

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of January 2017*

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## A new bench for Panama hearings

NEW year, new chief justice of Pakistan, new-look bench, but the same old Panama Papers issue. Moving quickly, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has formed a five-judge bench to restart the Panama hearings and the changes to the bench's composition are worth noting. By excluding himself from the bench, Chief Justice Nisar has allowed the hearings to be held in a less charged environment. Courtroom No 1, where the chief justice holds hearings, brings with it the most intense of media scrutiny and public interest and all too often litigants in politically charged matters resort to grandstanding before the court. With three of the original five justices still part of the bench, the fresh hearings can now be undertaken in a pragmatic and efficient manner. The second change, dropping a judge who is to retire in March, suggests that Chief Justice Nisar has an eye on continuity rather than disruption if the hearings stretch out once again.

Politically, it is welcome that all sides have publicly resolved to continue participating in the hearings. While the PTI has vacillated a great deal in recent weeks, sanity has prevailed for now. By accepting the new bench and announcing that the PTI is looking forward to pressing its case against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the party has avoided creating fresh controversy at the start of the new year. While it remains to be seen if it will abide by its commitment for the duration of the hearings, perhaps what the PTI, and other political parties, should consider is that ongoing and regular hearings of the Panama issue gives the opposition a political advantage in that it is the government and the Sharif family that will be on the defensive for the most part. Beyond that, there is the matter of a commitment to a democratic and constitutional order by the combined political opposition: to boycott or downgrade Supreme Court hearings would be to show disregard for the rule of law and the finality of the court as a judicial forum.

Finally, there are the lessons to be learned from the earlier set of hearings. Widespread public interest, intense media scrutiny and informed commentary are democracy-enhancing and should be encouraged when it comes to all state institutions. Over the decades, an excessively deferential approach to the Supreme Court has at times done a disservice to both democracy and the court itself. However, some of the public conduct surrounding the previous hearings spilled into the unacceptable; the new hearings ought to be covered and commented on in a more serious, sober manner.

## Media freedom

IF on the face of it the news appears positive, the underlying implications are undoubtedly stark. In its special report launched last week, the Committee to Protect Journalists — an independent organisation that works to promote press freedom worldwide — said that over the year past, it “did not identify anyone singled out for murder in Pakistan because of journalistic work”. This may be encouraging, but the fact that this is the first time the committee has made such an assessment concerning Pakistan since 2001 amounts to an indictment of the impunity with which media personnel have for years been targeted, of the lack of the state’s willingness to prosecute the transgressors, and of the fact that at times, it has been agencies of the state itself that have been suspected of harassing (or worse) journalists.

No media worker may have been singled out and killed for his or her work in 2016, but that does not mean that there have been no violent deaths at all in the community. In August, DawnNews cameraman Mehmood Khan and AajTV cameraman Shehzad Ahmed were killed in the line of duty in a bomb blast at the Quetta Civil Hospital as they took footage of lawyers mourning the murder of the president of the Balochistan Bar Association. And it is not just tragedies such as this that continue to illustrate how media freedoms in Pakistan, and therefore the right of the citizenry to public-interest information, stand compromised. As the CPJ report notes, journalists and media organisations here have, under threat, had to resort to self-censorship in some cases, and several individuals have had to leave the profession, particularly in conflict areas, as a result of coming under pressure from either non-state or state actors. Certainly, Pakistan desperately needs to protect its hard-won media freedoms and ensure safety for media personnel. Yet beyond that there is much more work to be done. Consider the manner in which citizens’ right to information laws have proved helpful across the world in nurturing an environment where public-interest information is able to see the light of day. This country, however, has a sketchy track record; the laws are there but, regardless of their varying levels of robustness, requests made for information tend to be stonewalled by bureaucracy. Perhaps what is needed is a change in optics: information, whether through the media or otherwise, is a public right that the state apparatus cannot withhold.



## Mercury poisoning

ONE of the most iconic black-and-white photographs of the last century shows a woman cradling her severely disabled daughter in her bath, the minimal light illuminating a hauntingly tender composition. The portrait is from Minamata, the Japanese fishing village where 900 were killed and thousands badly affected — including some in utero — by methylmercury poisoning in 1956. On Thursday, experts at a workshop in Karachi on the Minamata Convention on Mercury, to which Pakistan is a signatory, called for implementing the provisions of the international agreement and creating awareness about the importance of regulating the management and disposal of this toxic chemical element. The workshop was organised by the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency in collaboration with other organisations including the United Nations Environment Programme. It was part of an initial assessment project that aims to develop baselines on mercury management and develop national mercury inventories, in other words the preparatory work to ensure that public health and the environment are protected from mercury poisoning, known as Minamata disease.

As history has shown us, the consequences of such a disaster can be horrific. A neurological disorder, Minamata disease can cause a range of chronic disorders of varying severity, including anxiety, loss of appetite, damage to hearing, speech and vision, loss of coordination of muscle movement, and in extreme cases, paralysis, coma and death. As environmental concerns become prioritised across the world, particularly in the wake of climate change, there are increasing efforts to control the use and emission of mercury. In Pakistan, the major sources of mercury include certain industrial and hospital equipment such as thermometers and manometers, dental fillings, jewellery, skin-whitening creams, electric batteries, paints and various species of fish. In fact, the diversity of sources and their place in our daily lives makes the issue one of grave concern. It is therefore vital that the government and health and environmental experts coordinate on a sustained basis with industry leaders to reduce and, where other alternatives are available, phase out the use of mercury.

## Pain in the heartland

A CALL put out by three medium-sized chambers of commerce deserves careful consideration. Business leaders from Sialkot, Gujrat and Gujranwala recently met to issue a call urging greater disclosure on future plans for expansion of Chinese industry in the country, as well as the treatment they are receiving from tax authorities, especially in the matter of refunds. The community in these towns, that lie in the Punjab

heartland so vital for electoral prospects of the PML-N in 2018, voiced apprehension about what future Chinese industry is being admitted into the country, and asked whether there are any reciprocal plans for Pakistani businessmen to be able to enter the Chinese market on equally favourable terms. All three towns are home to large industrial clusters, and at least one of them — Sialkot — is an export powerhouse. Most industry in these areas is small and medium enterprises, and labour is highly skilled. Once the business leaders from these towns start voicing apprehension about the direction in which domestic industry is moving, it is worth Islamabad's while to listen.

The apprehensions are shared by many others in the business community, who are increasingly feeling that the government is largely unresponsive to their voice while making every effort to accommodate Chinese investors. It may be a positive sign for Pakistan that investors from China are willing to acquire long-term stakes over here, but it is necessary to determine what impact this is having on local industry. The chambers of these three towns feel that they have been left out of any planning for the induction of Chinese industry in Pakistan, and they are not alone in this. Would it not be better, they ask, if local industry leaders were consulted to see where better synergies could be formed, through technology transfer for instance that helps boost the productivity of domestic industry? Have they been consulted to see what opportunities they may find in China's western regions that are in the process of industrialising? Does investment into Pakistan really have to be such a one-way affair?

The voice from the triangle of industrial clusters in Punjab's heartland is part of a growing chorus of voices that are increasingly apprehensive about the attitude of the government towards domestic industry. Sialkot has been badly hit by the decline in exports, and any opportunities its business community can identify in China, with supportive deals that the Chinese are getting in Pakistan, could potentially lift its prospects. Much of the output of Sialkot, Gujrat and Gujranwala could realistically find a market in China's western regions, which are geographically closer to Pakistan than they are to the industrial heart of coastal China. Perhaps the government should heed these voices, and see if it is possible for CPEC to be a two-way road.

## Deradicalisation efforts

DEALING with the scourge of militancy requires multipronged efforts. One way is to fight militants on the battlefield and uproot the infrastructure of terror, as has been done, to an extent, in the tribal areas as well as in our cities through Zarb-i-Azb and 'intelligence-based operations', respectively. However, efforts must also be made to prevent young minds from falling into the trap of extremism, and to help them find a way

back into the mainstream once they forsake the way of the gun. Pakistan has experimented with deradicalisation programmes, most notably in Swat, where the army-led effort has produced mixed results. Now, as reported in this paper yesterday, Sindh also wants to initiate a deradicalisation project. Officials of the provincial Counter Terrorism Department have said that they plan on deradicalising and rehabilitating around 300 militants lodged in Sindh's prisons. Help would be sought from professional psychologists to understand the factors that drew these individuals towards militancy. The officials went on to say that two youngsters who were on their way to Syria to fight for the militant Islamic State group renounced militancy through the efforts of the Sindh CTD.

It is well known that militant masterminds prey upon the weak and the poor, luring them towards extremist violence with a mix of religious rhetoric and worldly enticements. Certainly, youngsters who had been brainwashed and who now renounce militancy deserve a second chance. However, we must approach deradicalisation efforts with caution. For example, with the aforementioned programme in Swat, there is little transparency and it is not known quite how successful the effort really has been, with rumours that some of the programme's graduates have returned to militancy. Even with militancy reform programmes in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, there is a considerable number of supposedly 'reformed' militants that return to violence once reintegrated into society. Perhaps the state — with the help of law enforcers and psychologists — should investigate which militants have been drawn towards extremism due to financial and socio-economic reasons, and which fighters are hard-core ideological supporters of militant causes. In the case of the latter, deradicalisation efforts would have little, if any, effect. Coming back to Sindh's efforts, while the deradicalisation plan may seem like a good idea, the provincial authorities must also pay attention to more basic efforts, such as building high-security prisons for 'hard-core' militants, as that has yet to get off the drawing board.

## Quality healthcare

THE success met by PTI chief Imran Khan in politics can be considered mixed, but there is no argument that in his altruistic venture, he has shone. Since 1994, when the first iteration of the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre started being accessed by the public, thousands of patients — many of them the poorest of the poor — have benefited. Commendably, the institution has been established in Peshawar too, with the groundbreaking ceremony of the third iteration taking place in Karachi on Thursday in DHA City. On the occasion, Mr Khan spoke about the need for all patients to be treated equally. He added that 75 per cent of the

patients coming to the Lahore facility are treated for free, and underscored the paucity of quality healthcare in the country.

This is a good time to raise the question with greater force: why has Pakistan allowed the public-sector healthcare system to fall into such a shambles? Does the lack of concern stem from the dismissive attitude evident amongst governmental ranks about the bulk of the populace that struggles every day against poverty, hunger and ill-health? Specialised healthcare and technical expertise is of course available; the problem is that there is not enough of it, and it can be accessed by only a tiny minority. Where privileged members of society, even government officials, waste no time in flying abroad for treatment, ordinary citizens must make do with the scarce resources of the state-run health infrastructure. That the issue hinges on effort rather than incapacity is obvious from the example of the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation, which was carved out of the government-run Civil Hospital and turned into a resounding success. While it largely runs on charity and donations, there is no reason the government cannot shoulder the burden. The only thing keeping the state from raising such facilities throughout the country, with the required funds at their disposal, is the sincerity of purpose. It must stop abdicating responsibility.

## Accountability in name alone

THE National Accountability Bureau is a patently flawed organisation, both in terms of its design and discretionary powers and the workings of the institution. It is for that very reason there is a political consensus that NAB should be replaced with a new, better designed and better resourced organisation. However, for obvious reasons, the political class has been slow to move on the accountability agenda — public pressure and the misdeeds of many a politician could rock the country's foundations if an empowered and independent accountability body were to be unleashed on the political landscape. But flawed as the existing NAB is, it need not be the national embarrassment that it has become and seems determined to continue being.

On Monday, before the SC, NAB defended its practice of a so-called voluntary return of ill-gotten wealth and, shockingly, appeared blithely unaware of the moral, political and legal dimensions of the case involving disgraced former Balochistan financial secretary Mushtaq Raisani. Even by the tawdry scale of corruption in the province, the discovery of, quite literally, cartons full of cash in the possession of Mr Raisani was an obvious financial crime that demands severe civil and criminal penalties. If a case can be made at all for voluntary return, it is in situations where either the sums involved are small and involve petty corruption — thereby preventing the legal system from further clogging —

or where immense corruption monies are returned for a minimal reduction in sentencing, once again with a view to preventing the legal system from suffering further overloading. In Mr Raisani's case the opposite is true — severe penalties for him and a determined effort to unearth the full scale of the corruption network that he was a part of. It is impossible for Mr Raisani, a bureaucrat, to have acted alone. To be sure, the history of accountability in the country suggests witch-hunts and politically tainted proceedings. What has been attempted under the guise of anti-corruption efforts in the past should not be allowed to be done again. Yet it is possible for the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction — of total inaction and almost fostering a corruption-friendly environment for public officials. Arguably, that is the situation the country and the accountability process finds itself in today. While the government and opposition in parliament are making a show of once again kick-starting a review of the country's accountability laws, there is clearly no real urgency on the part of either. Creating an independent, empowered and properly resourced accountability organisation will not be easy, but neither is it impossible. The experience the world over suggests that zealous prosecutors armed with good laws can make a great deal of a difference. It is time for some real accountability and a true strengthening of the institutional and democratic order in the country.

## State Bank report

THE first quarterly report issued by the State Bank of Pakistan contains a few alarm bells. Thus far the SBP has been mostly optimistic of the country's economic performance. In previous reports it has lauded the fiscal measures of the government, papered over the growing declines in exports, and celebrated the "record high reserves". But the latest quarterly report, for the first time, sounds a few alarm bells that suggest that the government's narrative of continuous strengthening of the economy may be running out of steam. The fiscal deficit during the first quarter reached "the highest first quarter level since FY12". This happened "despite an exceptional growth in provincial surpluses". Even on the expenditure side, current spending was restrained and increase in development spending "was led by the provinces, as federal development spending posted a YoY decline of 7.6pc in Q1-FY17". Taken together, these numbers show that the revenue effort of the government is unable to keep pace with its ambitious plans for the year, and increasingly the burden is being shifted onto the provinces. The SBP goes so far as to say that "achieving the annual fiscal deficit target of 3.8pc of GDP would be challenging. It will require additional fiscal consolidation efforts on the part of the government".

On the external front, things are considerably less cheery. Exports continue their

downward journey, but more worryingly, for the first time in four years, remittances have also registered a decline. Foreign direct investment too fell by 38pc. A more troubling sign is the overwhelming presence of China as the source of all FDI while other countries largely remained passive spectators. Taken together, these are signs that “the FX comfort available to finance a persistently high trade deficit, is now weakening”, says the SBP in the most direct words it has used to describe the external sector thus far. Even though the report tries to attribute much of this to external factors beyond the government’s control, such as fiscal tightening in GCC countries with persistently low oil prices and a “softening of demand” in traditional export destination countries, the fact of the matter is that many of our neighbouring countries saw a revival of their exports in the same months covered by the report. Given these deteriorating indicators, the SBP is right to warn that “underlying structural issues are still there”, even if the choice of words is somewhat stilted.

## Hepatitis drug prices

HEPATITIS C patients in Punjab and KP covered under the PM’s programme may have to pay between Rs1,350 and Rs1,370 for a one-month course of 28 tablets. Any difference in price is on account of a slightly higher rate at which a provincial government might have purchased Sofosbuvir 400mg tablets. But this difference is insignificant if you compare these numbers with the open market price of the same medicine. A report in this paper on Tuesday said a patient must spend Rs5,800 to get the same drug for a month-long course on the open market. This huge gap defies logic. It is a painful reminder of just how slow the health authorities are in dealing with a disease that is advancing in the country at a frightful pace. With 35pc Pakistanis possibly infected with hepatitis C by 2030, it cannot get any more alarming than this.

There have been efforts at controlling it, the most visible of them in recent times is the expanded campaign to create awareness about the agents that spread the disease. Sadly, the work towards providing the people in the country with efficient, affordable cure has not displayed the same level of intensity. This is despite the noise created by patients, doctors and concerned pharmacists. Apart from protests about disparity in prices, one of the demands is for the government to take control of the supply of the hepatitis drug via public hospitals. Given the size of the problem, a proposed programme for hepatitis control follows the pattern of the one in place against tuberculosis under which patients are provided medicines free of cost. Lack of resources is a hurdle but it is also about fixing your priorities. It is recognised that the fight against TB has been made possible with the guidance and support of international

agencies. It is said Pakistan cannot do without aid in this case too. Let's cry out loud for help until the voice reaches whoever can lend us a hand.

## New civil-military combination

WITH a new military leadership in place, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is resuming the business of civil-military consultations on national security and foreign policy matters. After a rocky military transition late last year, it is important that the civilian leadership establish a stable but frank dialogue with the incoming military leadership — the absence of dialogue having potentially profound consequences for internal political stability and external policy challenges. On Tuesday, the PM articulated a familiar message for the region: peaceful coexistence and economic integration. Little, as usual, is known about the specifics discussed or indeed if there is a policy-level rethink taking place. What is clear is that a reset in relations with Afghanistan and India is needed and the new civil-military combination must find ways to first stabilise and then improve ties with the two countries.

To be sure, both the Afghan and Indian governments have veered from unhelpfulness to outright hostility towards Pakistan in recent times. The virtual freeze in Pakistan's ties with those countries owes a great deal to the apparent belief in India and Afghanistan's leaderships that not only is Pakistan part of the regional problem but that it cannot be part of cooperative solutions. With unreasonableness dominating in Kabul and New Delhi when it comes to Pakistan, the leadership here has had few opportunities of late to try and reset ties. But neither should policymakers here be in denial about Pakistan's contribution to the regional impasse. Before Afghan President Ashraf Ghani turned hawkish on Pakistan, he had virtually staked his presidency on reaching out to Pakistan. And while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a long record of hawkish pronouncements on national security and foreign policy issues, it was the same Mr Modi who made a surprise stopover in Lahore on Christmas Day a little over a year ago. In comparison, a known would-be peacemaker such as prime minister Manmohan Singh was unable to visit Pakistan during his ten years in office. The positive risk-taking by the leadership of those two countries has not been reciprocated by Pakistan — even if Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has an apparent desire to do so.

While it is possible to overstate the value of grand gestures or bold statements, perhaps now is the time for the Pakistani leadership to test the regional appetite for a cooperative approach to security problems and economic opportunities. Border and boundary tensions are unacceptably high on all sides and endless trading of accusations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and India and Pakistan on cross-border

militancy needs to be meaningfully addressed. Political pessimists and security hawks in all three countries notwithstanding, the oldest of realities still applies: if political and security cooperation is not sought between the three neighbours, spoilers find ways to drag the relationships even further into darkness. A new-look national security team in Pakistan should attempt a new-look approach.

## Return of the DC

THE Punjab government has taken an entirely unnecessary step by resurrecting the district commissioner as part of the governance apparatus, even if he is not quite the officer that the colonisers installed for our benefit. The original DC acted as the revenue collector, looked after the administration and exercised considerable authority as district magistrate. The arrangement continued, with varied efficiency, until the theory that sought separation of the judiciary from the executive could no longer be denied. There was an SC order in the mid-1990s backing the separation and finally in 2001, retired Gen Pervez Musharraf came up with his devolution plan. He effectively created a third tier of the government, whereas the Constitution provided for two levels: the centre and provinces. The requisite amendment to the Constitution was never carried out amid action aimed at taking powers from the local governments and placing them again with the provincial governments. Stories about how weak this Musharraf favourite had turned out to be were still in circulation when the democratic governments returned.

Since then, elected governments all over the country have concentrated on finding methods to control the local government representatives. Worse, they delayed local government elections for years because they didn't want partners in power. Punjab, with even greater fanfare than other provinces, introduced companies, task forces and other such organisations under various names to run some of the basic affairs, leaving local government with little to do. With the latest move, Shahbaz Sharif's government has done away with the post of district coordination officer. It is as though the office of the DCO could not be modified but had to be eliminated in its entirety for being a relic of the Musharraf era. As originally envisaged, the DCO was to work under the mayor on the model of how a chief secretary works with a chief minister. Together the two symbolised at least a wish for transfer of power — or a respectful sharing of it — at the grass-roots. The born-again DC's office does not have the powers that its predecessor enjoyed. For instance, under the new Punjab law which has restored the post, a DC will now have to consult the district police officer in handling emergency law and order issues. Nevertheless, the reinvented DC, a throwback to a bygone era, for the moment looks poised to be working more for the power-sensitive government than the people who need to be empowered.



## Reduction in violence

A NEW report shows that the number of fatalities and injuries from violence in 2016 declined sharply from the previous year. The report, prepared by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, shows there was a 45pc reduction in fatalities last year due to violence, though the decrease in injuries from violence was a more modest 11pc. There are grounds for some cheer in this report, and taken as a whole, the figures at the national level point towards an improvement in the security situation in the country. But a closer look reveals a few disturbing patterns.

For one, violent incidents of a sectarian nature appear to have spread to areas that were previously unaffected, particularly towns in Sindh. Second, the terrorists appear to have adapted to the tougher security measures around the country by resorting to more attacks using improvised explosive devices, landmines and suicide attackers, which killed almost twice as many people in 2016 as in the previous year. These attacks have also become more indiscriminate, killing women and children as well as members of all communities who happen to be in the vicinity. The attack in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park in Lahore is a prime example. Supposedly an instance of communal violence, the suicide bombing claimed the lives of those belonging to many faiths, including 29 children in the playground. The reduction in the overall level of violence is to be welcomed, but the patterns of violence in 2016 suggest that the terrorism threat in the country is adapting in deadly ways and much work remains to be done to turn the corner in this battle. An emphasis on civil law enforcement is crucial to carry the battle forward into the new era of terrorism threats that appears to be opening up before us. It will be vital to reform the police and enhance judicial capacities to meet the new challenges, as well as work harder to de-legitimise terrorist and extremist narratives in order to drain this swamp.

## Mistreatment of child maid

LITTLE Tayyaba's story illustrates some of the worst aspects of Pakistani society. In fact, the grim tale ticks all the boxes: the grinding poverty among swathes of the population, the smug sense of entitlement among the elite, and a system that perpetuates the status quo through incompetence or complicity. The 10-year-old had been working as a domestic for a serving additional judge and his wife in Islamabad when she was recovered by police 24 hours after a neighbour complained that Tayyaba was being severely mistreated by the couple. Pictures that emerged of her in the media showed a battered, bruised and bloodied little girl, pathetic in her helplessness. Although Tayyaba told the assistant commissioner she had been tortured by her

employers, the law, instead of protecting the minor, has so far worked to the advantage of the alleged perpetrators. Pre-arrest bail was granted to the judge's wife on charges filed by the police; Tayyaba's parents came forward to claim that their daughter's allegations were "baseless" and they were "forgiving [the couple] unconditionally" — a curious contradiction — after reaching a "settlement" with them.

Society fails Tayyaba, and millions like her, on multiple fronts every single day. Firstly, there is the casual acceptance of child labour, at least in a 'non-hazardous' capacity. There is simply no moral justification for employing minors, not even as a 'favour' to their indigent families. Secondly, while there are a number of laws pertaining to child labour in different sectors, many of them have loopholes that can be exploited. Moreover, there is no law specific to domestic workers in the country. Third, the child protection laws in their present form also often end up putting abused children once again in harm's way by returning them to their parents. For, difficult as this may be to accept, given it goes against our cultural ethos, parents do not always act in the best interests of their child. Sometimes dire circumstances compel them to put them in harm's way in return for monetary gain. The state must create mechanisms empowered to intervene and rescue children from negligent or abusive legal guardians.

Fortunately, the Supreme Court has taken suo motu notice of the case, given the egregious injustice manifest in it — even more so with the alleged perpetrator being an individual responsible for dispensing justice. A medical board has also been constituted to re-examine the child, who the police have yet to locate after she was handed over to her parents. One hopes that justice will be done, despite the influential status of the suspects and their connections within law enforcement. Otherwise, Tayyaba will be just another little girl who has learnt a valuable life lesson that, not having been born among the privileged classes, her voice will never be heard in a system that serves the powerful and not the weak.

## Stalled privatisation

PERHAPS if Minister of State for Privatisation Muhammad Zubair could free up some time from his TV appearances where he is regularly seen defending the government on all sorts of issues, the debate on our state-owned enterprises and the privatisation process could be a little more meaningful. In a testy series of exchanges, both houses of parliament saw exactly where the taxpayers' money is going in the accumulating losses of entities like Pakistan Steel and PIA. In one case, the minister was asked what became of the privatisation plans for the steel mill, and his response was that the Cabinet Committee is set to decide on the matter on Jan 18, following which

expressions of interest can be invited. He says two parties have already expressed an interest, one from Iran and the other from China. Even if things work out as the minister describes, the fact that more than Rs50bn have been sunk into the enterprise since 2008 with no result other than accumulated losses beyond Rs120bn means that the government's numerous attempts to turn the entity around and then put it up for sale have turned out to be little more than words. In the final year of the government's tenure, the minister should know nobody is holding their breath.

In the case of PIA, the story is even more dismal. Although the airline remains operational, unlike the mill on most days, its accumulated losses have crossed Rs300bn according to figures given during a Senate hearing. Once again we are entitled to ask: what happened to all the grand plans the government had for the ailing carrier? Of course, we all know the answer: a clumsy attempt to move towards privatisation led to a strike, which turned violent resulting in fatalities, from which point the government quickly climbed down. Then came the news that the power sector's privatisation plans have also been rolled back, and now we see a determined push to expand bureaucracy's sway over entities in this sector also sagging under the weight of the accumulated circular debt. Perhaps outright privatisation is not the answer to every ailing enterprise, but the minister could command a little more credibility if his government had a clear direction on the state-owned companies, and if he wasn't so caught up in leading its public relations campaign.

## End of a fabled era

THE passing away of Ustad Fateh Ali Khan on Wednesday is a setback for classical music in Pakistan. Some would say, not unjustifiably, that his death is one more nail, if not the last, in the coffin of classical music in the country. After all, the genre of music here has been struggling perennially on the three counts of identity, patronage and competition from newer, more popular genres. The ustad was loved for his many compositions infused with the gentle caressing of notes, a tradition of singing that the Patiala gharana spawned even as it gave the world a range of singers across South Asia. Great musicians are not averse to learning from any treasure of talent. The Kirana gharana's Hirabai Barodekar for example, may have been the inspiration behind Ustad Fateh Ali's delectable slow composition in Raag Durga — Sakhi mori room jhoom.

Where the legendary Bade Ghulam Ali Khan embraced the purity of the Patiala grammar, which he wove deftly into thumri and khayal gayaki, Farida Khanum widened the aperture to include ghazal-singing in the traditional repertoire. This innovation is sometimes derided as the murder of classical music. When Mogubai Kurdikar from the

Jaipur-Atrauli line of great musicians chided her daughter Kishori Amonkar for singing a film song albeit composed in a classical raag, she retorted that she needed to earn her keep, implying it wasn't possible to live by rarefied music alone. The peerless Roshan Ara Begum endured a similar rebuke. She recorded a film song and was shown the door by her mentor Abdul Karim Khan. There are less traumatic examples. Ghulam Ali Khan lent his voice even if grudgingly to the movie Mughal-e-Azam. He is more famous for the two songs in Raag Sohini and Raageshri than for his entire magical collection. Even though his many awards were hardly a means of livelihood, it was brave of Ustad Fateh Ali Khan to maintain, "I would live my life exactly the same, if I had another life".

## Extremism unchecked

IF ever an image was emblematic of Pakistan's progress in the war against extremism — and indeed of the fissures in its society — it is that of the viciously defaced Karachi Press Club walls. Last October, a group of artists had painted them with portraits of women who have made significant contributions to the country in various fields, including Fatima Surraiya Bajiya, Zubeida Mustafa, Yasmeen Lari, Perween Rahman and Sabeen Mahmud. To celebrate them in this manner was to celebrate the progressive ideas they embodied, the last two even having paid with their lives for their efforts towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society. On Wednesday night, those ideas came up against another side of Pakistani society — bigoted, fanatical and misogynistic. In what was clearly a premeditated act, members of ultra right-wing groups demonstrating outside the press club, one of several such protests to counter commemorations of Salmaan Taseer's death anniversary in the country, spray-painted the walls with profanities and calls to murder.

This is the ugly reality of the state's much-vaunted 'fight against extremism', a fight that it vowed to take on with unwavering commitment after the APS Peshawar attack in December 2014. Two years on, with kinetic operations to dismantle the terrorist network in the northern areas virtually over, the other aspect of the fight — the long, laborious work to stamp out extremism from society — has barely begun. It is not that the state is incapable of asserting its writ: we have seen it do so comprehensively when Mr Taseer's killer was tried and convicted. The problem is that it chooses to do so selectively instead of sending a consistent, resolute message. How else can one explain the impunity with which certain right-wing elements continue to menace anyone who rejects their noxious worldview? Notwithstanding ad hoc measures such as the arrest in Lahore of over 100 people — who will undoubtedly soon be released without charge — for attempting to hold a rally to 'celebrate' the former Punjab governor's assassination, where is the concerted drive against hate speech and incitement to

violence that should be the cornerstone of the civilian aspect of NAP? Why does the government not robustly demonstrate that it values progressive voices rather than appeasing those who would build a shrine to an assassin?

Instead, the state goes through motions such as the Punjab apex committee meeting on Thursday where it resolved to choke terror funding and launch an indiscriminate crackdown against those providing financial support to terrorists. Yet the province has not seen action commensurate with the fact of it being the heartland of jihadist organisations. On the contrary, well-known centres of radical thought continue to operate unimpeded here while members of right-wing groups are being ‘mainstreamed’ into charitable work. Only when ‘zero-tolerance’ is more than just a meaningless buzzword will there be any hope of us turning the corner.

## Gen Rawat’s aggression

GEN Bipin Rawat, the recently installed army chief in India, was the surprise choice of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the country’s next top soldier. And now Gen Rawat has pulled a bit of a surprise of his own with his aggressive remarks against Pakistan that have elicited a swift response from army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa. In extensive and hard-hitting remarks about the alleged militant threat in India-held Kashmir emanating from Pakistan, Gen Rawat may well have been pandering to a domestic audience in India — with the state of India’s troubles in IJK refusing to go away, there appears to be a growing demand for tough official rhetoric against Pakistan. Among Pakistani hawks, however, a very different message may well have been heard. The growing influence of the Indian army in national security policy debates across the border has been charted for many years now by security hawks here and the appointment of Gen Rawat, who is believed to have been closely involved in the planning and execution of the alleged so-called surgical strikes along the LoC last September, has been interpreted as part of Prime Minister Modi’s get-tough approach on Pakistan. The potential for India and Pakistan to get their wires crossed — to have a different understanding of the same situation — remains high.

Gen Rawat’s comments and Gen Bajwa’s riposte underline the problem of militaries directly articulating policy positions rather than their parent ministries or civilian governments. The deliberately hawkish comments on Pakistan by Gen Rawat in a wide-ranging interview were always going to create headlines — both in India and Pakistan. A close examination of his words suggest he said little that was new or novel, but the comments were sure to have an impact on an already frozen bilateral relationship. Similarly, in responding to his counterpart in India, Gen Bajwa has guaranteed

headlines in both countries — reinforcing in Pakistan the notion that India is the enemy, and in India that Pakistan does not ultimately seek peace. The combined effect will be to make it yet more difficult for a resumption of diplomatic contact between the two countries and for the stalled peace and normalisation process to be restarted. Some days ago, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assembled his political and military leadership and reiterated his vision for a stable, peaceful and economically integrated region. India would do well to listen to his message.

## Younis's example

LET us put things in perspective. It is the debilitating attack on Pakistani bowling by Australian batsmen that has been chiefly responsible for the dull scenes transmitted from down under. Many Pakistani batsmen have done quite well even when the tourists are known for their batting collapses and for relying heavily on their bowling. Indeed, Pakistan chased down a target of around 500 runs in the first Test of the current series. Keeping these realities in mind, it is that much easier to celebrate the 34th century of star player Younis Khan. The innings brings the veteran at par with some of the greats of the game — Sunil Gavaskar, Brian Lara, Mahela Jayawerdene — with a similar number of hundreds to their credit. It also gives Younis the distinction of having scored tons in 11 countries. Remarkably, half his centuries have come in the last seven years or so, which underscores the toil the batsman, now 39, has undergone in the latter years of his career that began in 2000.

There could, of course, be criticism that the more senior players must prove their skills early in the contest, that Younis Khan took so long that he was left playing for symbolic honour rather than victory. He along with Misbah-ul-Haq was supposed to have led by example right from the start of the series — even if they did not have quite as much experience of Australian conditions as touring Pakistani players of the past. On the other hand, Younis Khan's performance on the field must be hailed; it is most likely to inspire players in a country where the game of cricket has been in a quandary for many years now. This is the sort of determination that is needed as the much-troubled Pakistan cricket seeks to move forward. It needs many Younis Khans along the road — all the more because it has survived and flourished due to the flair and character of individual players rather than the merits of the prevailing system.

## Raheel Sharif's new job

A QUIET retirement it has not been. In the weeks since former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif retired from the military, barely a day has gone by without Gen Sharif or events connected to him being in the news.

Now has come perhaps the biggest surprise: the recently retired army chief is rumoured to have been selected to lead a so-called Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism created by the ambitious, young Saudi Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman.

To the extent that the IMAFT is a large bloc of Muslim-majority countries — 39 at the latest count, according to Saudi authorities — focused on combating international terrorists, the retired general with his vast counter-insurgency and counterterrorism leadership skills could be an excellent choice as leader.

The Muslim world, wracked by terrorism across great swathes, needs a coherent and coordinated approach to fight the great threats that stalk its lands. And yet, there is remarkably little known about the Saudi initiative that he has reportedly signed up for.

Two sets of questions are of urgent importance. The first concerns the IMAFT generally. While Saudi officials have touted the broad membership of the alliance, little is known about the role each country is to play.

More importantly, with several countries still outside the fold, what are the ultimate intentions of the Saudi royal family? Is there a realistic scenario for the participation of all Muslim-majority countries or will a sectarian colour be imposed on the alliance? Specifically, with Iran and Saudi Arabia at odds over a number of issues in the Middle East, will Riyadh permit the involvement of Tehran and its allies in the IMAFT?

If not, how will it work towards its self-professed goal of fighting terrorism irrespective of sect and wherever the threat is to be found? It could be a fresh disaster for the Muslim world if the Saudi-Iranian rivalry fuels the creation of a new military alliance in the name of fighting terrorism.

For Pakistan, the challenges are specific. In April 2015, after the Saudi regime had demanded Pakistan contribute to a Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen against the Houthis, parliament here took the historic and correct decision of declining to authorise the government to send troops to Yemen.

While Gen Sharif is no longer a serving army chief and his decision to join the IMAFT is

somewhat independent of the Pakistani state, the fact remains that his high-profile leadership of the alliance will be associated with Pakistan.

The government and current military leadership, therefore, must publicly restate or clarify important foreign policy and national security parameters. Specifically, it must be publicly assured that the April 2015 decision taken by parliament will not be contravened and that any Pakistani contribution to the IMAFT will be for specific and clearly identifiable reasons. Clarity and honesty are needed if the alliance is to succeed.

## Losing languages

IN the realm of good intentions, Pakistan rarely misses an opportunity to show off its impressive cultural and linguistic diversity. Consider as a representative example the dozens upon dozens of promotional advertisements made over the decades, every single one of which features a whole gamut of inherited traditions. In reality, though, things are not as rosy as they may seem. Take just one indicator of diversity: languages of which the country's 200-million-strong population speaks some 72 (including Urdu and English). Of these, according to a 2014 parliamentary paper on the subject, 10 are classified as either "in trouble" or "near extinction". Meanwhile, the numbers of those who speak dozens of others are dwindling fast, an example being Hindko. Once the primary language of Peshawar, it is now spoken only by some two million people across the country, as was underscored at a conference held recently in the city to highlight the issue. Other numbers are of greater concern. The Urmari language of South Waziristan, to name just one, has an estimated 50,000 speakers only. And yet, the bigger reality is more troubling: even languages that are considered robust — the four provincial languages of Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi and Balochi — as they are spoken by tens of millions of Pakistanis, are fast losing their vigour.

There are many reasons for this, including migration and urbanisation, but it mostly boils down to the fact that Pakistani authorities at both the state and provincial level, as well as the country's intelligentsia in general have largely failed to make the effort to propagate linguistic diversity. There is the ironing out effect of Urdu having been declared the national language, with nary a thought given to the fact that there is a difference between 'official' and 'national' languages. Had the handful of major languages spoken in Pakistan been considered and treated as 'national languages', as the country's multicultural realities dictate, it would have kept them strong while simultaneously making space for the revival of smaller, more endangered ones. Similarly, the fact that English is considered the language of the elite and of officialdom means that anyone with upwardly mobile intentions focuses overwhelmingly on this, at



the cost of his or her mother tongue. At the end of this trajectory is a dismal future where not only have languages been lost irretrievably, but with them their literature, folklore, wisdom and connectedness. Is it too late to turn course?

## Cricket fiasco

THE 0-3 whitewash at the hands of Australia on Saturday must have left the Pakistan cricket team reeling. For all the adulation and success that preceded the tour — ICC Test rankings put them as the world number one side as late as October — Misbah-ul-Haq's men will be asking themselves what went wrong in New Zealand and Australia, and whether they really deserved to lose all the five Tests against less than a formidable opposition. In the final analysis, it is the unprofessionalism of Pakistani cricket that emerges as the main culprit. Backed by talent and experience, players such as Azhar Ali, Asad Shafiq, Younis Khan, Misbah and Sarfraz Ahmed have little to prove to the world regarding their credentials. However, they cannot alter the truth that there is a tendency to lose balance, primarily due to the paucity of competitive traits in society. When Pakistan made a strong comeback to level the series in England last August, it appeared that it had managed to remove its label as a mercurial unit on overseas tours. But then the team did itself harm when it returned to its adopted UAE backyard even if it defeated the lowly ranked West Indies, winning eight matches before embarking on the Australasia assignment. A warning had arrived in the shape of a shock defeat in the last Test at Sharjah, but Pakistan chose to disregard it.

Having said that, the losses do not necessarily warrant an overhaul. Most of the current batsmen are among the best available in the country. It is Pakistan's bowling, though, that is in dire need of improvement. The pedestrian show put up by pacers Wahab Riaz, Rahat Ali, Sohail Khan and Imran Khan is reason enough to call for replacements. As for Pakistan's lethal weapon Yasir Shah, the leggie seems to have lost his magic. It is imperative, therefore, that he is given a long break and youngsters such as Mohammad Asghar and Mohammad Nawaz are encouraged to prove their mettle instead.

## Meddling in US polls

AN unprecedented election in the US has given way to an acrimonious and tendentious presidential transition process. While the world may have become accustomed to American politicians warring over issues big and small, the extraordinary spectacle of Republicans, Democrats, the Obama administration, and president-elect Donald Trump

and his supporters arguing over the so-called Russian hacking of the November presidential poll is almost incomprehensible. The world's only superpower is at war with itself politically over the collective assessment of its intelligence apparatus that the Russian state tried to influence US public opinion in favour of president-elect Trump and against his opponent, Hillary Clinton, by hacking Democrats' emails and passing the stolen information on to the whistleblower website WikiLeaks. Befuddling as events may be for US citizens and the undeniable schadenfreude of many non-Americans the world over, there is a deep irony to these events: the US is suffering, at the hands of a rival, what it itself has long inflicted on countries around the world, friend and foe alike.

Take just the recent, regional experience here. Despite vowing to build the nation of Afghanistan, or perhaps because of that pledge, since 2001, Afghanistan has had a government whose leadership has effectively been decided by the US. Installing Hamid Karzai in 2001, trying to oust him in 2009, then forcing a so-called National Unity Government on the country in 2014, the dominant role of the US in the Afghan political process has run counter to its own avowed goals there. Or consider the Pakistani example: a decade ago, as then-president Gen Pervez Musharraf was considering how to cling on to power, the US, along with its usual ally in such matters, the UK, helped broker the infamous National Reconciliation Ordinance to create a power-sharing scheme between Gen Musharraf and the PPP. The PML-N, which has swept elections in Punjab since 2008, was nowhere in the scheme and only a catastrophic breakdown in the relationship between Gen Musharraf and the PPP opened the door to legitimate elections in 2008.

Elsewhere, in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, the experience of US interference in domestic political processes — and directly manipulating elections — has been so ubiquitous over the decades that it scarcely qualifies as a scandal in the US today. Clearly, the Russian interference in the US election, if true, would herald a new era of global tensions and possibly instability. But if America can acknowledge its own murky interference in elections and political processes internationally, perhaps new rules can be drawn up for an integrated, digitally connected era.

## Tax filings drop

THE fact that the number of tax filings for the current fiscal actually dropped from last year is a stark reminder that beneath the government's claim to have increased revenue collection since coming to power lies a vacuum. One caveat perhaps is that unlike last year, the deadline has not been extended beyond Dec 31 this time. Perhaps the intention is to penalise those who will surely file in the months ahead. Nevertheless, the

fact that tax compliance is not improving even as revenue climbs is the best indication that incremental revenue is being squeezed out of those who are already in the net. For example, around 16,000 corporates filed a return this year, even though the total number of registered companies in the country is around four times that. The sheer incapacity to ensure compliance even from registered enterprises speaks to the enormously weak revenue machinery of the state, which is able to come down with a heavy hand only on those who agree to work within its rules. The tale on the personal income tax side is even more appalling. Less than 900,000 people filed returns this year, down from more than a million last year, although it is expected that this year's number will rise in the remaining months of the fiscal year.

Aside from raw numbers, the revenue effort of the PML-N government has not succeeded in changing very much. This is despite a supposedly punitive tax on the banking transactions of non-filers, after numerous amnesty schemes designed as a carrot-and-stick approach. This is even more worrying given the difficult situation shaping up on the fiscal side, as expenditures continue to rise and the government is left scampering to arrange resources by pushing the burden on the provinces as well as through utility surcharges and other revenue gimmicks. It was understood many years ago by fiscal experts around the world that trying to raise tax compliance through measures such as amnesty schemes and transaction taxes is not as effective as a policy that encourages businesses to document their transactions such as through the application of an automated value added tax. Having opposed such a measure purely on populist grounds, the government is now left huffing and puffing to manually push through tax compliance, with little to no results to show for its efforts after more than three years of being in power.

## **Train collision**

LAST week's train and rickshaw collision in Lodhran, Punjab, resulting in the death of eight people, including six children, is another sorry reminder of the decrepit state of Pakistan's railway infrastructure. There is no doubt: Pakistan Railways urgently requires a safety audit and technical upgrade. Moreover, when lives are lost, the ministry shockingly does nothing more than commiserate with the grieving families, offer monetary compensation, and order 'detailed' investigations. We have heard echoes of the above after last week's collision. In this instance, with the crossing gate open and the railway signal red, the Hazara Express to Karachi slammed into a three-wheeler rickshaw carrying 15 passengers, after which another rickshaw collided with the same train. While it is the state that is primarily responsible for ensuring safety, citizens too must be cognisant of the danger of approaching trains before they hurriedly cross the

tracks. Then, with foggy conditions surely there must be contingency plans for drivers. This train accident — the third in three months — was avoidable had the crossing been manned and the signal properly communicated to the driver. Ideally, given the frequency of collisions, an efficient train management system with digital technology ensuring real-time communication between the control centre and driver should be mandatory. However, until PR undertakes this task, it must at least address staff negligence and absenteeism.

With around 37 train accidents at crossings without gates in the first six months of 2016, the railways minister, Khawaja Saad Rafique, has some serious explaining to do. Determining the cause of accidents must be the first step. When the railways are a vital cog in the country's transportation system, why is the manning of crossings not deemed mandatory? And when the minister says that PR is unable to establish accident-proof systems and signal-free corridors for the next 20 years, it is not only demoralising; it also exposes the government's callousness when it comes to installing safety mechanisms. Only political resolve to upgrade the railways will improve safety and efficiency.

## Yet another amnesty scheme

A NEW amnesty scheme is being considered to allow those who hold wealth abroad to bring it back into the country without facing a penalty other than paying a nominal amount of tax on the value of the declared asset. If approved, this would be the fourth or fifth amnesty offered by this government, depending on how one defines the term. This time the step is made necessary by the arrival of a new tax convention created by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development which mandates the sharing of tax information with other countries. Once the convention is in force, the state here will be able to directly access records of bank accounts, registered companies and other assets maintained by Pakistanis abroad, and, in turn, will be compelled to share such information with foreign governments. This exchange is tied to bilateral agreements at the moment, but come 2018 Pakistan could be part of a global regime to automatically share tax-related data with signatory countries. The government has already begun searching for ways to motivate people to start thinking of declaring their foreign assets against a nominal tax.

Not many people are afraid of the bilateral sharing mechanisms in place today, but once automatic sharing kicks in there will be genuine grounds for concern for those who hold undeclared wealth in offshore locations. For now though, it appears the impending amnesty scheme for foreign assets will be nothing more than what its predecessors

have been: thinly veiled revenue measures. The long list of such revenue measures disguised as amnesty schemes and documentation exercises now give the government the appearance of pleading for cooperation with racketeers and tax evaders. The total lack of will and capacity to pursue any meaningful reform and expand the tax base has driven the government into this corner. Now a new challenge is beginning to open up in the form of global regimes for the sharing of tax information, as well as closing the financial system to abuse by illicit and tax-evaded wealth.

The OECD convention is only the latest example. Before this we had an Anti Money Laundering Act, which had to be amended to include tax evasion as well. That too was prompted by a tightening of the regimes that seek to choke off access to the financial system for illicit players. Failure to properly move on that front is complicating corresponding banking relationships for many Pakistani banks. The State Bank has recently cautioned that these complications could raise transactions costs for banks, which could impact remittances. Being a nursery of rackets is becoming more and more difficult for Pakistan given how global financial and tax regimes are evolving. If the will and capacity to drain the swamp of black money cannot be found, costs in the future could be severe.

## Missing activists

THE sanitised language — ‘missing persons’, ‘the disappeared’, etc — cannot hide an ugly truth: the state of Pakistan continues to be suspected of involvement in the disappearance and illegal detentions of a range of private citizens. Now, with the disappearance of Salman Haider and at least three other activists, a dark new chapter in the state’s murky, illegal war against civil society appears to have been opened. It is simply not enough for government and police officials to claim that the disappearances are being investigated. Mr Haider and the other recently missing activists need to be returned to their families immediately — it is surely impossible that several individuals can simply vanish and the state lack the resources to track them down and have them released on an emergency basis. The state, because it is the enforcer of the law, cannot be above the law. If Mr Haider and the other recent additions to the long list of missing persons have something to answer for, if they need to be investigated, there are laws in place to do that — though it would be remarkably confounding if individuals who have built a public profile based on their human rights and democratic activism are to be investigated and charged with crime by the state.

The recent disappearances are also sure to contribute to a worsening climate of fear and intimidation in the country among activists working for a tolerant, progressive and

inclusive Pakistan. Where once missing persons belonged to the remote areas of the country, to Fata, Balochistan and far-flung parts of KP, and mostly involved those accused of waging war against the Pakistani state, the tactic has now clearly been broadened to encompass anyone who is deemed an irritant to state policy — or the policies of a state within the state. Meanwhile, the vast infrastructure of jihad and the mosque-madrasah-social welfare network of extremism continues to thrive. That contrast, of peaceful citizens practising democratic dissent versus armed militias preaching hate and intolerance, is one that the state and society should encourage in favour of the former, and it is indeed official state policy enshrined in the National Action Plan. But the on-ground reality appears to be the reverse, of a state lashing out against the ostensibly weak and cowering before the purportedly strong. Why is that the case? And why are so many in government and across the political spectrum silent in the face of state repression?

## Karachi street crime

MOST citizens of Karachi have either been held up at gunpoint themselves, or have friends or family members who have gone through this terrifying ordeal. In fact, muggers do not have the slightest compunction in pulling the trigger at even a hint of resistance. Many valuable lives have been lost for not handing over a mobile phone or wallet. Recent data compiled by the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee, published in this paper on Monday, has revealed that despite a drop in other violent crimes, the epidemic of street crime continues unabated in the metropolis. The data says that in 2016, over 34,000 mobile phones were either snatched or stolen across Karachi; moreover, the CPLC has zeroed in on 60 ‘hot spots’ spread out across the vast expanse of the city that are particularly prone to street crime. The seriousness of the situation can be gauged by the fact that during last week’s meeting of Sindh’s Apex Committee, the provincial chief minister ordered the administration to carry out a “vigorous operation” against street crime.

The effort of compiling data is commendable as it gives law enforcers some sort of baseline to work with, though it can be argued that the figures cited here may only be the tip of the iceberg; due to the mostly lethargic response of the police, many victims of street crime are reluctant to report their mobile phones, wallets or vehicles as snatched or stolen. Now that areas particularly prone to street crime have been identified, the police have no excuse to not crack down on this menace. Constant patrolling in the areas, as well as the deployment of undercover personnel and plainclothesmen, can help catch criminals in the act, and make these neighbourhoods safer for citizens. Reduction in the incidence of targeted killings, kidnappings, extortion and other violent

crimes have indeed allowed the people of Karachi to breathe easier; however, citizens will only be able to sleep easy once street crime is controlled.

## Soft-peddalling sectarian groups

Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan's remarks in the Senate on Tuesday about sectarianism in Pakistan beggar belief. Not only are they out of touch with reality, they are deeply offensive, and — given he is interior minister of a country involved in a battle against violent religious extremism — cause for extreme concern. Responding to the senators' objections about his meeting last October with the head of the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, Ahmed Ludhianvi, who had arrived as part of a Difa-i-Pakistan Council delegation, Chaudhry Nisar said that banned sectarian organisations could not be equated with banned terrorist groups. The Shia-Sunni conflict, he added, went back 1,300 years. His words outraged members of the Senate, triggering a walkout by the opposition. Examine: Perpetuating sectarianism

First, some basic facts. The ASWJ is a sectarian organisation that has been banned earlier, initially when it was called Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan and later when it re-emerged as Millat-i-Islamia. Then, as now, it was banned because it was actively involved in spreading hate against the Shia community, often resulting in violence and death.

It is also a fact that Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, which openly claims sectarian killings, is an offshoot of the SSP, its very name inspired by one of the group's founders. Also, the interior minister should know that the multifaceted religious extremism we are battling today first manifested itself in the form of sectarian violence when Pakistan in the '80s, helped by Gen Zia's 'Islamisation' campaign, became a proxy battlefield for the ideological war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The hardening of positions by organisations representing Shias and Sunnis, and the spewing of poisonous, takfiri rhetoric by some of the more rabid among them, led to further fracturing, including between Deobandis and Barelvis. Inevitably, the infusion of funds — by individuals and foreign governments — into extremist organisations, and, regrettably, at one point the latter's patronage by Pakistan's security establishment in the name of 'jihad', raised the stakes even higher. The minorities were also swept up in this tidal wave of bigotry, paying the price in terms of their lives and their right to practise their religion freely. So to suggest that sectarian violence is some lesser form of terrorism, which is what the interior minister's words imply, is wrong: it is the very bedrock upon which terrorism of the kind we see in Pakistan is based. However, appeasement of sectarian organisations has a long history here. It is rooted in

the expediency of post-Zia governments, which allowed these groups to further weave themselves into the warp and weft of the political landscape even while some of them were banned from time to time to mollify international opinion. It was not only military governments that kept religious extremists onside, civilian dispensations too did the same, courting their support in the electoral field and in parliament. That approach was always indefensible. Now, turning our back on it is imperative for this country's survival.

## Export incentives

THE prime minister's announcement of a package of incentives for textile exporters is perhaps generating more optimism than is warranted. The size of the package, as calculated against the foregone revenue for the government, is large indeed, but it would be a mistake to think that this is money being pumped into the ailing sector. In fact, on closer examination, the package appears to be designed in haste. For one, the textile sector remains internally divided between the spinners and the so-called 'value added' sector, comprising garments and other segments, and the impact of the package will be different on each. An export incentive in the form of a 4pc rebate given to spinners, for example, could end up raising the cost of yarn for the value added sector by the same amount, which could inhibit value added exports correspondingly. As in previous such meetings, the spinners' lobby appears to have carried the day simply by virtue of being the largest. The duty drawback reduction also appears to be built in such a way that the eventual payout, should an exporter meet the target of raising export orders by 10pc from last year, will come in July 2018, by when there is likely to be a caretaker government in power which may or may not honour the terms of the package.

In so many ways, the package betrays a near total absence of thought. Pakistan's exports have been dropping for 10 consecutive quarters now and if this package is the best thinking the government can come up with to tackle the problem, which is a broad based one and not specific to industry, then it shows the lack of depth in their thinking. All that has happened is that the government has postponed dealing with the core issue raised by exporters: the expedited processing of tax refunds stuck up by granting all other demands that don't carry a cash payout but have an impact on future revenues. If the thinking going into this package is at all serious, we should see a corresponding set of revenue measures designed to offset the revenue impact of the package, given that the fiscal framework is already coming under serious stress. But simply agreeing to everyone's demands, so long as the demands involve no cash payout, smacks of expediency more than serious policy thinking.



## Mentally ill on death row

HANGING a prisoner, and that too one diagnosed as mentally ill, is inhumane and does not serve the objectives of criminal justice. Black warrants being repeatedly issued for mentally ill prisoners expose serious anomalies in the justice system. Served with his third black warrant after 14 years on death row for killing a policeman, Khizer Hayat is scheduled to be hanged on Jan 17. Disturbingly, despite his counsel filing an application in the Lahore High Court to stay the execution, the prison authorities approached the sessions court for the warrant. Because Hayat's case is under review at the National Commission for Human Rights, issuing a black warrant demonstrates negligence and perverts the course of justice. Diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2008, his medical reports were never presented as evidence to the Supreme Court by jail authorities in 2009. Again when he was examined by a court-appointed medical board in May 2016, it was concluded he suffered from delusions and psychosis. This lack of coordination between jail authorities, lawyers and the judicial system demonstrated on several occasions is unpardonable.

Given the irrevocable nature of the death penalty — a punishment this newspaper does not endorse — there is a critical need for the judiciary to comprehend the nature of mental illness. In Imdad Ali's case, the Supreme Court's controversial verdict ruled schizophrenia is a 'recoverable' disease in contrast to universal medical evidence stating it is incurable. That said, why have the jail authorities failed to approach the home department to hospitalise Hayat for treatment? Because the system is rigged against the poorer mentally ill prisoners, the latter's cases hinge on inept state prosecutors and jail authorities. Given that the Ghulam brothers were wrongfully hanged — executed before their appeals were decided — the state must review capital punishment keeping in mind that there is no place for it in a society that upholds human rights as a supreme value.

## PM on minorities

IN grim and troubled times, it is both welcome and necessary for the political leadership of the country to articulate a message of inter-communal peace and coexistence and to preach a message of tolerance and inclusivity. On Wednesday, on a visit to a Hindu temple complex in Chakwal, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif struck a sensible note in speaking about the equal status of non-Muslim citizens and the need to ensure progress for all religious communities in the country. Indeed, in a week in which controversial remarks have been made about what ought to be properly considered as

militancy and with social activists still missing, the prime minister's comments may help tilt the PML-N's rhetorical balance at least towards what a democratic, constitutional order ought to represent.

Yet, words alone cannot and will not be enough. While the federal government and at least two provincial governments, Sindh and Punjab, have taken up progressive legislation to protect and enhance the rights of non-Muslims, women and disadvantaged groups, there is still an immeasurably long way to go before Pakistan can truly be regarded as a country of equal rights and protections for everyone and where all communities can progress together, free of fear and intimidation. Indeed, among the many areas in which the political leadership of the country has come up short in the nearly decade-old transition to democracy, it is the intersection of the law and social interventions that continues to be deeply problematic. Consider the example of the PPP in Sindh: while the party continues to take steps on occasion that hew to a secular political ethos, the terrible state of administration in the province has allowed a law and order breakdown to become a threat to entire communities. The spread of extremist networks in the province is increasingly documented and a dire threat to the well-being and safety of non-Muslim communities.

Meanwhile, the PML-N, which rules at the centre and in Punjab, appears almost determined to prevent the state from a root-and-branch attack on extremism in Punjab and the country generally. Surely, while it is well and good for the prime minister to garner praise for himself with his progressive pronouncements, the tolerance that the PML-N has for sympathisers of extremism within the party's own ranks is part of a national, political problem. The recent religiously tainted unrest in Chakwal was an important example: when faced with actual violence by extremists, the state prefers to hush matters up and seeks to deter the affected communities from seeking justice and the true protection of their rights. If Pakistan is to become the country that Mr Sharif has now repeatedly said he wants to see, then the political leadership needs to be both bold and determined. Political rhetoric will never mask real inaction.

## Different but equal

GIVEN the societal and even state disinclination to bring those with physical disabilities into the mainstream, the Lahore High Court's directive to the federal government is worthy of appreciation. On Wednesday, the court stated that two visually impaired and distinction-earning candidates of the Central Superior Service should be allowed into the service groups of their choice, rather than those dictated by the rulebook. Faisal Majeed and Muhammad Yousuf, both of whom achieved distinctions in the 2014 CSS

exams, wanted to work in the District Management Group and the Foreign Service respectively. But Section 9(2) of the Federal Public Service Commission rules restricts the recruitment of the blind to merely four service groups, with their entry into the remaining eight barred, regardless of the principle of open merit. Thankfully, and exactly as it ought to have been, Chief Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah found the rules to be discriminatory and in violation of fundamental rights. Striking down Section 9(2), he observed that the government could not be allowed to treat disabled persons in a discriminatory manner.

The decision will obviously have a positive impact on the lives of these two men, who have the potential of becoming role models for others in similarly challenging situations. The hard fact is that notwithstanding good intentions and even efforts made from time to time to extend equality of opportunity to the differently abled, there is a daunting terrain to traverse. From the prejudice that continues to taint far too many to the lack of understanding and empathy, the challenges faced by those with disabilities in the country are manifold, and can often come from unexpected quarters — such as Section 9(2) of the rules framed by FPSC and that was struck down by the court. On the other side of the equation, consider, for example, that something as basic as wheelchair access in public buildings remains a goal to be met at some point in the distant future. A change in societal mindset is possible, but only if it is spearheaded by a sustained, public-representative run campaign. The Lahore High Court's decision certainly carries within it the seeds of sowing such a process, provided that within the ranks of government there are men and women who desire such a trajectory. While it is heartening that in this instance the case has been decided in the petitioners' favour, the overall issue deserves steady and sustained attention.

## KCR's eternal wait

THE Japanese aid agency's refusal to 'rejoin' the Karachi Circular Railway project is understandable. As disclosed by Sindh Transport Minister Nasir Shah, the provincial government approached the Japan International Cooperation Agency to revive the KCR but it declined — for reasons that seem obvious to all except those who had the gall to approach Jica. Japan's involvement in the KCR project is decades old. It studied the KCR, whose rusty tracks had been buried under tonnes of dust, made technical studies, completed the report, offered technical and financial aid and awaited official approval. The go-ahead never came. All that the Japanese had asked for was the removal of illegal construction, including bungalows and factories, on KCR land. This was too much for the provincial government, for many administrations came and went but none could remove the encroachments and ask Jica to go ahead with a project that would have

given Pakistan's biggest city a modern mass transport system. Jica is not the only frustrated foreign agency that has received such treatment. In fact, as far back as 1996-97, a Canadian firm and a newly formed Indus Mass Transit Company signed an agreement with the federal government for building several corridors of elevated rail lines, but like the KCR the project never saw the light of day.

The truth is that no federal or provincial government has demonstrated the political will necessary to give Karachi a modern mode of transport. Lahore's example comes in handy. The Punjab government has received flak, much of it justifiable, for its 'mega' transit projects, but while some of these ongoing projects are indeed controversial and should be reviewed, several commuters also say they have benefited from transit systems in operation. Unfortunately, on Tuesday, Mr Shah said that a 'new' feasibility report on the KCR had begun. This is laughable. If the minister would dust off the files, he would find many such reports. The KCR doesn't need any more 'studies'; it needs political will, and that is lacking.

## Afghan reset?

EVERY new year brings with it a fresh dose of hope on Afghanistan — perhaps finally the Afghans themselves and the outside powers so invested in the country will find a way to stabilise Afghanistan and put it firmly on the path to peace and security. Soon enough, however, and especially once the annual Afghan Taliban spring offensive gets under way, hope dissipates and in its place a familiar gloom takes hold. But now, as a new US administration prepares to take power and the Afghan state continues to struggle to contain the Taliban insurgency, hope may already be slipping away for Afghanistan. Part of the problem is certainly the administration of US President Barack Obama. Afghanistan was one of the two wars that Mr Obama inherited that he had publicly pledged to end before the conclusion of his presidency. But Mr Obama has never had a clear strategy on Afghanistan and his policy has come to represent, in the White House's own characterisation, 'Afghanistan good enough'. With foreign troop and funding commitments in Afghanistan now extending till 2020, President Obama is effectively transferring the Afghanistan problem to his successor, president-elect Donald Trump.

And therein lies possibly the next great missed opportunity. As the next president of the US, Mr Trump could attempt a policy reset on Afghanistan. A new, purposeful Afghan policy would have a threefold approach: improving political stability and governance; shoring up counter-insurgency efforts; and restarting a peace and reconciliation process. Sixteen years since the start of the UN-mandated, US-led war in Afghanistan,

it is obvious that even the most sensible of policies on Afghanistan will not immediately and necessarily produce the intended outcomes. However, there is reason to fear that the incoming US administration may not seek a policy reset on Afghanistan and may in fact double down on the long-standing US approach of externalising blame for the deep malaise in Afghanistan and putting pressure on Pakistan to do more.

Certainly, Pakistan has contributed to the quagmire in Afghanistan because of a policy muddle over the years. However, in recent years, Pakistan has done a great deal to correct its approach towards Afghanistan. From emphasising better border management to nudging the Taliban towards talks with the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has arguably done a great deal of what was demanded of it for many years. But between an impatient Afghan government and a desultory US administration that has not really seemed invested in the peace process, Pakistan's efforts have largely gone unacknowledged and unappreciated. The elimination of Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a US drone strike last year and the scuttling of an incipient Murree peace process the year before were acts that greatly set back the possibility of talks — and were carried out ostensibly over the objections of Pakistan. The incoming US administration ought to study the recent past of Afghanistan and recognise that merely demanding that Pakistan 'do more' will not help deliver a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

## **Fertiliser subsidy**

WHETHER or not fertiliser ought to be subsidised and to what extent is a somewhat technical subject, and only industry insiders are interested in the details that feed into this question. What is not so technical, though, is the spectacle of watching a government announce the withdrawal of the subsidies one day, only to reverse its own decision the next as a result of the ensuing political uproar. In its last budget, the government had announced an amount of Rs27bn for subsidising fertiliser for the entire fiscal year, but the amount ran out in December. Instead of increasing the allocation, it decided to withdraw the fertiliser subsidy altogether. When a furore erupted, it quickly backtracked, and declared triumphantly that it was the Punjab chief minister whose insistence led to the restoration of the subsidy. Now, apparently, the only thing left to do is to locate the budgetary resources to fund the subsidy for the remainder of the fiscal year.

This is economic policy at its most absurd — part populist, part factional with a large dose of indecision. There is a good case to be made for why fertiliser should be subsidised, especially considering the condition of the farm sector and the increasingly dire circumstances of small farmers. But it is also a fact that a large share of this

subsidy never reaches the small farmer. Manufacturers eat up a large chunk, calculated to be as high as 30pc in some cases. Then comes the middleman. And finally, and most significantly, there is the problem of distribution. Fertiliser distribution is famously weak, skewed heavily in favour of big landlords with political connections, and the prices written on the bags are difficult to enforce. Given the massive weaknesses that weigh on the agriculture sector, a far more serious policy approach is necessary to lift its sagging fortunes than simple crowing about a fertiliser subsidy. Sadly, during the tenure of this government, we have seen an 'agriculture package', and this debate around a subsidy, with no real attempt at reforming the underlying weaknesses that keep the sector hostage to middlemen, large landlords, substandard seeds and pesticides, and poor water utilisation practices. If the Punjab chief minister wants to have his regard for agriculture taken seriously, he should focus on fixing the procurement machinery and on ensuring that the benefits of the subsidy actually reach the intended recipients.

## A worthier vocation

RETIRED army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has been invited to the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos to speak on terrorism. There are few, globally, who are as well qualified as him to speak on the subject. Not only was he the head of a national army locked in a crucial battle with militants, he has also been credited with defining that war, discarding the often half-hearted efforts he had inherited, and launching a real offensive. No doubt, there was criticism of the way he went about it, especially when he was seen as encroaching upon the civilian government's space. But that debate, as well as any other objections that might have been raised about the former general's methods, does not make him any less worthy of the prestigious forum which will see participation by top-level state and private functionaries from across the globe.

Only a few weeks after his retirement as army chief, a question was raised about what kind of a stage would now be fit for Gen Sharif, given his stature and particular experience. Davos has provided one likely answer. The other option that he has been associated with lately is contentious; it is attached to speculation, initially confirmed by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, that Gen Sharif would be heading a Saudi-led 34-member Muslim alliance against terrorism. The minister's subsequent 'clarification' that the government was not aware of the former general's appointment has caused confusion. Nevertheless, if the Saudi assignment is indeed being considered, it should be realised in the light of events and politics in an extremely polarised Muslim world, that it would be a very controversial task to undertake and could deepen divisions. On the other hand, forums like Davos provide the world a great opportunity to learn and benefit from the experience of a military commander who has the distinction of leading

his army in a war that many are very keen to hear about, ie the modern war against militancy. The choice should be clear.

## Accountability must start with PM

THE Supreme Court has tasked itself with giving a verdict on the collective opposition allegations against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family in the matter of the Panama Papers and the London flats owned by the Sharifs. Daily court hearings are undoubtedly helping speed along what could be a definitive judgement on an issue that exploded last April, with the release of the Panama Papers, and that has refused to die down since. But the hearings themselves and the occasional investigative media report are raising a fresh and ever-expanding set of questions that the Sharif family is not addressing — and that the family may struggle to address in an adequate manner. Already this much is clear: while no explicit illegality may be evident as yet, Prime Minister Sharif and members of his family have provided an ever-shifting account about the origins and scale of the family's wealth and assets.

Legal questions aside, the matter is deeply troubling from a democratic and political perspective. Consider that barely an allegation against the previous federal government led by the PPP has been proven in any court of law anywhere, but the reputation of the party and its allies is set in political stone. Few among the public, in the media or, indeed, in the PPP itself, will deny that the party has a virtually unshakeable political reputation for corruption, incompetence and misgovernance. While the electorate delivered its verdict by consigning the party to virtual obsolescence at the federal level in the last general election, the impact on the perception of the democratic system has been damaging and lasting. Now, the PML-N is doing its own damage to the democratic system with its shaky and seemingly evasive defence on the issues of the Panama Papers and London flats.

The Sharif family undeniably has every right to defend itself using every legal tool and argument at its disposal. But Prime Minister Sharif has a larger and more important duty to the nation: of both being and being seen as deserving of the office of prime minister. Instead, thus far, the prime minister has fallen woefully short of the elevated standards of conduct that ought to be expected of him — and it is the democratic system itself that is suffering damage and coming into some disrepute. As this paper has consistently held, the prime minister and his family need to be held to exceptional standards and must voluntarily submit themselves to independent scrutiny ahead of all other accused individuals. The Supreme Court can only examine the evidence placed before it; for the country to truly believe that the Sharif wealth and assets are untainted, independent and

unhindered scrutiny is needed. Will the prime minister commit to the exceptional scrutiny of himself that democratic norms demand?

## Artist honoured

MAKING sense of the socio-political stimulus, Pakistani art has come into its own over the past decade. The most recent recognition of its worth is in the form of an award for miniature artist Imran Qureshi, the first Pakistani to be honoured with the US State Department's Medal of Arts Award. Mr Qureshi shares this award with four other world-renowned artists, including British artist Rachel Whiteread, the first woman to win the Turner Prize, for demonstrating his commitment to cultural diplomacy through the visual arts. Elements of violence and beauty come together in the art of most contemporary practitioners, their collective expression serving as visual documentaries of our times. Mr Qureshi's work reflects this fusion through traditional painting techniques — introduced by 16th-century Mughal masters — in groundbreaking ways. His well-deserved award is an honour for Pakistan, especially in a milieu where cultural heritage and art receive only ad hoc state patronage. What is commendable is that he has managed to preserve miniature art, both in technique and material, while depicting modern world concerns including violence and terrorism.

Mr Qureshi is no stranger to global acclaim; a 2013 installation on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum titled 'And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean', taken from a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, received much attention from the art world. But even as he is celebrated globally, in Pakistan there are few large public spaces to exhibit art work of this nature, a shortcoming that the state refuses to rectify. It is no wonder that artists of his calibre cultivate a niche abroad where their work is given more prominence and where its value is recognised. Given our own history of violence and the need for building peace, our government would do well to support culture that is imperative to the promotion of tolerance and plurality. The reminder that a nation stays alive when its culture stays alive should not be lost amid other priorities.

## Fata financing plan

AN argument is doing the rounds that the proposed Fata reforms will die a natural death if a controversial financing plan for them continues to meet objections from the provinces. It is encouraging to note that the head of the Fata reforms committee, Sartaj Aziz, himself does not subscribe to the idea, but it is being pushed by others around



him. The financing plan proposed to help pay for the reforms involves reducing the provincial share of federal transfers under the NFC award. Rolling back the NFC award in order to meet the federal government's current commitments is not a good idea, but in this case, since the matter relates to a provincial government, and mainstreaming Fata is a shared priority for many reasons including security, perhaps some amount of burden-sharing with the provinces can be taken into consideration. The onus is on the PTI government in KP to help build consensus amongst the provinces, particularly in Sindh since opposition to the idea is strong in the province controlled by the PPP. The advance of the Fata reforms should not be held hostage to the fate of a financing plan, and the KP government must find a way to work with the federal government to get the job done since it is the primary beneficiary of the process.

What is more problematic is the inclusion in the revenue scheme of projects in regions like Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan that are not scheduled for merger with any province. Additionally, the financing burden of purely federal subjects, such as the formation of a CPEC security force, is also being pushed onto the provincial governments. Diverting resources meant for provincial governments towards other areas can be argued for if there is strong provincial interest in the outcome, such as in the Fata reforms which seek to merge federal territory with a province. But security and projects in other sub-federating units are purely federal subjects, and it is wrong to ask provinces to bear the burden of their costs. If the government wants to take the road of using NFC resources to help pay for Fata reforms, it needs to delink the issue from other similar requests, and work closely with the KP government to persuade the leadership of those provinces that are resisting the idea. The temptation to shrink the divisible pool unilaterally should be resisted.

## Hounding refugees

THE grim scapegoating of Afghan refugees by both the state and its law enforcers has long been assailed by right-minded sections of the public and the media. But the relentless propaganda against this vulnerable section has continued to the point where public opinion appears to have been irreversibly poisoned against the continued presence of Afghan refugees on Pakistani soil. In building a narrative of hostility, one particular accusation has played a central role — that Afghan refugees have driven up the crime rate in Pakistan, and KP in particular, to unacceptable levels. But, going by a report in this newspaper on Sunday, that myth has been exploded by official crime statistics themselves. According to documents obtained under the provincial Right to Information Act, of the major crimes in which cases were registered, the involvement of Afghan refugees was about 1pc of the total. The stark figures bear some repeating

because they are obtained from the Directorate of Prosecution and Department of Police. From 2014 to September 2016, of the 10,549 cases put up in court, a negligible 134 cases involved Afghan refugees. And of the more than 23,007 individuals accused in the cases, only 300 consisted of Afghan refugees.

That the Afghan refugee involvement in major crimes in the province, as catalogued by the police itself, is so low is unsurprising — few major crimes have ever been specifically blamed on or proved to be the doing of Afghan refugees. What is shocking, however, is the degree to which public officials have distorted the truth in recent times. The vilification of Afghan refugees as a prelude to forcing them out of the country is an ongoing process and one of the more shameful chapters in this country's history. While officially denied, Afghan refugees have become a pawn in a policy tug-of-war between the Afghan and Pakistani states: Kabul's reluctance to cooperate on border management, its seeming unwillingness to clamp down on anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, and its aggressive denunciation of this country for a failed peace process have contributed to an environment where Pakistan may be seeking to punish Afghanistan by forcing it to take in a mass of population that it cannot sustain. True, Pakistan has a legitimate right to encourage the humane and voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, but that right must not be abused for political purposes. The harassment of Afghan refugees must cease.

## Israel snubbed

IN less than a month, Israel has received a second rebuke from the international community which insists that only a two-state solution can give a lasting peace to the Middle East. As French President François Hollande told the Paris gathering of 70 nations on Sunday, a two-state solution wasn't a dream; it remained "the goal of the entire international community for the future". The conference communiqué chose not to embarrass US president-elect Donald Trump and avoided a reference in the communiqué to occupied Jerusalem, which he has vowed to recognise as Israel's capital. But French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault minced no words and warned in a TV interview that such a move could have "extremely serious consequences". In fact, Mr Ayrault was blunt. "When you are president of the United States, you cannot take such a stubborn and such a unilateral move on the issue," he said, adding that the Trump administration would find it difficult to implement it.

Given its track record, Israel's rejection of the Paris call shouldn't surprise the world with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accusing the 69 nations (Britain didn't sign the communiqué) of imposing conditions "incompatible with our needs". Israel's fear is that

the Paris statement could form the basis of a resolution which the Security Council could pass before the Trump administration is in place. The Security Council's resolution 2334, passed last month, still seems to rankle with the Likud government. However, US Secretary of State John Kerry was quick to reassure Mr Netanyahu his country would oppose any such move at the UN. With Tel Aviv having shown utter contempt for UN resolutions and international agreements to which America and Israel itself are party, the Paris declaration does little more than prod Israel. With the heart of the Arab world in a shambles and America's military and diplomatic power at its service, Israel has every reason to display hubris and plan the eventual annexation of all occupied territories, as it has the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem.

## Organ trafficking

ORGAN trafficking is, in essence, a crime against society. Preying on the despair of the poorest of the poor, it is a self-perpetuating cycle and further deepens social inequities. A report in this newspaper yesterday exposed the various players — the doctors, the police and the middlemen — who are part and parcel of the lucrative business, and the impunity with which they have thus far operated. This, despite the fact that the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Ordinance, 2007, followed by parliamentary legislation in 2010, specifically criminalised the practice. In October 2016, after shocking reports emerged of 24 people being detained for weeks in a building in Rawalpindi so that doctors at the city's Kidney Centre could harvest their organs, a comprehensive crackdown against the mafias that sustain the racket seemed inevitable. That, however, would have meant discounting the role that connections — social, political and institutional — play in Pakistan when justice is at stake, particularly when one side is manifestly powerless. As the report illustrated, the cases filed against the accused doctors, as well as the ongoing suo motu action at the Supreme Court on the organ trafficking issue, have not deterred others involved in this criminality.

What makes organ trafficking all the more reprehensible is that the offending doctors cloak their actions in the garb of social service. In reality, it is pure and simple skullduggery, fuelled by greed and a breathtaking contempt for humanity. Certainly, it is true there is a dire shortage of organs for those who need them, and their yearning for restored health is understandable. Nevertheless, that need cannot — must not — be met by exploiting the most disadvantaged amongst us. This is not a situation to which market forces of supply and demand, in the ordinary sense of the term, apply. Those driven by circumstances to offer their organs for sale — let alone those who are duped into parting with their kidneys — cannot be considered autonomous actors with freedom of choice. Moreover it is an unequal, one-way exchange: if the impoverished organ

vendor's remaining kidney fails — a reasonable possibility given his less than optimal health plus the lack of post-operative care he receives — will anyone from a (usually privileged) kidney recipient's family step forward to offer him his kidney for free?

The answer to the apparent conundrum lies in deceased organ donation, practised in many parts of the world, including several Muslim countries. The provincial governments here should proactively promote this procedure which can, to an extent, meet the requirement for organs as well as address the reasons for the prevalence of kidney disease in Pakistan. But first they must ensure that those involved in the illegal organ trade are punished without fear or favour. As long as organs can be purchased on the market, the efforts of those trying to promote ethical transplantation and deceased organ donation will always be undermined.

## Steel mill fiasco

ANOTHER plan has been approved to get the ill-fated steel mill out of government hands. This time, the Privatisation Commission board has agreed to a proposal to lease out the mill for a period of 30 years to any interested party. If successful, and that is a big if, the proposal might yet see the realisation of a dream that is more than a decade old already: the handing over of the steel mill to an operator more suitable to manage it efficiently than the government of Pakistan. This would be a step forward. Ever since the Supreme Court killed the privatisation of the mill in its famously controversial judgement of 2005, the mill has been struggling. Today, it has accumulated losses close to Rs166 billion, as well as untold billions invested in the myriad 'rescue packages' that have been necessary over the years to meet its running expenses and 'replacement imports'. Meanwhile, its output has floundered and one plan after another for its revival has been dead on arrival. The latest one, which involved handing it over to the Sindh government, seems to have died a natural death after the provincial government's conspicuous lack of enthusiasm.

The real cost of that controversial judgment in 2005 will be tallied up by future historians. For now, it's enough to say that it runs into billions of dollars. For a government that has twice approached the IMF for a bailout due to dwindling foreign exchange reserves since 2005, this is clearly an unacceptable cost. Multiple governments have made the effort to try and revive the mill through their own efforts, but have failed. By now, it ought to be abundantly clear to everyone that there are very few options left. Holding on to the mill is prohibitively expensive for a cash-strapped government, and seeking its revival as a public entity is something everyone has failed at. So if privatisation has become too controversial due to the politics of our time,

perhaps the proposal just floated by the commission is worthy of consideration. The conditions attached to the proposal are stringent. The interested party would not be allowed to sell the mill, its assets or its land. They will have to invest their own money for plant upgradation. The accumulated losses will have to be cleared by the government. But if the investor can turn the entity around, then the proposal deserves to be given serious thought.

## Dr Arif's persecution

THE farce that is the 'case' against Dr Hasan Zafar Arif is being taken to ever more dangerous extremes. The elderly, retired philosophy professor, who suffers from a heart condition, is to stand trial for the 'crime' of having facilitated and listened to hate speech — a reference to the incendiary address delivered last July by Altaf Hussain, whose party he joined but recently. Dr Arif's ordeal began in October when he was arrested by the Sindh Rangers along with another member of MQM-London from outside the Karachi Press Club where they were to address a news conference. First, he was detained in Central Jail for two months under the oppressive, colonial-era Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance and subsequently remanded to prison by an antiterrorism court on charges registered under sections of the penal code that included, among others, those pertaining to promoting enmity between different groups and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings, as well as Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Last Wednesday, the administrative judge of the ATCs sent his case for trial.

The state is courting ridicule by proceeding in this manner against a renowned educationist with several achievements — both national and international — to his credit. Amnesty International has launched an appeal for action pointing out the multiple violations of Dr Arif's rights to due process and proper medical care, and urging Pakistan's civilian leadership to address these concerns. As anyone who is aware will vouch, the life of this scholar has always been animated by progressive ideals, in support of causes that have earlier put him in the cross hairs of dictatorial regimes. To accuse him of furthering the cause of terrorism only exposes the intellectual bankruptcy of the forces that have, for some time now, resorted to political victimisation on the pretext of tackling crime and fighting terrorism. The truth is that whether or not one agrees with his politics, Dr Arif is a prisoner of conscience whose only 'crime' is that he belongs to the MQM's London-based faction.

## Suo motu on stents

WITH the number of people fitted with coronary stents growing at a very rapid pace, the Supreme Court now wants to know how many patients have actually needed the medical device. The court has asked the FIA for an investigation. Besides wanting to ascertain if a stent implant was necessary or even carried out, another concern of the chief justice is to find out if the patients were charged an 'exorbitant' price. Some other questions that need answers relate to the quality and efficacy of the devices as well as the level of awareness regarding the procedure among the attendants. Media reports indicate that patients and their attendants are often in the dark about what a stent implant entails, and may end up being swindled by a greedy medical enterprise that preys on the sick.

Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif was recently told that hospitals in his province were using unregistered coronary stents — despite the existence of DRAP, the drug regulatory authority. It is a shocking piece of information since the general public appears to think that at least this is an area that is being closely watched given the sensitivity of the life-saving 'business' — or families might be too worried about patients to ask too many questions about routine procedures and devices that are used to save lives. Indeed, it is quite likely that a majority of cardiac patients would be at risk without the insertion of a stent, and are, in fact, being given the right medical advice by expert doctors. But then, if there is any unusual medical procedure taking place in their vicinity, doctors, especially the specialists among them, have a duty to report it and to help stop it before it becomes a regular practice. Now the reports, even without being backed by FIA findings, threaten to bring stent implantation into disrepute, opening the floodgates to yet more criticism that could condemn the entire healthcare system of the country.

It is said that the big hospitals in the more privileged and supposedly more secure Lahore — Mayo, PIC, et al — have all been getting their supplies of unregistered coronary stents. They will now be under probe by the FIA amidst fears that matters could be worse in smaller towns, given that 'stenting', as it is sometimes called, has emerged as a safe, routine procedure to treat coronary blockages. The fact that healthcare in the country needs constant monitoring by the authorities cannot be emphasised enough. Indeed, it would seem that, in a variety of illnesses, even well-qualified doctors are capable of acting as quacks and are not averse to prescribing expensive drugs and procedures that may not be needed — all this in order to make extra money. Unless there is greater vigilance and suitable penalty for those who play with their patients' health, such unethical practices will not stop.

## Accountability woes

IN the Senate opposition's rejection of a government-sponsored ordinance amending the NAB law, a host of issues appear to have become entangled. First, in disapproving of the hastily promulgated presidential ordinance merging the rules governing voluntary returns and plea bargains — and in doing so, making court permission mandatory before either option can be authorised by NAB — the opposition has sent yet another signal against the misuse of presidential ordinances. Presidential ordinances are a constitutional legislative mechanism designed to be used in exceptional circumstances when the normal, parliamentary legislative is not available. But as an opposition senator pointed out on Wednesday, the ordinance amending NAB was promulgated after the Senate session had already been convened. In essence, like all governments before it, the PML-N has found it legislatively convenient to rely on ordinances and only later turn to parliament to force through the existing law. The practice undermines parliament's relevance, and surely prevents the strengthening of the democratic process and institutions. It should cease.

Second, the government's approach to the issue of accountability. In the face of court pressure and public outrage, the government acted quickly to try and defuse some of the justified anger at the woeful state of accountability. But the government's response also betrayed a willingness to only do the bare minimum. It is also reasonable to question if the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court played a role: was the government only acting quickly on the NAB front because doing nothing on accountability would be politically damaging? In truth, it does not appear that the government takes the issue of accountability seriously at all. Had the government been serious, a review of the accountability laws would have been conducted expeditiously and parliament would have been tasked to overhaul the system. But three and a half years into the government's term, an ad hoc approach still reigns.

Third, what should be the principles underpinning a new accountability regime? The voluntary settlement and plea bargaining system put an emphasis on recovery of ill-gotten wealth and assets — but they achieve little in terms of deterrence. Surely, if a senior public servant faces no mandatory minimum jail sentence, the temptation to indulge in corruption will remain high. After all, the end of employment with the state and returning only the assets the state is able to trace would be a reasonable risk for many to take. An effective accountability regime would emphasise both recovery and deterrence, and the latter is difficult to achieve without mandatory minimum sentences. A graduated approach could be put in place whereby petty corruption is treated differently to institutional corruption by the accountability system. Creating an effective

and just accountability system is politically difficult and institutionally disruptive, but it is necessary if Pakistan is to become a modern, law-based state.

## Killed for ‘honour’

ZEEENAT Rafiq was one of around a thousand women murdered in the name of honour in Pakistan last year. In the vast majority of such cases, the wheels of justice do not merely turn slowly; they do not turn at all. In Zeenat’s case however, there has been a reckoning. An anti-terrorism court in Lahore on Monday sentenced her mother, Parveen Rafiq, to death and her brother to life imprisonment for murdering the 18-year-old on the pretext of honour. The young woman’s killing in June last year had repulsed the nation, not only for the gruesome manner in which it was carried out — Zeenat being doused with kerosene and set alight — but also because it was her own mother who had torched her and then reportedly exulted over her actions. Even for Pakistan, inured to the slaying of women by fathers, brothers, husbands and the occasional uncle or brother-in-law, maternal filicide is a bridge too far.

The back story was a familiar one: a woman marrying of her own free will and a family determined to mete out the ultimate punishment to her for having ‘shamed’ them. While this paper continues to oppose the death penalty, one must note that there has been accountability in Zeenat’s case. Most ‘honour’ killers go scot-free courtesy the legal loophole whereby families of victims can forgive the perpetrator, a particularly grotesque provision in the context of honour killings where the victim’s family and the perpetrator are often one and the same. However, that the accused in this instance have been punished owes more to the fact they were charged under the Anti Terrorism Act rather than the legal landscape for this terrible crime having changed significantly.

Although parliament in October 2016 enacted amendments to ostensibly strengthen the law against such murders, the legislation falls short on an important front by not making honour killings non-compoundable, that is, one in which a compromise cannot be effected. Instead, it does little more than prescribe imprisonment for life, ie 25 years, for those found guilty of the crime — and that too is subject to judicial discretion. That is not enough to serve the ends of justice, particularly given the problem has its roots in the society’s cultural mindset. These legal shortcomings should be addressed and police, prosecutors and judges trained to appreciate that so-called honour is never a mitigating factor in murder.



## Financial inclusion

WITH half its adult population excluded altogether from the financial system, Pakistan is well positioned to reap the gains of financial inclusion. While the other half is served in some capacity or the other, only 16pc of the total is formally banked, meaning most of those using the banking system do so peripherally, such as presenting a cash cheque to collect payment. The National Financial Inclusion Strategy has made some gains through the use of mobile banking instruments, but much room for growth remains. Big push strategies are key to this, such as routing all government payments through mobile banking channels. The gains from a growing financial inclusion approach are innumerable, starting with documentation of small ticket transactions, but also for business ventures that are made possible, and the voluminous data that can be mined to fine-tune other policy measures.

One such step has just been taken in the form of a partnership between Nadra and Mastercard. The idea is to make every CNIC a potential payment portal, and use the CNIC number and Mastercard's clearing system to vastly increase the potential population that can be targeted in further financial inclusion initiatives. The idea will take time to find traction, but it deserves sustained attention from all concerned, within Nadra and the State Bank to ensure that it eventually strikes roots. Nadra is an example of how large databases can be potential game changers enabling further business development. Their database has proved invaluable in promoting mobile communications as well as financial inclusion initiatives. Now it looks like the ground is being laid for a giant leap into a future where even international remittances can be sent electronically directly between sender and beneficiary. The potential of such partnerships is enormous. Innovative approaches such those being deployed in the financial inclusion efforts are the real unsung game changers that are currently being rolled out.

## An uncertain era

WHAT seemed inconceivable until Nov 8 has now become a reality: having won a stunning, historic election, Donald Trump is the new president of the United States of America. It is without doubt an anxious time for much of the world. The unconventional election campaign of Mr Trump created much uncertainty that the two-month transition failed to resolve. Indeed, the capricious, almost whimsical nature of Mr Trump's pronouncements, many on Twitter, have often contradicted his own cabinet nominees' comments. Chaotic is almost an understatement in describing President Trump's path

to the White House. Flawed as Barack Obama's presidency was, at least at a personal level Mr Obama and his family brought great dignity and poise to the White House. A thoughtful president with a widely celebrated and universally popular spouse, Michelle, the occupants of the White House until yesterday morning, set an admirable example of progressive, inclusive leadership. Whatever history's judgement on Mr Obama's presidency, the Obamas were an undeniable inspiration for millions across the globe. Barack and Michelle Obama's post-presidency public life will be watched closely by many.

Now, though, is the era of Donald Trump. Assessing its potential is fundamentally complicated by a disconcerting reality: even now, 19 months since the most blinding exposure imaginable, it is not quite clear what Mr Trump stands for. Many of the new president's cabinet nominees are hard-core conservatives, but it is not clear whether Mr Trump will, in fact, embrace a radical social and economic agenda. Nevertheless, some of the damage is already apparent. For better or worse, the US has been a global leader when it comes to rights-based, liberal democratic values. The actual record may be decidedly mixed, but at least when it comes to promoting progressive, inclusive, democratic values, the US has been a self-professed leader. That may no longer be the case as an ethno-nationalism takes hold in the US and the slogan of 'America first' is interpreted internationally as every country for itself. The absence of a strong voice for progressive, inclusive and democratic values internationally may have all manner of consequences, few of which will be good.

Regionally, a Trump presidency could have alarming consequences. From Mr Trump's loose talk about nuclear proliferation to possibly starting a trade war with China and from India's perceived determination to make itself indispensable to the US to the new president needing to chart his own course in Afghanistan, the challenges are significant. Will terrorism come to define Mr Trump's presidency as it did George W. Bush's? Or will Mr Trump end up as the worse combination of his immediate predecessors: — between Mr Obama's seeming desperation to steer clear of a full-blown war overseas and Mr Bush's apparent eagerness to stoke conflict? Never before has the adage 'hope for the best and prepare for the worst' seemed more relevant.

## Nisar's statement

INTERIOR Minister Nisar Ali Khan has taken a timely stand on the issue of the missing bloggers. One hopes he can follow it up with the firmness and clarity that are required. If so, it may yet prevent what is at the moment a matter of deep concern that could lead to a terrible denouement. On Thursday, the interior ministry issued a statement asserting

there was no truth to reports in the media that any case had been filed against the online activists that accused them of blasphemy, describing such claims as “ridiculous”. The statement also decried the “negative propaganda” particularly on social media against the missing men, and alluded to the perils inherent in the allegations against them. “Perhaps [these elements] do not realise that this act of theirs is further increasing difficulties for the affected families,” it added.

Chaudhry Nisar’s assessment, while broadly correct, does not quite spell out the awful truth: if the vilification campaign against them continues along the path it is taking, the bloggers’ very lives will be in danger when they are released. Freedom would mean little in such a context. These were precisely the misgivings conveyed by the activists’ families and supporters in Islamabad on Wednesday. In a statement issued by them, they described the malicious propaganda as an attempt to divert public sympathy for their plight and that of their loved ones. Indeed, the groundswell of intimidation and violence driven by wild, unfounded allegations has been growing in intensity. In Karachi on Thursday, supporters of religious groups hurled stones at protesters demonstrating against the enforced disappearances, and demanded the men be put on trial for blasphemy. Civil society, at least the sections of it that believe in rational discourse and due process, are looking to the government to assert its support unequivocally for the missing five. Moreover, the interior minister, who is after all the country’s police and intelligence czar, should also be more forthcoming: first, where are the men? They must be recovered immediately and their protection ensured. Second, who instigated the allegations of blasphemy and to what purpose? Those culpable should be exposed for the dangerous game they are playing. They have, perhaps deliberately, triggered a new and sinister turn of events, one that bodes ill for rights activists. By default, it gives regressive state and non-state elements a deadly weapon they can access anytime, anywhere to throttle dissent.

## State of prisons

OF the many aspects of Pakistan’s justice system that are deeply flawed, one of the most inhumane is the wretched state of the prisons. Many of those incarcerated can expect their existence to quietly be erased from the public memory. It is not often when this subject is debated. But on Thursday, the issue of jails came up when, during question hour, the Sindh Assembly heard that over the past three years, 104 prisoners had died in the prisons of the province. MQM legislator Sumeta Syed had asked why of these fatalities 76pc, or 80 persons, had died in the prisons of just two cities, Karachi and Hyderabad. While no direct explanation to this point was provided, the provincial minister for parliamentary affairs, Nisar Ahmed Khuhro, did inform the house that the

death of 90 prisoners was due to 'natural' causes, while the rest had died because of other reasons, such as suicide and jail riots. Further discussion brought to light other information — for instance, 19 women were incarcerated in the province's four women's prisons, but the number of children living with them was not known.

To quote natural causes is all very well, but it must be highlighted that the conditions that prevail in prisons across the country, not just in Sindh, are very far from a standard that allows good health. The most endemic problem is overcrowding: prisoners are forced to live in cramped and uncomfortable quarters, with juvenile detainees or those convicted of 'soft' crimes often housed with hardened criminals — because of which they too can be thrust further into a life of crime. The buildings that are being used as prisons tend to be old, colonial-era relics where hygiene and sanitation present major challenges. And while the budgets for prisoners' diet may have increased over the decades, more can be done on this front. Such deficiencies need to be addressed urgently. Jailing people should not mean stripping them of their basic right to dignity.

## Indian soldier's return

With the repatriation of an Indian soldier who had crossed the LoC the day after the so-called surgical strikes last September, one of the more difficult phases in Pak-India relations has hopefully come to a close.

The sensible manner in which both Pakistan and India have handled the return of the soldier is commendable: after initial confusion and contradictory accounts of the circumstances in which the soldier came to be in the custody of Pakistani security forces, the two militaries and foreign ministries worked quietly to resolve the matter.

### ADVERTISEMENT

In the end, the soldier was returned in a dignified manner to India, with minimal grandstanding and no hail of accusations. When the two countries' leaderships act sensibly and focus on problem-solving, the results can be pleasantly surprising.

To be sure, a great deal more will need to be done if the post-Uri attacks phase in the bilateral relationship is to turn towards the reactivation of dialogue between the two countries. The lessons from Uri are that an overreaction by either side causes the other to follow suit.

The wild cheerleading in India after its government claimed it carried out surgical strikes across the LoC put Pakistani policymakers in a situation where they felt compelled to

respond to the Indian pressure and propaganda. Soon enough, the LoC ignited once again as both sides traded fire, and inside Pakistan anti-India sentiment was actively inflamed.

The new year — and perhaps a change in military leadership in Pakistan — has restored a degree of calm to a situation that had threatened to spiral out of control. With the return of the soldier, perhaps a new chapter in relations can be opened, provided that the leaderships of the two countries show the courage and vision necessary to restart a stalled normalisation process.

On the Pakistani side, it is fairly clear that the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif wants dialogue with India and seeks the resolution of at least some of the old disputes plaguing ties. But is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government willing to engage Pakistan again?

With a spate of state elections imminent, including in some states where firebrand nationalist politics can help win votes, signs are that the Modi government is not willing to consider a fresh opening. While elections are important, it is also true that the Indian electoral calendar has state elections peppered across the term of a national government — meaning there will always be another election around the corner as an excuse to defer dialogue.

Mr Modi needs to show bold leadership at home and extend a hand of peace to Pakistan.

## Medical education

EVEN a cursory look at the healthcare system in place across the country reveals a state of utter disrepair. Public-sector facilities are grossly inadequate for the load they must bear, being underfunded and poorly staffed. Those in the private sector function largely without proper regulation, and patients must pay often exorbitant amounts that are set according to market needs, instead of being aligned with the principle that access to healthcare is a basic human right. The latest shambles to have been highlighted concerns the provision of medical education facilities, an example of how 'more' does not necessarily translate to 'better'. As reported by this newspaper on Saturday, the establishment of ever-increasing numbers of medical and dental colleges across the country, most of them in private hands, has created a situation where faculty shortages have become endemic; according to an official of the National Health Service, the teaching of subjects that include anatomy, pharmacology and biochemistry

is badly affected. Meanwhile, student-teacher ratios have fallen to unacceptable levels, made worse by the fact that several medical colleges have increased the number of seats they offer, so that student enrolment figures are raised. To put the problem in perspective, consider this: Pakistan is rivalling the US in the sheer number of facilities offering medical education. In fact, during the past year alone, 31 applications were filed for the establishment of new medical colleges.

Grim as it is, the tale does not end here. Many of the private-sector institutions have established teaching hospitals but lack key infrastructure or staff to ensure that neither the treatment of patients nor the training of students suffers. The problem is one of regulation, a task that comes under the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council. Amongst its assigned missions is safeguarding the public interest through uniform minimum standards of medical education, ensuring implementation, registering doctors, and watching out for malpractices. But this body has itself been in a state of utter confusion in recent years, in need of restructuring and being cleansed of elements that have conflicts of interest when it comes to carrying out their duties. Correcting course at this late stage, when simply shutting down institutions will adversely impact thousands of students, is a challenge indeed. Nevertheless, it is one that must urgently be taken up. This is about more than just education; it is also about the lives that will be held in the hands of graduating students.

## Misogyny in the assembly

KUDOS to our lawmakers for proving themselves to be truly representative of Pakistani society by exercising their male 'privilege' of making derogatory, sexist remarks against women who question or challenge them. The unedifying spectacle took place on Friday in the Sindh Assembly, when PPP MPA Imdad Pitafi made vulgar innuendos in response to PML-F MPA Nusrat Seher Abbasi's queries during the question and answer session. Despite Deputy Speaker Shehla Raza making a futile attempt to rein in the minister and ordering his remarks expunged, he persisted in the same vein. Shamefully, several legislators belonging to the ostensibly progressive PPP found Mr Pitafi's coarse humour a matter of much mirth despite Ms Abbasi's obvious distress.

Such incidents are not a rare occurrence: consider for example, Khawaja Asif's tirade against the PTI's Shireen Mazari in the National Assembly last June which the speaker actually condoned rather than censured. Such boorish behaviour is something that millions of working women have to contend with every day; they are considered fair game for harassment, or worse, for having the temerity to step into the public sphere. However, what can be said of a party like the PPP whose recent history is studded with

a slew of pro-women legislation, yet which cannot restrain its lawmakers from objectifying and disrespecting women colleagues in the assembly? Laws empowering women can only be truly effective when they are accompanied by a change in attitude towards them. Although parliament is a microcosm of society, it nevertheless has a duty to set an example, and party leaders themselves should make it very clear to their members that misogyny — howsoever disguised as clever riposte — is unacceptable. This leads to another point: solidarity between women legislators. While politics can be competitive and ugly, women lawmakers should consider themselves a sisterhood in a chauvinistic landscape. They must work across the aisle not only to enact pro-women legislation but also when one of them is singled out and bullied, simply for being a woman.

## Imran's challenge

IT is a good, sensible and democratic idea and it is one that the government ought to consider seriously. On Sunday, PTI supremo Imran Khan challenged Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to a parliamentary debate. While Mr Khan gave no specifics, presumably the debate would centre on the Sharif family-related revelations in the Panama Papers and questions about the family's wealth and assets. The PML-N is likely to be dismissive of the demand. The party's disdain for its biggest political rival is apparent; the prime ministerial circle is likely to argue that the matter is sub judice; and Mr Sharif himself has shown little interest in the proceedings of parliament throughout his third term, even when political waters have been unthreatening. But such likely reluctance should not obscure the fact that an important, democracy-strengthening debate needs to be held in parliament.

Set aside the specific matters being heard by the Supreme Court. The Panama Papers and the subsequent admissions by the Sharifs have raised serious matters of conflict of interest. The separation, if any, between the seemingly vast business empire of the Sharifs and the public roles of Prime Minister Sharif and Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif is a dark area. Consider the immense scrutiny President Donald Trump is under in the US and the several steps the Trump business empire has had to take to put a distance between its operations and the office of the president. The Sharif family, meanwhile, has vast business operations both inside and outside Pakistan — and there is no known step that has been taken to ensure that political favours are not being used to keep the businesses afloat and profitable. How have the prime minister, the Punjab chief minister and indeed many wealthy businessmen in the cabinet and government separated their personal business interests from government decision-making and policymaking? Surely, as the democratic transition continues, it is necessary for more rules and greater

oversight of potential conflicts of interest between elected leaders and their private business interests. A parliamentary debate would be the right starting point.

There is also an external dimension, made public by the Sharifs themselves. The production of a letter by a Qatari prince supporting the Sharif position on the London flats has only a more riveting disclosure among many problematic revelations. It is now clear that the Sharifs have direct business ties with leaders of several Gulf and Middle Eastern states. But those states also happen to be the ones with which Pakistan has multi-billion dollar trade and human capital ties. Is the collective national interest being offset by private interests of the country's leadership? These are grave matters with no easy solutions. But a parliamentary debate could put the country on a path to untangling some of the apparent conflicts of interest. Imran Khan is right — go to parliament and address a host of concerns, prime minister.

## Thailand FTA

THE sixth round of negotiations to conclude a Free Trade Agreement with Thailand ended with no substantive deal on any of the agenda items brought by either side. According to reports that came out of the two-day-long negotiations, both sides presented their respective 'offer lists' but neither could agree on accommodating the other. In time, hopefully, a fuller press briefing will be given to update the public on the negotiations, but the fact that the Pakistani side is holding its ground and preferring to delay the agreement rather than rush into an ill-conceived agreement is a hopeful development. Trade negotiations are always a hard-fought and long-drawn affair, and if more time is required to build consensus then so be it. Pakistan has a bad track record when it comes to negotiating trade agreements. Our other FTAs with China and Malaysia have caused our trade deficit with those countries to balloon, with the reason primarily being that the agreements did not secure concessions on those items that have high trade export potential for those economies.

In negotiating with Thailand, the potential for trade is considerable and the government must ensure that any agreement includes those items that have high export potential. Thus far, as per reports in a leading business daily, the talks have focused on the auto sector, but very high export potential is available in surgical goods, cotton-based products and seafood. It is not clear how much these sectors have been factored into the negotiations, or even if representatives from these sectors have been asked to become involved in the process. The auto sector, however, is sufficiently represented. One hopes that the authorities are not repeating the mistakes of the past by remaining too focused on a few sectors alone, and allowing the entire process to hinge on their



requirements. There are at least 50 items at the six-digit HS code that alone enjoy an export potential of \$2.8bn to Thailand, according to research done by the Pakistan Business Council on an FTA with that country. Building a comprehensive list of items for which concessions are being sought is key to maximising gains from trade through bilateral agreements. In this time of depressed trade, opening markets one by one through skilfully negotiated bilateral trade agreements is the surest way to build our future export potential. Let us give the process all we have.

## Police violence

THE thana is an exceedingly grim place in Pakistan. Rather than being an integral part of the community, the local police station is a place to be feared. The main reason for this is the police's extensive use of physical violence including torture while dealing with suspects. As reported in this paper on Monday, a video of policemen assaulting two individuals in Lahore's Thokar Niaz Baig area that made it to the TV channels has once again exposed the brutish methods employed by our law enforcers. As per the report, the police had signalled the two men — on a motorbike — to stop, and when they refused to comply, the officers gave chase and thereafter gave the two suspects a hiding. Indeed, in these days of rampant militancy and violent crime, law enforcers are under tremendous pressure and at times have to apply force against dangerous suspects. But these are exceptional circumstances, whereas physical violence has been an insidious part of Pakistan's thana culture as far back as memory serves. In fact, as a Human Rights Watch report released last year notes, police brutality is a countrywide problem. And as some law-enforcement experts have pointed out, the culture of police brutality happens to be common across South Asia.

Perhaps the main reason our law enforcers employ such dreadful tactics is that our policing model — for the most part — is a remnant of the colonial age, ill-suited to protect and serve the populace of a modern state. As experts have repeatedly said, until the policing model changes, it will be nearly impossible to wipe out the use of torture by police personnel. Instead of a policing model that dates back to the days of the Raj, community policing is the need of the day, through which police officers can take citizens into confidence and use modern scientific methods to pursue cases. Employing violence has failed to make Pakistan safer, and has only widened the chasm of mistrust between the people and the police.

## SC's Panama concern

WITH more than a hint of exasperation — and rightly so — Justice Asif Khosa has called for an end to the speculation and overheated political attacks surrounding the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court. Justice Khosa, the senior-most judge on the bench hearing the petitions by opposition parties calling for the removal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, made his remarks after yet another spell of grandstanding and accusations outside the court and in the media. All parties to the case are to blame. The impromptu news conferences held outside the Supreme Court after the conclusion of the daily hearing bear the hallmarks of political rallies and resemble the political attacks in front of the cameras outside parliament. The Supreme Court, a co-equal branch of government, is certainly not immune to criticism and its conduct should be fearlessly examined by the media and the political class. But what is transpiring outside the court and in the media, especially the news channels, all too often enters the domain of politicising the court and the hearings.

To be sure, the Panama Papers hearings will have a far-reaching and lasting political impact. The very survival of the government and the prime minister is at stake. But the Supreme Court is not a political forum and it must not be treated as one. All parties, in government and in the opposition, agreed at the outset that the Supreme Court ought to have the final word. In a constitutional democracy, questions of law regarding political actors must be settled in a court of law — and it is important that the proceedings and judgements of the highest court in the land be treated in a dignified manner. At the end of the Panama Papers hearings, there will be one side that is victorious and another that is not. The losing side will be entitled to criticise the judgement and continue to make its political case to the people. What is happening at the moment, however, is that the very proceedings are being deeply politicised — thereby politicising the court and the final judgement too. That is unacceptable. Political parties and sections of the media involved in the hyperbolic coverage of the hearings ought to consider the damaging effects on the democratic system itself. No constitutional democratic order can be strengthened if the institutions of democracy themselves are attacked and characterised as fundamentally political in nature. All parties should pay heed to Justice Khosa's warning.

## Revival of festivals

THE revival of the Sheedi mela at the Manghopir shrine in Karachi after seven years ignites two strains of thought. While it is welcome that an effort is on to restore to a community an occasion of indigenous expression, it is a little sad that this is still a partial restoration. That it was thought prudent to curtail the duration of the festival from one week to one day must surely have evoked nostalgic feelings for a richer cultural past. The usual questions are being asked. Where have all our melas gone? What have they done to these fairs? Have we done enough to resist the marauders of culture? A one-day reprieve — this is the measure of just how much ground has been conceded to those bent upon imposing a strict code on Pakistanis. This is true for the Sheedi festival and this is what has been happening in every province of this country. The life and culture around the shrine have been a prime target of the militants, be it Bari Imam in Islamabad or Data Sahab in Lahore — there are so many events that have been brutally erased from the Pakistani cultural calendar. All these occasions rooted in the land have to be rebuilt with active state participation.

At its peak, militancy in the country threatened a whole lifestyle evolved since the birth of civilisation. The civilisation was endangered and it is essential that what was forcibly shut is revived. An enabling environment has to be created for the various shades of Pakistanis to reclaim what has been snatched away from them by the agents of intolerance. The popular desire for a renewal of tradition is visible whenever there is an opening in the long-existing layers of fear — an opening that is to a great extent dependent upon protection by the government of the time. This desire has to be complemented by an equally visible will of the state to ensure cultural freedoms for all.

## Ombudsman's powers

THE recent decision to reduce the powers of the federal ombudsman is a disturbing development. The government has prepared a bill with amendments to the legislation that created the office of the ombudsman. Under these, the federal ombudsman will be unable to set up regional offices, or allow the existing mechanism to fill a temporary vacancy should one arise. The bill effectively takes the powers of the federal ombudsman in the opposite direction from where they need to go. To today's jaded and cynical public, the presence of a grievance officer in every government department might sound like a small step towards improving governance. But considering the volume of complaints that these officers get each day, the need for such a mechanism should be obvious.

Just last year, for example, the ombudsman saw 94,000 complaints, which is an average of more than 310 per day excluding Sundays. At any time, the waiting room at the ombudsman's office is filled with ordinary citizens with complaints about some government department or the other; eg whether a public-sector hospital or a power utility engaged in overbilling. Hearings are usually set up within a month of a complaint being filed. The hearings themselves usually don't last for more than 20 minutes. How often does the beleaguered citizenry of this country get a chance to air a specific complaint against a government department with the opportunity to present its case before an officer from that department, with a finding arrived at and specific directions given in less than an hour? Such a mechanism is badly needed, and instead of looking for ways to curtail it, the government should be searching for methods to expand its reach and powers.

There is a dire need for alternate dispute resolution mechanisms in this country. The caseload before the courts is already too large, and many of the complaints that are brought before the ombudsman need not turn into a legal dispute. Such a mechanism should be introduced in the rural areas too, and extended down to the district and union council level. Additionally, there is the office of the banking ombudsman that badly needs some vitality injected into it so that it can make a more conscious effort to look out for the interest of consumers, particularly with the rollout of plans for greater financial inclusion. Grievance officers play an essential part in ensuring that governance remains on track and focused on delivering for the common man. It is understandable that some government officers or political leaders will see this function as a nuisance, but that opinion is irrelevant. Keeping their minds focused on delivering for the common citizenry is the task at hand. The government should draft a different bill for the ombudsman's office, one that seeks to expand its reach and powers rather than curtailing them.

## **Bull run on stock market**

THE stock market is on a steep upswing and optimism has filled the air about its future prospects. This is not the first time that we have seen the stock market go on a wild ride while crisis-like conditions grow in the world economy, and the domestic economy puts out increasingly mixed signals, with some sectors booming and others on the verge of collapse. The last time this happened was in 2008, and the whole affair ended in tears. There is no feeling at the moment, however, that the present upswing is also built on sentiments alone. Stocks that have performed well thus far, such as cement (although that could reverse due to rising energy prices), have genuine grounds to show for their performance. Nevertheless, the warning issued by the chairman of the Securities and

Exchange Commission that small investors should beware of the sales spin being put out by small brokers should be heeded. Times like these can create a feverish pursuit of quick returns, and the small investor who lacks any other profitable avenue for keeping his or her savings can be strongly lured by manipulative agents.

For one, it must be emphasised that what is called a 'psychological barrier' of 50,000 points makes for good headlines and a decent sales pitch but has little actual bearing on the decisions that guide trading. A better sign of the health of the current bull run is to notice the short, intraday surges followed by equally strong dips of selling. Moreover, foreign investors are not rushing in as uniformly as one might expect, and some trade sessions have even seen net outflow of foreign funds. In short, a closer look reveals a mixed pattern of signals coming from the trade floor, just as the overall environment within which the bull run is taking place is also marred by mixed developments. The only thing that is not mixed at the moment is sentiment, and this makes for a potentially problematic scenario.

These are the times brokers look for to offload non-performing stocks onto unwitting investors, stocks that will stand in their place while the bull run rages past them. The short intraday dips can often point towards the operation of schemes such as this. The best way for small investors to protect themselves is to keep longer horizons and avoid entering the market with the aim of making a quick return. Expectations of that sort are sniffed out easily by brokers, and are preyed upon mercilessly. There are good grounds this time for the stock market to be on a bull run, but the SECP chairman has shown wisdom in issuing a warning to retail investors to avoid dealing with the more unscrupulous end of the brokers' spectrum, especially unregistered traders. Times are good, but the buyer should still beware.

## Crackdown on NGOs

THE misguided war on NGOs is continuing, though the superior courts are stepping in sensibly where possible and allowing some NGOs to work while the state proves its allegations against these organisations and their employees. To be sure, if there are cases — surely, rare — where NGOs are operating as a cover for espionage activities in sensitive areas of the country, the state is entitled to take action within the parameters of the law. But what seems to be taking place is something else altogether: the government is cracking down in the name of national interest and on grounds of carrying out so-called anti-state activities to shut down NGOs working on human rights and women's issues that it does not approve of. The actions, taken both at the federal and provincial levels, amount to a suppression of human rights and are denying the

citizens vital services provided by the NGOs — services the latter are providing because the state has failed in its responsibilities to the people.

The problem is both the motive behind the decisions to curtail the activities of certain NGOs and the total absence of due process. The contrast between the ever-more onerous requirements being placed on lawfully operating, rights-enhancing NGOs and the vast network of extremism that is the mosque, madressah and social welfare complex across the country could not be more stark. Madressah-governing bodies have resisted registration and oversight of curricula by the state for decades. Social welfare networks with obvious ties to banned groups are allowed to operate wherever they please. Mosques with ties to militant networks continue to operate in plain sight. But NGOs are being tarred as following either some vague Western agenda or undermining the state. It is as if the state is trying to decide which direction society should take, and that direction is a very dark one indeed. Moreover, the actions against NGOs are sudden and draconian, often with no warning that they are under investigation. Surely, before shutdown orders are issued, the state must give the NGOs a chance to address the allegations against them and demonstrate they are operating lawfully. That is why several of the NGOs against which action has been taken recently have quickly found a reprieve in the higher courts. Where the rule of law is so evidently being trampled on for murky reasons, the courts will inevitably have to act. The war on NGOs must stop.

## Polluted environment

FOR the state, safeguarding the environment is quite obviously low on its list of priorities. However, at times, either due to the hue and cry raised by citizens, or the efforts of conscientious public servants, major environmental hazards are highlighted, after which the state scrambles to formulate a response to the problem. Two issues currently under the spotlight in Sindh are pollution of the province's water resources and degradation of the environment by certain industries. As reported in Wednesday's paper, a judicial commission in Sindh formed by the Supreme Court in response to an individual's petition has ordered the relevant government departments to submit a report on the discharge of effluent by industries. According to another report, seven factories in Hyderabad's SITE area were sealed after the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency noted that the concerns were flouting environmental protection laws.

These actions are welcome and it is hoped that state organs tasked with monitoring environmental standards remain alert. The fact is that Sindh — as well as other parts of Pakistan — suffers from high levels of pollution. For example, a recent conference held at Karachi University was told that 40pc of the Sindh capital's population was exposed

to “highly polluted air”, while 65pc of its citizens lived in areas with “elevated levels of noise pollution”. Moreover, the judicial commission, currently touring Sindh, was earlier told that the metropolis received 200 million gallons of unfiltered water daily. Matters in other parts of the province are no better; while surveying the situation in Sukkur, the commission was told that only three of 29 water treatment plants in the upper Sindh city were functional. This degraded state of the environment has both short- and long-term effects on people’s health and quality of life. It would not be enough for the state to just point out how much pollution exists; the next step should be to implement policies to bring down the level of pollution.

## Trump vs America

No matter how much he tries to portray himself as a champion of the white working class, US President Donald Trump is pitting himself against his country’s heritage with his latest executive orders against immigrants.

Given his way, which is now a foregone conclusion that he will get, he will build a wall not only with the border of Mexico, but around the entire country through executive actions that seek to bar refugees, curb immigration and deny visas to citizens of certain countries.

More damaging is the fact that the countries named in the yet to be signed executive order whose citizens will be denied visas for an unspecified period are all Muslim states, some of which have been bombed or invaded by US forces. At least one, Iraq, is an allied government engaged in a fight against the same terrorist groups that Mr Trump says he wants to bomb out of existence.

Dealing with the labyrinthine complexities of the Middle East requires sound judgement and subtlety, qualities that Mr Trump clearly doesn’t possess and that the executive orders reportedly waiting for his signature lack even more.

For the time being, he has signed an order to start work on building the wall with American funds, while reactivating programmes that practically force police in cities to hunt down undocumented immigrants. It has vague language to pull people into its dragnet, such as anyone who may have engaged in “fraud or wilful misrepresentation in connection with any official matter or application before a governmental agency”, meaning even a tiny inadvertent error while filling out an application could lead to an individual being targeted for deportation.

Denial of visas to citizens of seven Muslim countries — Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia — is under serious consideration, because issuing such visas would be “detrimental to the interests of the United States”. If this is what we get in the first week of the new presidency, one can only imagine what is to come in the years ahead.

One could argue endlessly that ‘America is a country of immigrants’, but it is up to the leadership of that country to decide what sort of country they want to be. What is appalling in these actions is the vindictiveness, the pettiness, and the crass disregard for what are clearly US interests ie maintaining and building ties with the populations of those countries where anti-American attitudes are spreading with growing ferocity.

By cutting his country off from the rest of the world, Mr Trump is in fact digging himself into a hole. The revival of torture and ‘black sites’ for detention, the revocation of trade agreements like the TPP or Nafta, will not make America more secure or revive the engines of its prosperity. It will only fuel the fires that have now encircled the superpower.

## Military and RTI bill

IN small but important ways, the Senate is distinguishing itself as a legislative forum in which important issues of the state are being debated. On Wednesday, a Senate select committee discussing the federal Right to Information Bill, 2016, made crucial observations about the extension of right-to-information laws to the armed forces. As several senators rightly observed, the military is unjustifiably exempted from disclosures on the grounds of national security and institutional prerogative. Far better, from a democratic, institution-strengthening perspective, for cases involving human rights violations, corruption and embezzlement to be required to be shared with the public rather than remain cloaked in military-mandated secrecy. But will the Senate discussion really lead to a push for change? Part of the problem is the relative weakness of the civilian side of the state in comparison to the security establishment. Even when making a justifiable demand, as wanting the security establishment to put itself up to the most basic and justifiable scrutiny, the civilian leadership backs down rather than pushes for clarity and a legally enforceable definition of national security. Perhaps, even if the several senators who argued for such a delineation were to prevail at the committee stage, the Senate as a whole and parliament are unlikely to push the matter too far.

The question that ought to be asked is, why? Why does the military resist even the most basic of outside scrutiny and why are parliamentarians too timid to push for a modicum



of oversight of the armed forces even in the most justifiable of circumstances? From the security establishment's perspective, two factors appear to dominate: a belief that internal checks and balances are adequate and concern that public accountability is a politicised process that can chip away at the hard-earned respectability and public standing of the military. At least one half of the excuse has some merit — the civilian side of the state does not seem interested in accountability per se and is perhaps motivated by a desire to see other institutions implicated in the muck of corruption too. The answer lies in equal, and real, accountability for all. Consider the record of the provincial RTI laws so far. Scarcely have the bureaucracy or the political leaderships found themselves in the dock for any transgression. Indeed, the civilian side of the state has done much to water down the existing provincial RTI laws thwarting their implementation. Equal transparency for all is the correct starting point.

## Child labour

AT a time when the Supreme Court is hearing the case concerning the torture of a child maid at the hands of her educated employers in Islamabad, another tragic tale of abuse has emerged from Gujranwala. Getting angry over his 12-year-old maid not being prompt enough in fetching his tea, a man threw the hot drink in her face. The child sustained severe burn injuries and had to be admitted to hospital where her parents demanded a full medical examination. As a result, it emerged that the minor had been raped, too. The police have now registered a case against her employer and his brother, and two suspects have been arrested. But while the case winds its interminable way through the country's notoriously slow judicial system, one thing is certain: this child has been scarred for reasons that cannot even be comprehended by such a young mind, and her life has been irretrievably damaged. Given this context, the unanimous move by the Sindh Assembly to pass a bill against the employment of children below the age of 14, punishable by a prison term and fine (extended and increased in case the work involved is hazardous), gains greater significance.

Child labour is an issue that is as old as it is endemic, and while there are laws banning the practice, they have proved difficult to fully enforce. The reason for this is simple: it is extreme poverty that leads the guardian of young children to put them to work for whatever pittance they are granted by their employers. And this is the reason the practice is so hard to stamp out. Perhaps a more pragmatic first step towards eradicating child labour would be the establishment of registries under welfare bodies where the names of children employed in households are entered so that their welfare can be monitored on a frequent basis. In the long term, of course, the only thing that can end such exploitation of children is poverty alleviation and family planning.

## Pemra ban

FOR some days now, Amir Liaquat has crossed all limits, repeatedly and egregiously. The television host has used his programme 'Aisa Nahi Chalay Ga' on Bol News as a bully pulpit to rouse hatred and incite violence and as a vehicle for carrying out a vicious personal vendetta. First he accused a number of individuals, beginning with the missing bloggers, and anyone else — including civil society activists and media persons — who has shown support for them and condemned their abduction, as being anti-Islam and having committed blasphemy and treason. Subsequently, he expanded the scope of his scurrilous attacks to include allegations of moral turpitude against several journalists who have a progressive stance and have censured the content of his show. On Thursday, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority barred him from appearing on screen in any capacity and ordered that the broadcast of 'Aisa Nahi Chalay Ga' be immediately suspended. On Friday, taking notice of the fact that the channel chose to flout the ban and air the programme as per schedule the previous evening, Pemra issued a show-cause notice to Bol News.

Even for an electronic media that quite frequently appears to have forsaken the ethics of journalism, the stream of invective and calumny spewed forth by Mr Liaquat is unprecedented. The ultra right in this country is unmistakably seeking to silence all appeals to reason and humanity by employing extremely dangerous tactics. As history bears witness, accusing anyone of blasphemy in this country is a thinly veiled invitation to murder. Indeed, the entire spectrum of allegations levelled at the programme represents crimes considered especially heinous in our society; it was calculated to intimidate and blackmail those at the receiving end by provoking public fury against them. Pemra has done well to take notice of the defamatory language and then to stand firm against the channel for defying the ban. Otherwise, in a media landscape already short on restraint, this would set another entirely undesirable benchmark. Bol News itself, being a new channel in the process of establishing its brand, should consider the impact on its credibility were it to continue with programming of such kind. That said, Pemra's response — an open-ended, blanket ban apparently not preceded by any show-cause notice to the host — should be a cause of concern for the media. It is excessive, gives the impression of being arbitrary and can establish an unwelcome precedent in muzzling press freedom.

## Cricket defeat

SINCE the heady days of September 2016, when the Pakistan cricket team was hoisted as the world number one side in ICC rankings, it has been a struggle for the players. Unsurprisingly then, there was an air of inevitability about the Pakistan cricket team's recent tour to Australia. A 0-3 whitewash in the Tests and a 1-4 drubbing in the ODIs was perhaps a result already on the cards. Several factors contributed to the dismal show in Australia, some connected to the logistics of the tour and others to just the facts of cricket life. However, the absence of an attacking leadership and an absurd tour itinerary stand out as the core causes of the catastrophic campaign. The unprofessionalism, both in terms of performance and administration, of Pakistan cricket is no secret especially when it comes to playing sides such as Australia, South Africa and even India in recent years. Besides the inadequacy of technique and the players' inability to handle pressure, the team's grit has been blighted by the lopsided wins on tailor-made pitches in the UAE. The dull and dreary state of domestic cricket has added to this situation. It is no surprise then that in Misbah-ul-Haq and his morose deputy Azhar Ali Pakistan has a leadership that has failed to inspire.

Not discounting Misbah's tremendous contribution to Pakistan cricket, the hard truth is that a defensive mindset has brought the game to a dead end. And with no serious thought going into the team's long-term strategy and planning by the PCB and the coaches, non-stop cricket since early October has left players fatigued and disoriented. Though they had their moments, the opportunities were squandered due to tiredness and lack of motivation. With a wealth of talent still available, it would be folly to dismiss hopes of resuscitating Pakistan's prospects. But in the current scenario only a more inspiring skipper, perhaps someone like wicketkeeper-batsman Sarfraz Ahmed, can help revive Pakistan cricket and take it safely ashore.

## Fight in parliament

IT ought to be self-evident: parliamentary debate is necessary and important, and coming to parliamentary fisticuffs is embarrassing and damaging to democracy. What transpired in the National Assembly on Thursday is shameful and squarely the responsibility of the speaker, the PTI and the PML-N. The unseemly brawl on the floor of the house should never have happened. Worryingly, none of the parties involved seems contrite nor concerned about avoiding a repeat incident. The imperatives of democracy appear to have been relegated behind a boisterous and disturbingly familiar type of politics. Start with the role of National Assembly speaker Ayaz Sadiq. While

there was nothing wrong per se in his oversight of the house in the events leading up to the brawl on Thursday, Mr Sadiq has become a lightning rod for opposition criticism, particularly for the PTI. Contrast the non-partisan and sensible management of the National Assembly by speaker Fehmida Mirza in the previous parliament with Mr Sadiq's contentious role. Following his return to the speaker's chair after a charged by-election victory against a PTI candidate, Mr Sadiq appears to have lost sight of his principal role as a neutral steward of the house. Even where his rulings are fair and sensible, Mr Sadiq often appears exasperated and is curt in his dealings with the opposition. He ought to reconsider his approach while chairing the house.

Certainly, the PTI must bear a great deal of the blame too. The party appears to be suffering from at least three problems: a party leadership that is contemptuous of parliamentary norms; several first-time MNAs who are neither guided nor restrained by senior party colleagues; and a determination to create as much controversy whenever possible to highlight the PTI's anti-government politics. While the political dividends of such a strategy can be disputed, what is clear is that the PTI will get nowhere in its avowed goal of strengthening the anti-corruption regime if democratic processes are constantly stalled or disregarded. The PTI itself had demanded a parliamentary debate recently, so why not use the platform of a new session to press its political and legislative case? Sadly, the PTI's interest in positively contributing to the functioning of democratic institutions appears limited at best.

Finally, though by no means of least consequence, is the PML-N's own tawdry role in the parliamentary brawl of Thursday. Whatever justification the PML-N believes it may have, two factors override that entirely. First, the PML-N is the governing party and as such the chief custodian of the democratic project in the country. It must always rise above petty provocation rather than descend into the muck of slander and brawling. Second, the senior leadership of the PML-N knows well what unseemly parliamentary fights and squabbles led to in the 1990s. The government may not want to turn the other cheek, but it must rise above petty provocations.

## Census questions

FINALLY, it looks like a census is going to happen. After almost two years of delaying and wrangling, the government appears set to hold the crucial exercise now that the army chief has approved the deployment of 200,000 army personnel for the task. It took considerable prodding from the Supreme Court to get to this point, but now that we appear to be credibly moving towards carrying out the exercise, a few important questions need to be raised before the task gets under way. First and foremost: what

sort of data will the census try to gather? The census exercise is not just about counting people; it is also about gathering a vast trove of demographic data, such as levels of educational attainment, health, and even access to social service delivery from the state. Now that the conversation is focusing on what should be gathered as part of the population count exercise, it is important that those putting it together liaise with the policy and research community that relies on census data for their work.

One large positive is that the transgender population will be counted for the first time. But as the conversation picks up around what all to include in the questionnaire, it is worth bearing in mind that the exercise loses its efficacy when it tries to gather too much data. The questionnaire should be short and focused, and now is a good time to rationalise it. For one, local government service delivery, such as sanitation, can perhaps be included. But occupational data can be left out, since the census is perhaps not the most appropriate way to gather this.

Another innovation this year is a parallel exercise being conducted by the army to count the number of foreigners alongside the census. Granted that this can yield valuable data, but it is still important to have a clear definition of the word 'foreigner'. The massive effort to repatriate Afghan refugees, for example, has had the pernicious side effect of pushing many Pakistani Pakhtuns into proving their citizenship. Pakistan is, in many ways, a country of immigrants, and very often people who have completely bona fide claims to citizenship find themselves having to prove their credentials when applying for or even renewing national identity cards. If the census exercise will be venturing into this tricky terrain, it is important that it remain free from the kinds of controversies that the verification of CNICs exercise became mired in. If due care is maintained in drafting the final questionnaire as well as the data to be gathered during the housing census, the exercise will go a long way towards improving the targeting of policy and giving a clearer picture of our demographic trends. These are invaluable tools for policymakers, and keeping the census focused on them is crucial.

## **Pak-India cultural ties**

EVERYTHING has its place, the aphorism goes, and there can be found in this a fair bit of wisdom. For when knock-on effects start to accrue, unintended and adverse consequences can occur. Currently, nowhere is this more applicable than in the context of the cultural ties between Pakistan and India, which appear to increasingly have become a casualty of the two countries' pugnacity. It was in September last year that Indian security forces in Uri, India-held Kashmir, came under attack, with the Indian government losing no time in 'detecting' — without evidence — some shadowy

Pakistani connection. A matter of grave concern this certainly was, one that deserved being taken up through governmental and diplomatic channels. But amongst the responses on both sides of the border was the ratcheting up of the 'anti-other' narrative at the level of the people and even in the sphere of entertainment and culture. In Bollywood, severe pressure was brought to bear by nationalist and right-wing elements that Pakistani performers working there be expelled. Hindutva groups even threatened to burn down any cinema halls where movies featuring Pakistani artists were being shown. The Indian outfits that had signed them on, indeed anyone who dared point out the damaging result of such a move, was hauled over the coals. In Pakistan, cinema owners — no doubt worried about the safety of their infrastructure and reputations in an atmosphere in which India-bashing was actively being stoked — decided to suspend the screening of Indian films. Subsequently, Pakistan's electronic media regulator, Pemra, issued orders that all Indian content be taken off television and radio, while in India, the airing on television of hitherto highly popular Pakistani soaps was halted.

The result has been to the detriment of the populations of both countries. Work and opportunities for collaboration have been lost and potential revenues thrown to the wind. Pakistan's cinema industry, which had in recent years started showing signs of revival (and consequently investment) after decades in the doldrums, is now worse off. Cineplexes appear as ghosts of their former selves and screens have had to be shut down — the hard fact is that the country's own cinematic output, even in addition to the Western fare that cinema-owners are able to put up, are nowhere near enough to sustain the industry at the levels that Bollywood made possible. Worryingly, the longer this 'dry' period persists, the harder it will be to reverse course. There is yet time for sense to prevail.

## Hangings the mentally ill

EXECUTING mentally ill prisoners who cannot even comprehend the nature of their punishment is inhumane. That the death penalty violates human dignity, international law and medical standards, was raised in a letter recently by 17 Pakistani psychiatrists. Written in response to black warrants issued to mentally ill prisoners in Punjab, they noted that mentally ill convicts can't defend themselves and are unaware of their actions. The poor medical knowledge demonstrated by the courts, given the frequency with which black warrants for mentally ill prisoners have been issued of late is of concern. Consider this: despite the case of mentally ill prisoner Imdad Ali pending with the Supreme Court, a lower court issued yet another black warrant in January for Khizar Hayat who is also mentally ill. Executing unfit prisoners rather than treating them not only sets a dangerous precedent, it also defeats the purpose of criminal justice. When

Hayat was served with his third death warrant in January, medical evidence was not considered. Despite his counsel filing an application in the Lahore High Court to stay the execution, the prison authorities approached the sessions court for the warrant. Given that the case is under review at the National Commission for Human Rights, issuing a black warrant perverts the course of justice. Moreover, the psychiatrist involved says Hayat requires specialised healthcare and that a forensic psychiatric institution would best serve prisoners like him.

Last year, the Supreme Court ruled that schizophrenia is a 'recoverable' disease, clearing the path to execute Ali who is certified by doctors as schizophrenic — a ruling that was later stayed. At the time, Ali's medical reports presented as evidence were dismissed by the court. Most importantly, these cases make it imperative to improve the workings of the Punjab Mental Health Authority ensuring that the mentally ill are treated rather than given the death penalty — an irrevocable form of punishment this paper does not endorse.

## Social activists' return

MYSTERY surrounded their disappearances and mystery surrounds their return too. Some of the present confusion is perhaps understandable: neither the social activists who have returned nor their families may want to be vocal in public for the time being. There was after all a vicious campaign run in sections of the media and on the internet against the missing men. In addition, an abundant sense of caution usually accompanies newly returned individuals and their families. But what the men themselves cannot say and the families may prefer not to, the right-minded and sensible must. First, the government must immediately ensure the safety of the returned activists. A systematic campaign of incitement to violence was carried out against the missing men, and their lives may be in danger from religious and nationalist extremists. The men must be provided the security needed to return to their lives and occupations — they are free citizens of the state against whom no wrongdoing has been proven in a court of law and against whom there is no known or credible accusation by the state.

Second, the returned men must be encouraged to tell the stories of their disappearances to the authorities. Far too often, disappearances and returns — in some cases deaths — are simply hushed up. Of the disappearances that end with mysterious returns, the police and other authorities simply watch silently from the sidelines. That cowardly practice must stop. Civilian authorities, with the backing of parliamentarians if necessary, must step forward and take the first steps towards publicly identifying and eventually punishing whoever is threatening the freedom of law-abiding citizens. The

road to a rule of-law, constitutional and democratic society is necessarily long and challenging. The case of the five missing men can become a turning point – the opportunity for change is real. If investigators are given the right backing and the missing men and their families the right assurances, the investigative trail can surely lead to who is responsible for the apparently coordinated disappearances.

Third, the government must constitute a high-level inquiry into the broader issue of missing persons and the public campaigns against missing persons that are becoming a disturbing new trend. Commissions in the past, interventions by the judiciary and promises by state officials have all failed to halt the trend of individuals being abducted for a seemingly growing set of reasons. From the Baloch to alleged militants and from journalists to social activists, there is now a breathtakingly wide array of individuals who have disappeared over the years – and many have yet to return home. What kind of a state and society does Pakistan want to be? Surely, at least, a country in which citizens are free to express their opinion and in which the law is applied against those threatening freedoms rather than those agitating for greater openness and humaneness.

## Wind power tariffs

THE decision to eliminate upfront tariffs in wind power is a positive development and needs to be expanded to other areas as well, particularly solar. Using upfront tariffs in the renewable field was always an old-fashioned approach to cutting-edge technology, and left the power regulator open to criticism that the tariffs being set were far too high. In this day and age, all power tariffs should be on competitive bidding terms, including thermal, and the sooner Nepra and the ministry can find a way to get there the better off the power sector will be. In the case of renewables, tariff determinations were leading the regulator towards a quagmire of sorts, with court challenges cropping up and the benefits of falling international prices getting locked out.

Across the world, the cost of solar and wind-based power is dropping rapidly and the challenge for power-sector planners is to tap this declining price trend. Pakistan has had a bad experience with competitive bidding in the power sector and relies far more on upfront tariffs than many other countries, mainly because of the challenges of attracting investment to the country because of the prevailing uncertainties. But renewable energy is a packed field, and there is no shortage of players willing to acquire stakes, nor is there much risk in adopting a new tariff-setting method since renewables are not part of the base load. There is criticism that many of the bids coming in at a lower cost are bringing with them technology of poor quality. Nepra is right to not give this view too



much credence since the investors will be paid only for the power they inject into the system, and if they rely on poor technology the loss will be theirs. Now that the move has been made in wind power, it should be broadened to include solar, and active steps need to be taken to bring in competitive bidding for all other power projects as well, including base load. More flexible pricing of electricity is crucial to ensuring that consumers can benefit from the declining prices worldwide, as well as incentivising investors to improve efficiencies since they should be paid only for the power they produce and nothing else. Competitive tariff-setting is also more transparent than deciding upfront tariffs, or determining them for individual projects based on opaque feasibilities. Let us hope there is more to come.

## Segregation on campus

MORAL policing appears to have become the new normal on Pakistani campuses, and apparently one of the most effective ways that morality can be upheld is to keep young men and women apart. A report in this paper on Saturday gave a glimpse of the gender segregation being practised at some institutes of higher education. At times this follows an unwritten agenda, at others there are codes of conduct and fines — even strong-arm tactics — to enforce it. At the Punjab University in Lahore, where the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba is the flag-bearer of the moral police, girl students are compelled to sit at the back of the class — which is not much better than making them sit at the back of the bus. This approach extends to other aspects of campus life as well: some canteens are out of bounds entirely for girls, while at others their seating is located behind a curtained-off area. At another institute, each gender has its own entryway and couples detected sitting together are fined Rs5,000 each.

It was not very long ago when universities treated their students as adults with the capacity to make decisions — whether right or wrong — based on the values that had been inculcated in them. Even when campus administrations sometimes introduced bizarre rules to prevent student fraternisation, these were treated with levity. After all, at this stage, young people are on the threshold of stepping out into the real world, a complex place where gender segregation is rarely the norm and impossible to achieve without sacrificing productivity and efficiency. Institutes of higher learning thus offer valuable opportunities for students to learn to interact with people of the opposite gender — in other words, learn how to conduct themselves in society. However, a blinkered, authoritarian worldview has overtaken many campuses, and administrations are either afraid to challenge ideologically conservative student groups or they share the same thinking. Building walls between students on the basis of gender is not the way to foster a healthy attitude to life.

## Statement on IHK

THE names are as eye-catching as their message is sobering. On the death anniversary of Gandhi, prominent Indians describing themselves as “thinking citizens of the world’s foremost democracy” issued a statement condemning the repression in India-held Kashmir and have called for a more humane approach to the disputed region. The unprecedented joint statement by a number of highly regarded retired government officials, security officials, diplomats, journalists and rights activists is a welcome reminder that violence, repression and unjust policies of the state are resisted the world over by right-thinking individuals. And while the Indian government will undoubtedly try and dismiss the latest appeal by many of its own citizens as a partisan and political attack, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government will be unable to easily shake off the central claim in the joint statement: that the violence in IHK since the killing of Burhan Wani last summer is squarely the responsibility of the Indian state.

At the root of the current crisis in IHK are two disturbing realities of the Modi-led government: a total denial that the Kashmir dispute is in fact an internationally recognised dispute between India and Pakistan; and an unwillingness to approach the people of IHK in any way other than through a hard security prism. Consider that on the recent Indian Republic Day, the central government announced gallantry awards for the security forces involved in the killing of Burhan Wani. It was that very killing that sparked a wave of protests across IHK, but the Modi government appears unmoved and, worse, unwilling to even recognise the failure of its violent, repressive tactics in the disputed region. Moreover, the BJP central government seems unwilling to give its partner in the IHK government the space to try and reduce tensions by initiating dialogue with the restive sections of the people. In effect, the BJP appears to believe that the unrest will eventually be quelled by tough security measures and that the repression will not be questioned by the outside world, or indeed anywhere in India.

The Modi government is wrong. The joint statement this week is a clear sign that disquiet at home is growing. The legitimacy of the grievances of the people of IHK is too established and too widely known for a new regime, no matter how determined, to simply wipe the past and present away. There is only one sensible approach: dialogue inside IHK and dialogue with Pakistan. Anything else and the BJP is likely to be as surprised as it was by the Kashmiris’ reaction to the Wani killing, a killing that the Modi government fundamentally erred in considering a great success. As the signatories to the joint statement have rightly warned, not only is the Indian state on the wrong track in terms of policy, it is also morally on the wrong side in IHK.

## Trump's travel ban

THE decision to temporarily curb all manner of entry into the United States for citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries has evoked a fierce backlash in many countries — though, ironically, not in the Muslim world. In the UK, a petition against a visit by President Donald Trump has garnered more than a million signatures, while American airports and airwaves are full of protesters against the move. A civil rights group has obtained a temporary stay on some parts of the executive order through which the travel curbs have been applied, while lawyers working pro bono are providing legal assistance to those stranded at various American airports. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has schooled the president on the obligations that fall upon his country under the Geneva Conventions. France and Canada have both criticised the move, and leading lawmakers in America are also in open opposition to it.

Conspicuous by their absence, and silence, through all this are the countries of the ummah; Iran has ordered tit-for-tat curbs, but it is not clear if responding in kind is a good way to counter the step taken by the new American president. Iraq has denounced the measures, for good reason considering it is an ally of the US in the fight against the militant Islamic State group. The leaders of Saudi Arabia and Egypt have both held telephonic conversations with Mr Trump since the order was signed, but there is no indication that they even discussed the travel curbs, let alone opposed them. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation is mute on the matter, as are the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. Nothing exemplifies the pathetic state of the Muslim world better than this silence. With their own policies, and shortsighted pursuit of power, Muslim rulers govern countries where dissent is prohibited, and where elections, if they are ever held, often yield controversial mandates, where minorities live in fear, and where hunger and poverty grip their populace. Foreign meddling and the play of imperialism have contributed to weakening the capacity of Muslim-majority states and Muslim rulers to provide true leadership at the international level. But the extremely shortsighted approach to statecraft and their preoccupation with narrow divisive politics have been instrumental in turning rulers of Muslim countries into mute spectators at this crucial juncture, leaving the fight to large sections of the Western public that are rising to challenge the unjust decrees of their own rulers.

## SBP on external sector

THE latest monetary policy statement released by the State Bank of Pakistan contains a short discussion on the external sector outlook that merits close attention. It points out that the current account deficit has more than doubled in the first half of the fiscal year compared to the same period last year. It has now touched \$3.6bn in six months, 40pc more than what it was for the entire fiscal last year. There are a number of reasons for this. The statement cites CPEC-related imports, falling exports and remittances and a halt to the Coalition Support Funds as the primary reasons. Despite this, the overall balance of payments showed a surplus of \$0.2bn, meaning that gap was made up through an uptick in foreign investment and foreign borrowing from bilateral and multilateral lenders. Even in the foreign investment position, almost half of the inflows have come into debt securities, meaning it is money that has to be repaid with a return. In its characteristically diplomatic language, the bank is warning that if matters don't change, "the need of financial inflows would grow further".

This is as direct as the State Bank has been in recent times about the deteriorating health of the external sector. Overall, reserves remain at a high level, but the direction is troubling, and if matters don't change quickly on the exports front, or if remittances don't halt their recent declines, the high level of reserves could deplete very fast. At the moment, the government appears to be counting on its export package and CPEC-related growth to help change the situation, but this could easily turn out to be a misplaced hope. Export packages of the sort just announced have historically never done much to turn a years-long structural trend around. And CPEC is a far longer-term proposition than what the government is telling us. If this trend keeps up, Pakistan could well find itself approaching the IMF within two years.