

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June 2017

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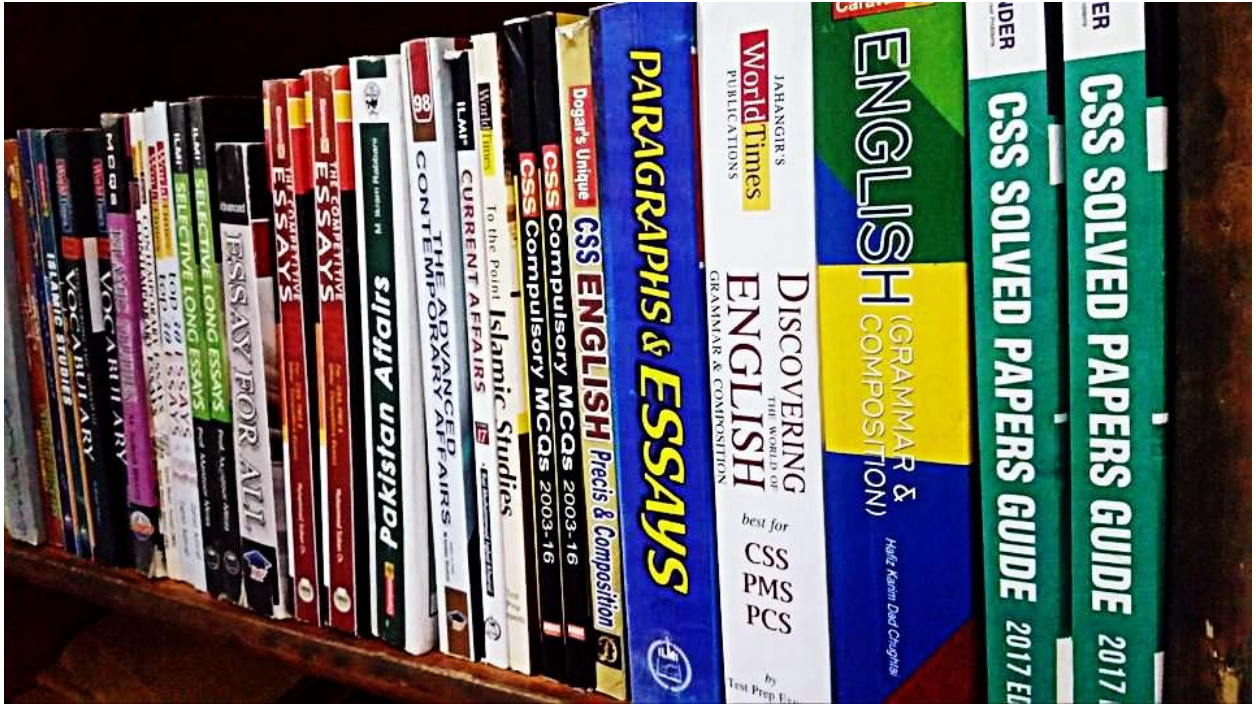
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Fatwa against terrorism

WHEN violence is justified in the name of religion, it is best countered with the language of religion. Last Saturday, 31 prominent scholars from all Muslim schools of thought issued a unanimous fatwa condemning extremism and terrorism. Declaring the supporters of suicide bombing as traitors, the religious decree defined jihad as being the purview of the state and disallowed the use of force to compel obedience to Islamic laws. The fatwa came at the conclusion of a national seminar organised by the International Islamic University in Islamabad to discuss the reconstruction of Pakistani society in the light of the Madina Charter. This document, often described as the oldest written constitution in the world, places emphasis on — aside from various other issues — peaceful resolution of disputes between people of different faiths, and the right of non-Muslims to autonomy and freedom of religion.

Granted, the fatwa contains little that is original: the ulema have issued decrees along similar lines several times. There has been, in particular, a general consensus among them against suicide bombing — even if it has not always been unequivocal — in which they have also been targeted. For instance, in 2009, Mufti Sarfaraz Ahmed Naeemi paid with his life for his robust condemnation of suicide bombing in precisely such an attack. More recently, the JUI-F's Maulana Ghafoor Haideri was injured when a suicide bomber struck his convoy, killing 27 people. The stance pertaining to jihad in the recently issued fatwa, however, is comparatively unusual. It harks back to the founder of Jamaat-i-Islami, Maulana Maudoodi, not to mention other religious scholars of yore, who held that only a state can declare jihad and no individual or group has the right to wage a private jihad of its own.

The eminently sensible, if obvious, assertions in the decree have been met with disapproval by Maulana Samiul Haq, who heads his own faction of the JUI. Known as the 'father of the Taliban' because his madressah in Akora Khattak, KP, is the alma mater of several senior Afghan Taliban — including their late leader Mullah Omar — the maulana has long been among the most strident supporters of militancy. Expressing concern over the fatwa, he contended that the rulers of the Muslim world were puppets of the West and could not therefore declare jihad against their masters. This is a perverse argument that has never lost currency among the ultra right and has been used to advocate armed struggle against the state. Certainly, resistance against the excesses of undemocratic or dictatorial regimes is morally justifiable, but its objective must be clear and violence should never be used to achieve it. Now, more than ever at this juncture, when various purveyors of violent extremism are creating mayhem in Pakistan and the region, it is important once again for religious leaders to reiterate the principles of peaceful coexistence.

Opposition boycott

INFLEXIBILITY by one side and petulance by the other led to a rather sorry sight outside parliament yesterday. The budget session of the National Assembly is no ordinary session — it is constitutionally mandated and sets the parameters for the financial year ahead. Alongside legislative and executive oversight responsibilities, the passage of the budget is one of the core responsibilities of parliament. Even when the government has the numbers in the National Assembly to pass a budget without the opposition's help, democratic norms and legislative rules require the opposition to participate in the budget session. Yet, a farce played out yesterday as the PPP, PTI, MQM and the Jamaat set up a makeshift 'parliament' and proceeded to hold their own version of a budget session, boycotting the actual one in the National Assembly. The ostensible reason for the opposition boycott was a refusal by the speaker to ensure that speeches by opposition leaders are broadcast live on state-run PTV. But the enthusiasm with which the combined opposition participated in the faux session outside parliament yesterday indicated that political posturing more than principled politics was at work. Perhaps the opposition calculated that it was more likely to embarrass the government with a boycott than by whatever substantive issues it could raise about the budget inside parliament.

To be sure, the government continues to perform poorly when it comes to a sensible and fair management of parliamentary sessions while Speaker Ayaz Sadiq appears to have all but given up on the neutrality between the government and opposition that he must ensure. The opposition also has a legitimate demand when it comes to more equal coverage on state-run media — a demand made by every opposition party that is conveniently forgotten when and if it comes to power itself. The PML-N has perhaps been a more habitual offender when it comes to denying the opposition a fair share of coverage in state-run media. Yet, the opposition's responsibilities go beyond simply being heard live by a section of the public. There is real work to be done inside the house and that work becomes all the more important when a government prefers to go through the motions in parliament. With the next general election on the horizon, political parties need to reinforce parliamentary norms to ensure that the final months of parliament do not devolve into a fiasco.

Reduced tobacco tax

THE passage of World No Tobacco Day yesterday constituted reason to reflect on how far many nations have come in restricting the use — once widespread and synonymous with glamour — of this dangerous, deeply addictive product. In much of the developed world, not only is the sale of tobacco strictly regulated and heavily taxed, the laws about smoking in public places are properly enforced and the anti-tobacco narrative strengthened so that populations themselves look askance at anyone indulging in the habit. In this context, it is sobering to ponder that in the national budget just passed, taxes on the tobacco industry have been reduced through the introduction of a third tier of the federal excise duty, bringing down the minimum tax to Rs16 — a reduction of over 50pc. The impact this will have on the health of the population can be gauged by the fact that most of the cigarettes smoked in the country fall in the new third tier. On May 17, in advance of the budget announcement, the Ministry of National Health Services wrote to the finance minister and related authorities with a request that the FED on cigarettes be increased — the World Health Organisation recommends a 75pc tax. Even so, as participants at a rally marking World No Tobacco Day outside the National Press Club lamented on Tuesday, the government had proved itself “addicted” to the tobacco lobby.

There can really be no argument that greater taxes be levied on this public health menace. However, it needs to be noted that even if the state were to find the spine to counter the machinations of the powerful tobacco lobby, that would not be enough given that Pakistan’s markets are awash with smuggled cigarettes. The money for much of what is bought by the country’s smokers goes straight into the pockets of the purveyors, bypassing the state exchequer altogether. No move to reduce the statistics pertaining to smoking can succeed in this situation; the borders must be closed to smuggled products, especially cigarettes.

Kabul attack

A DEVASTATING attack deep inside Kabul, near the presidential palace and inside the diplomatic quarter, has caused a wrenching loss of life and injuries to hundreds of people.

The grim reality is that in a country wracked by war almost continuously for several decades, there remain atrocities that can still cause unprecedented shock and revulsion.

Pakistan grieves with the people of Afghanistan. The absence of a claim of responsibility, with the Afghan Taliban going so far as to deny involvement, is perhaps not an aberration.

Given the extremely high civilian casualty toll, militants may be reluctant to take ownership of a bombing that could cause public opinion to turn against them.

Yet, the bombing was deliberate and presumably so was the message that absolutely no place in Afghanistan is safe, not the high-security zones in Kabul and certainly not the far-flung areas of the country where state control is tenuous at best.

Immediately, and perhaps predictably, a blame game has begun with some Afghan officials accusing the Haqqani network and Pakistan of being responsible for the attack.

Undoubtedly, the attack raises fresh concerns for the Afghan and Pakistani states, but perhaps both sides are unwilling to acknowledge the fundamental realities of the region today.

For Afghanistan, the bombing points to an increasingly apparent though uncomfortable reality: were it not for international support, the Afghan state as it exists could implode.

The Afghan security forces may have pockets of competence and even excellence, particularly the army special forces that have fought the Taliban valiantly, but the overall situation suggests that the security forces are unable to deliver progressive improvements in the fight against the insurgents.

Simply, without external military and economic backing, there are few scenarios in which the Afghan state is viable or sustainable.

Cooperation, then, between Afghanistan and Pakistan is an obvious alternative to the endless accusations that undermine the bilateral relationship.

In the rise of the militant Islamic State group, there is a common threat to both, while each country could benefit from action by the other side against militant sanctuaries in their respective areas.

The pattern of recent times must be broken — of Pakistan blaming Afghanistan after a major attack on Pakistani soil and Afghanistan blaming Pakistan after a major attack on its soil.

At least on the Pakistani side, there has been an effort lately to provide intelligence to Kabul for action against the Pakistani Taliban based on Afghan soil.

If Afghanistan does have evidence of involvement of the Haqqani network in the Kabul attack, it should share it with Pakistan and perhaps also with a third party that can act as mediator if necessary.

Enough blood has been shed; Pakistan and Afghanistan must work together to fight militancy and protect the people of the region.

Mountains at risk

TO most people in the country, it might sound odd that a glacier surging in the far northern reaches of the Karakoram mountains should be a matter of deep concern. But it is worth pausing to reflect on the words of the country's chief meteorologist who explained the significance of this event. The northern areas of Pakistan, home to some of the most breathtaking sights on Planet Earth, are also host to hundreds of glaciers and the main source of the water that irrigates our fields and hydrates our cities. The livelihoods of millions of inhabitants in the region depend critically on the hydrology of the mountains. So when the chief meteorologist points to one surging glacier, which has blocked a key river in its vicinity, and says that there are dozens of other examples of dangerous surges, and that the phenomenon could well be caused by rising temperatures, it ought to be clear that climate change is creating hazardous conditions across the craggy mountains. It should also be apparent that climate change is potentially jeopardising the seasonal flows of waters crucial to life and livelihood in the plains below.

At issue is the Khurdopin glacier in Shimshal valley, which has surged and blocked the Shimshal river, causing a lake to form. About a dozen other sites in the Hunza valley are at risk from large-scale landslides or glacier surges, which could have serious consequences downstream for the inhabitants, besides disturbing the ice mass of the region. In the Shimshal valley, too, half a dozen other sites have developed similarly dangerous spots where surging could occur any day. Such surging can create conditions leading to Glacial Lake Outburst Flood events, where a large body of water nestled inside glacial ice suddenly breaks out and cascades down a mountain side, just like a burst dam. Two years ago, multiple simultaneous Glof events hit Chitral valley following a sudden downpour, and devastated the entire district. Apart from the hazards that such events pose to the inhabitants of the region, there is also a significant threat to those living in the plains, especially in view of the fact that an increasing number of dangerous surging events and formation of glacial lakes is being recorded year after year. There is little that can be done to arrest the trend, but mapping out the hazardous spots and building emergency plans for the region is becoming a growing priority.

Sports over politics

THERE is no early resolution in sight of the tiff between Pakistan and India over the staging of a cricket series.

The sports authorities have been referring to it as a 'bilateral contest' — a series that doesn't involve any other side.

There has been no bilateral cricket between the two countries for almost five years now since Pakistan toured India for a few limited-over games in the winter of 2012.

India has sternly told Pakistan to shed all thoughts of such an engagement in the near future, going so far as to say that "cricket and terrorism cannot go together".

This is a very strong stand, yet Pakistan has no option but to persist in its approach of pursuing a series with India, especially in circumstances where its cricket calendar has been severely curtailed.

Of late, it has been trying to exert pressure on the BCCI, the Indian cricket board, to pay \$70m as compensation for not honouring its promise of having regular cricket series.

The Pakistan Cricket Board cites an MoU in which the BCCI agreed to regular cricket matches between 2015 and 2023.

The 2014 agreement appears to have been signed in return for Pakistan's backing India's inclusion in the Big Three running the International Cricket Council.

Those who deal with sports in New Delhi are unmoved, and have allowed tensions between the two countries to seep into the sports arena.

Anyone who believes in the original promise of sports, and who would like to see better relations between India and Pakistan, would be only too ready to encourage cricket matches between the two countries.

Those who have rejected any thought of giving sportsmen on both sides a chance to find a way of reducing tensions are not doing anyone a favour.

The emphasis has to be on the ability of the game — in this case cricket — to influence relations between countries, instead of it being the other way round.

A new round of tensions

CONTROVERSY is no stranger to politics, but matters have taken a grim turn in the latest Supreme Court-government spat. Some context is important here. Ever since the Supreme Court waded into the Panama Papers dispute — a dispute that has threatened to engulf the prime ministership of Nawaz Sharif — last November, the court has been faced with a difficult task: deliver a sound judicial verdict in a matter that has been heavily politicised by all sides. If there is one error the court has made, it is in the handling of the coverage of the Panama Papers hearings. Both inside the court, though mostly outside, the government and the opposition have postured for the public — at times turning the day's proceedings — in scenes more familiar in a political rally or on a rowdy day in parliament. Particularly outside the court, the frequent news conferences held by the government and opposition turned a serious legal matter into a wild political carnival. Inevitably, though unfortunately, the mood outside the court sometimes appeared to infect the proceedings inside the court too.

What is more surprising, however, is that the government, and to some extent the court, have allowed the sour mood to continue through the JIT phase of the Panama Papers hearings. The extraordinary events of this week have created fresh problems for all sides. Faced with pressure on multiple fronts, the PML-N, or sections within it, has directed its anger at the Supreme Court and the JIT investigation. The verbal attack of now former senator Nehal Hashmi on the court and the JIT was shocking and unacceptable. If there is one right thing the PML-N has done in recent days, it is to quickly terminate Mr Hashmi's senatorship by seeking his immediate resignation. That could have ratcheted down tensions, but the court was unwilling to let matters rest.

It is at this point that the court may want to reflect on its own reaction. The lawful being pursued may be right — prima facie Mr Hashmi does appear to have committed contempt of court — but the rhetoric accompanying the action may be looked upon as excessive. To compare a government which has sacked a previously obscure senator for his offensive remarks to the Sicilian mafia may play well in the court of public opinion, but it does not behove the highest court in the land to react in such a manner. The court must always be mindful of its own conduct and the potential impact of language employed on the reputation of one of the constitutional pillars of the state. The government, however, must also bear a great deal of responsibility in the current situation. The sharp reaction by an unnamed government spokesperson to the court's censure was thoroughly ill-advised. For the sake of stability, both sides need to pull back from unnecessary accusations and recriminations.

Climate change deal

IN withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change, President Donald Trump has in fact walked away from the role of global leadership that the United States has held since the end of the Second World War. Out of the 197 countries that had signed the agreement last year, 147 have already ratified it, meaning the departure of the US from the commitments made at Paris deals a significant blow to cooperative efforts to contain the rise in global temperatures. The saddest part of the whole affair is how the defence of antiquated industries has been invoked by the president at the cost of the welfare of future generations. The latter was reflected symbolically last year when then secretary of state John Kerry, holding his toddler granddaughter in his arms, signed the Paris Agreement. President Trump, on the other hand, stood alone before a group of his admirers, including many who are labelled as 'climate sceptics' and serve in his government in important capacities such as director of the Environment Protection Agency.

As the biggest contributor of global carbon emissions, the US has a special responsibility to lead in the area of climate change. Once before, too, it has walked away from an important global arrangement, the Kyoto Protocol, at the last minute under president George Bush Jr. This cycle of entering into and then walking away from international cooperative efforts to mitigate climate change does serious harm to America's role as a global leader, and leaves a vacuum that is easily filled by rising powers such as China. The fact that only a few days before his disastrous decision to pull out of the Paris Agreement, President Trump was in Europe diluting his country's commitment to the Nato umbrella will also be seen as a dent in America's leadership role. The silver lining here is that it could take up to four years to actually make a departure from the agreement since there are strong laws governing exit, and by then there might well be a new administration in power more amenable to staying. But the troubling signals coming out of Washington, D.C. have already registered in capitals around the world. Germany is now openly considering less reliance on America, while China is talking of international commitments. Whatever Mr Trump does, it seems the world might yet adapt and carry on with or without his assent.

Punjab budget

PUNJAB has announced the expected development-driven budget for 2017-2018. The Shahbaz Sharif government seems confident that once the mega infrastructure projects are completed, large-scale investment will boost the ruling party's standing among voters ahead of general elections. Besides raising development spending by a fifth to Rs635bn from the revised estimates of Rs532bn for the outgoing year, the government has offered a number of freebies for constituents, both in the rural and urban areas. A political party whose top leadership is faced with a corruption probe will do anything to wean the public away from the hype the opposition and media have created on the issue. The budget's focus on elections aside, the provincial government certainly has many successes to show off. The outgoing fiscal is probably the first year in decades when any government collected almost 95pc of its provincial tax target — even if the target was set below potential. Also, the government has substantially increased allocations for the social sector — education, health etc — and is on schedule to complete most ongoing development projects.

The last budget of the five-year term entails a certain kind of caution on the government's part. The new budget betrays a desire to not ignore any area as the chief minister seeks to woo voters from the less developed parts of the province such as the southern districts. However, it is unlikely that inequalities between different regions, created by development priorities and urban bias, can be removed in one year. Also, the rulers have failed to attract local investment in job-creating sectors of the economy because of an excessive obsession with companies from a couple of favourite countries as a panacea for all problems ranging from garbage collection to power generation. Despite an obvious attempt at establishing some kind of equality among regions and sectors, diversity is lacking from this latest road map to have emerged from the chief minister's office.

Dangerous alliance

WHAT was always a possibility now appears to have all but been confirmed. The Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance against terrorism may have some counter-militancy aims, but it is also increasingly clear that it has been conceived by the kingdom as an anti-Iran alliance. The admission by foreign adviser Sartaj Aziz in the Senate on Thursday that the recent summit in Riyadh, headlined by US President Donald Trump's presence and attended by dozens of leaders of Muslim-majority countries, has widened the sectarian divide in the Muslim world ought to lead to a reassessment of Pakistan's involvement in

the IMA. Two decisions — to participate in the IMA itself and allow former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif to accept a Saudi offer to militarily head it — appear to have been taken in haste and, more worryingly, without keeping in mind Pakistan's true national interest.

To be sure, the Muslim world needs leadership and coordination when it comes to the fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism. Saudi Arabia, with its enormous resources and status in the Muslim world, is an important plank in any attempt to forge a consensus against the danger. Theoretically, the IMA could be a meaningful platform from which the fight against militant violence and extremism can be led. But that would require one non-negotiable, inarguable condition: participation by the full spectrum of Muslim-majority nations and a reflection of all mainstream strains of Islamic belief. The IMA is plainly the antithesis of that, and, therefore, a potentially dangerous and destabilising alliance. It is not so much what critics of the alliance are alleging as what the participants themselves are claiming. The Saudi leadership has explicitly stated that Iran is a threat to Saudi Arabia and countries allied with it. President Trump and his administration have explicitly embraced the Saudi-led IMA as a potential counter to the influence of Iran in the Middle East.

Not only can Pakistan not afford to be part of an overtly sectarian military alliance, membership and leadership of the IMA is inimical to the historical and future strategic interests of this country. While a close relationship with Saudi Arabia is warranted, better relations with Iran are necessary too. Pakistan shares a border with Iran; there are commonalities between large sections of the two populations; sound economic policy demands greater trade and connectivity with Iran; Iran can help Pakistan mitigate a persistent deficit of affordable energy; Iran and Pakistan have several common security problems along the border that demand cooperative solutions — the reasons why the two countries must progressively build closer relations is long and substantive. Courageous voices in parliament, like that of Senator Farhatullah Babar, have underlined the risks and emphasised the senselessness of aligning Pakistan along sectarian lines. The government, the military leadership and Gen Raheel Sharif must urgently reconsider their position.

Family planning

ON Friday, a report in this paper highlighted the grim consequences of recurrent pregnancies and unsafe abortions in Pakistan. Unfortunately, most women from low-income communities have intermittent access to reproductive healthcare. The story of a young woman in her 20s, who died after an unsafe termination, echoes the reality that thousands of women who resort to abortions as a family planning method must face. Risky abortions are one indicator of our failure to bring down the population growth rate to acceptable levels in a country where the number of people is set to rise to 227m by 2025. Because of conservative norms, women are unable to decide when they should have children and how many. In this situation, the state must provide them with safe birth control methods. According to the Family Planning Association of Pakistan, there are, annually, 900,000 terminations in the country. Most are dangerous backstreet abortions. This alarming figure not only speaks volumes for the sheer desperation that compels women to adopt this course, it also reveals low contraceptive usage, only 35pc, among women between 15 and 49 years. It also highlights the state's failure to make progress on the SDGs on sexual and reproductive healthcare and rights. Media campaigns can bring the issue to the forefront, but the curbs on advertisements for contraceptives on the electronic media are an impediment. Information on birth-spacing services is a critical component of family planning where men need convincing.

With a daily average of 40 deaths from pregnancy-related complications, the solution lies in greater contraceptive use. At the Family Planning 2012 Summit, Pakistan pledged to raise its contraceptive prevalence rate to 55pc and ensure universal coverage of family planning services by 2020. Some Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran, have a high contraceptive usage rate (80pc) compared to Pakistan's abysmal rate. The population welfare department must move at breakneck speed so that the 7m women that Pakistan promises to cover will get their reproductive rights. Family planning is about women's rights and their capacity to make decisions about reproductive health. Engaging lady health workers in communities with no access to birth control can improve contraceptive usage. Our state is yet to comprehend that practising birth control contributes to economic stability. The lack of this results not only in lost potential for women and a high infant mortality rate, but also burgeoning healthcare costs.

Carnage on the trade floor

THE stock market may have closed one of its worst weeks ever last Friday. In four days of trading, the market lost almost 4,000 points and market cap worth Rs653bn was incinerated in a selling frenzy the likes of which has rarely been seen.

The fact that this happened on the day the index was upgraded to Emerging Market status, fanning expectations of an inflow of almost half a billion dollars, added irony to the debacle.

For the moment, it is difficult to tell where this will end, but panic must be avoided since there are no material changes other than the reindexation that could be said to be driving the declines.

In the clichéd parlance of stockbrokers, the fundamentals remain sound.

What is highlighted by the whole episode, however, is the ease with which brokers can build hype around any event that impacts the stock market.

In the run-up to the upgrade to Emerging Market status, we heard a lot of stories about how Pakistani stocks would now soar because their price-to-earnings ratios were significantly undervalued compared to their peers in emerging markets.

The less sophisticated of the lot sold stories about massive inflows that are about to come in and lift all boats in the stock market. Much of that may yet happen, and the selling pressure could subside soon.

But the ease with which hype trumps all on the stock market should make retail investors wary of the tales told by the brokers.

What is clear is that the market prices in such events long before they become public knowledge.

The fact that the PSX rose steeply for months in the run-up to the upgrade, breaking the 50,000 barrier in January before tapering off, was one indication that it might be overbought.

The giddy expectation of a huge rise in the index immediately following the upgrade led many market players to take out positions that were far riskier than they would otherwise have taken.

Clearly, those managing foreign emerging market funds are not so foolish as to come rushing into an overbought market simply because it has just been upgraded.

Eventually, the selling will subside, and the market will find its footing, and foreign investors will make their entry, but a correction is obviously required before that happens.

For now, the episode should bring home the old lesson for small investors, that the stock market is no place to take risks with one's nest egg and hard-earned savings.

Keep a long horizon, be wary of elaborately built-up hype, and stay calm during periods of panic.

These are the rules for surviving and winning in this stock market. Greed and the lure of rapid returns can leave even the best of them battered and bruised.

Sanitary worker's death

THE tragic death of a sanitary worker in Umerkot in Sindh on Thursday highlights — yet again — how those who boast of providing aid and succour can fail to show even an ounce of humanity. Young Irfan Masih had been cleaning a deep manhole when he was rendered unconscious by poisonous gas. The team on the ground heard his call but had no equipment with which to pull him out immediately. Nevertheless, they managed to do so and took him to Umerkot Civil Hospital. Appallingly, though, the doctor on duty there allegedly refused to treat him, saying that he was fasting and that the patient was covered in filth. Given that the facility had no oxygen cylinder either, a young man who in life belonged to one of the most marginalised and discriminated against sections of society died. Meanwhile, three of his colleagues, who had also descended into the manhole to try and save him, were taken to a hospital in Hyderabad in critical condition.

Had Irfan's family not had the courage to approach the police, there is little doubt that his death would have gone unnoticed by society in general. As it stands, his father Nazeer has managed to have an FIR registered against three doctors at the Civil Hospital — the doctor who refused to treat him, the medical officer and the medical superintendent — as well as three employees of the Umerkot Municipal Committee; it is a shocking that even in this day and age Irfan and his colleagues had been expected to work in such dangerous conditions with next to no equipment. Irfan's death must be taken as a clarion call to improve the working conditions of one of the poorest sections of society. Meanwhile, although it has yet to be proved that the doctor did indeed refuse to treat him on the stated grounds, there is no lack of evidence that much of Pakistani society remains deeply prejudiced and ruled by antiquated notions of caste even while it celebrates the values of compassion and equality that their religious beliefs emphasise. That office-bearers of the Pakistan Medical Association have threatened the medical

community will boycott out-patient departments and emergency services across the district if the doctor arrested is not released is further evidence of how meaningless the Hippocratic Oath seems to have become in the country. They should instead be lobbying for justice.

Dealing with the note

THE finance minister has categorically ruled out demonetising the Rs5,000 note, but he should be asked why successive governments insist on having such a high-denomination note in the first place. The note is used mostly in bulk cash transactions and has little value in the ordinary retail economy. Given the emphasis that his government has placed on broadening the tax net and penalising non-filers of income tax returns through a miscellaneous bevy of taxes, it is odd that he would so steadfastly stand by this note which is used largely to transact tax-evaded wealth. If he was serious about making it difficult for tax evaders to transact, one of the most important steps he could take would be to phase this note out. Instead, we see growing recourse to various kinds of withholding taxes on transactions of non-filers, while the note freely circulates and is readily available to facilitate the bulk cash transactions in the property market, as well as numerous other markets in the black economy.

It is worth noting that the matter may not be entirely in his hands. Successive attempts to reduce the volume of the Rs5,000 note have met with opposition from powerful quarters. In many cases, people have been surprised to learn that the note has support from all manner of quarters. Currency notes usually don't have powerful lobbies behind them, but in this case, the presence of exactly such a lobby is the clearest sign that the note exists to facilitate the wrong kinds of economic practices. Phasing the note out will not cleanse the economy of these practices, but it will at least make it that much more inconvenient to engage in them. The finance minister should reconsider his categorical statement. Clearly, he cannot simply demonetise the note, but he can at least leave the door open to that possibility down the road, and encourage a wider reconsideration on the merits of such a high-denomination note.

A controversial investigation

AN ESCALATING controversy over the JIT probing the family of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif demands the urgent attention of the Supreme Court.

There are at least three problems with the composition and functioning of the JIT that have combined to cast a shadow over the entire process so far.

First, and most recently, a leaked still image of Hussain Nawaz, son of Mr Sharif, from a CCTV recording inside the room where the JIT is conducting its inquiry has ricocheted across the political and media landscapes.

There has been no explanation so far about how the image found its way into the public domain, why the JIT proceedings appear to have been recorded surreptitiously, and where the recordings are stored and who has access to them.

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The JIT is effectively acting as an investigatory arm of the Supreme Court, and its findings could have a far-reaching impact on the country's politics.

It is disturbing that a media circus appears to be tarnishing the sanctity of the judicial process.

Second, there are the as yet unexplained reasons for the registrar of the Supreme Court reaching out to several of the agencies that have supplied representatives to form the JIT.

It is to be expected that all court communications to government agencies will be properly documented and will scrupulously adhere to rules and norms in the conduct of such communications.

That standard does not appear to have been met in the informal calls made by the registrar — giving rise to serious questions regarding the unsolicited telephone calls over the internet.

Perhaps it was only a matter of laxity, but the court should explain why it occurred and directly address the worrying questions about undue influence on state agencies.

Third, there is the original problem: the inclusion of two members of military-led intelligence agencies in what are essentially financial matters that the JIT is probing.

Unlike the other nominated members of the JIT, the credentials of the two intelligence representatives do not appear to have been assessed for whether they are relevant to the matter before the JIT.

An unnecessarily deferential attitude was taken in a matter that should never have involved military-led intelligence representatives in the first place.

It is important to reiterate what is at stake here.

A historic set of hearings in the Supreme Court has for the first time probed the sources of income and wealth of a serving prime minister of the country and his family.

Besides the political future of the prime minister and his family, the integrity of the democratic process itself is being tested.

The Supreme Court is, therefore, the right forum to decide a matter of such profound implications. What is needed now is a reiteration that rules and the law will be scrupulously adhered to.

Blasphemy allegations

MASHAL Khan has been absolved posthumously of blasphemy allegations. A report by a joint investigation team states that the young man who was killed by a mob on a Mardan campus on April 13 had been framed. The possible motives include a desire to remove him from the scene since he was considered a hurdle by a political party or group. It is tragic that those who were responsible for his murder could not think of non-violent ways to handle what they saw as dissent among their ranks. Unfortunately, blasphemy charges have been used all too frequently to settle even smaller scores. So great is the emotional wave around a blasphemy case that it often results in riots, making an honest inquiry next to impossible. There are always points in a sequence where an intervention by those in authority can prevent a charged few or even an enraged crowd from taking matters into their own hands. The Mardan probe mentions a moment when a couple of teachers managed to have a sobering effect on those going after a friend of Mashal Khan at the university. A similar timely intervention by teachers could have prevented the killing of the young student, but it is debatable whether it could have materialised — those who could have shown the angry attackers other ways — legal and political — of settling their argument were alleged to have been part of the conspiracy.

Some of those involved have since reportedly expressed their regret at being overtaken by emotion, but these shows of remorse apart, the real lessons must be learnt by the

government. The authorities must see and acknowledge the evidence which says that prompt tackling by officials present of blasphemy accusations can help prevent situations where mobs are found to be violating the law. Instances of how deft handling by the police, following the surfacing of blasphemy allegations, has helped prevent a law-and-order situation do exist, even if they are quite rare. Only recently, the resolve to not allow a violation of the law was on display in Chitral where, after being called by a mosque imam, police stood between a crowd and a man alleged to have uttered blasphemous remarks. These examples of intervention must be studied closely to inculcate greater awareness and a sense of responsibility among the law enforcers. Sensitisation at the local level can help the law enforcers greatly.

Consumer boycotts

THE recent boycott of fruit sellers that began on social media and soon became a national phenomenon may stir its own debate, but it has demonstrated the power of an organised consumer interest. The wholesale fruit sellers from the markets on the outskirts of all major cities were the real target of this boycott, since it is they who take most of the profit margins from a spike in demand in Ramazan. And they are not a poor lot. The pushcart vendors who got caught in the crossfire between the consumers and the wholesalers deserve all our sympathy since their daily livelihood was jeopardised due to the boycott. But if the end result has been to bring prices down, then the goal has been achieved.

There is, however, the very real possibility that prices could shoot up again in a few days, and the boycott may not be able to come together a second time. And that is the problem with many social media campaigns: they are more palliative than corrective. If the energies harnessed by the fruit boycott can be put behind a larger consumer interest movement, then it has real promise. But if it ends with a few days of cheaply priced fruit, then it needs to be asked whether the cost inflicted on the poor pushcart vendors was worth it. There is no shortage of issues around which active and engaged citizens can come together to help bring about positive change. Rapacious practices by major corporations, such as banks and appliance assemblers, are commonly overlooked or fought out in solitude. Those taking pride in participating in the fruit boycott need to now prove that they have a vision larger than cheaper bananas and mangoes. If this is their sole victory against rapacious pricing practices, then they can just as easily be viewed as picking on the weak, or organising around a whimsical set of interests.

Trouble in the Gulf

A SERIES of bizarre events has been unfolding in the Arabian Peninsula over the past few days.

On Monday, led by Saudi Arabia, a number of Gulf and Arab states cut ties with the tiny but gas-rich emirate of Qatar over what they said was Doha's support for 'terrorism'.

This is an unprecedented move in the history of the over three-decade-old Gulf Cooperation Council.

The charges of Qatar's support for 'terrorism' have generated some debate: the emirate has angrily been accused by Riyadh and its allies of supporting a wide variety of actors, from terrorist outfits such as the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda, to the Muslim Brotherhood, to Shia militants in eastern Saudi Arabia.

While the Kuwaiti emir travelled to Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to try and mediate, it was unclear at the time of writing what the outcome would be, especially with US President Donald Trump stepping into the fray.

The intra-Gulf tensions have emerged barely a few weeks after the Saudi rulers gathered a number of Muslim rulers in Riyadh and — with Mr Trump as guest of honour — lectured the world of Islam about the need for forging unity within the ranks, along with isolating Iran.

The events of the past few days have proved that the edifice Riyadh was trying to build was nothing but a mirage.

The truth is that apart from the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, geopolitical differences between other Muslim states make unity a far-fetched dream. Saudi Arabia has long considered itself the head of the Arab and Muslim fraternity.

After the fall of Nasser in Egypt, Riyadh felt it was the sole champion of the Arab and Muslim worlds. However, in the decades since, others have emerged to challenge this narrative. Post-1979 Iran, for example, has staked its claim as a major actor in the Muslim world, while Qatar, in the past few years, has been accused of punching above its weight, as it has expanded its influence through broadcaster Al Jazeera as well as its support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Perhaps at the core of this spat is the desire for power and influence: the Saudis and Emiratis have not been happy with Qatar's foreign policy, and this seemed the 'right' time to cut Doha down to size.

As for the accusation that Qatar has sponsored terrorism, while the emirate has been blamed for backing extremists in Syria, it is also true that the Saudis themselves have a complex relationship with Salafist militancy.

If there are genuine concerns regarding Qatar's alleged role in promoting militancy, these should have been discussed through diplomatic channels.

Pakistan, which has cordial relations with both Riyadh and Doha and has hundreds of thousands of workers living in these states, must also tread a very fine line: relations with both the Saudis and Qataris must be maintained, while this country must not be dragged into any internecine Arab conflict.

LoC violence

ANOTHER round of violence along the Line of Control and more accusations and recriminations between the DGMOs of Pakistan and India — the worrying pattern in the Kashmir dispute continues, casting a pall over the entire Pakistan-India relationship.

As ever, the facts in any given incident are difficult to establish though it is clear that the civilian populations along the LoC are the principal sufferers.

The problem with low-level skirmishes or exchange of fire over short durations across the LoC is the possibility of the violence spiralling out of control.

While communication channels such as the DGMO hotline are designed to prevent an escalation beyond a certain point, regular violence can create its own set of expectations on both sides — and lead to a disastrous miscalculation.

The possibility of the latter is higher when the senior leadership on both sides appears more interested in brinkmanship than defusing tensions. Indian military commanders are increasingly given to making provocative statements about war with Pakistan — a mindless threat given the military and nuclear realities of the region.

Hawkishness at the very top can filter down to the ranks and produce adventurism along the LoC, a situation that no responsible leadership anywhere should encourage or tolerate.

Indian denial, however, cannot change two basic realities of the Kashmir dispute.

First, there is a genuine and deep resistance to the policies of the Indian government in India-held Kashmir.

The current BJP-led government at the centre and the coalition set-up supported by the BJP in IHK appear unwilling to acknowledge that state policies towards the people of IHK have plunged the region into a crisis.

Right-minded and humane voices in India have called urgently for a change in direction of government policy and until Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and those aligned with his politics in IHK recognise the futility of the course currently being pursued, the crisis in IHK will not disappear.

Second, the rejection by Mr Modi of a condition-free, wide-ranging dialogue with Pakistan is a negation of the historical record.

By trying to remove the Kashmir dispute from a dialogue process altogether, New Delhi has only succeeded in underlining the centrality of the Kashmir dispute to the Pakistan-India relationship.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: adhering to a principled insistence on settling all disputes via dialogue and using legitimate, diplomatic means to bring global attention to the violence in IHK.

Sindh budget

IN its last fiscal year before the elections, the Sindh chief minister, who also holds the portfolio for finance, has said that his government is serious about investing in education and has announced its largest hike in allocations, up by 24pc, for this sector. He justified the hike with these words: "If we are to prevail as a fair, just and emancipated people, we must invest heavily in our schools and especially our teachers." Nobody will disagree with the sentiment behind these words, nor will anyone dispute the increased allocation. But it is still strange that in almost a decade of ruling the province, the PPP government has woken up to this responsibility only in the last year of its second term. And if the chief minister would like to claim that his government has been serious about education from the very beginning, he should show the people where the results are.

Fact of the matter is, the Sindh government has announced a very non-serious budget in its last year. It is laden with handouts, and contains no new revenue measures to help pay for them. Contrary to how provincial governments are supposed to operate, it is a deficit budget. The minister is right to complain that the federal government unjustly withholds the province's share from the NFC award, but according to his own budget documents, in the current fiscal year, 97pc of budgeted federal transfers on revenue assignment were received by the province, meaning the shortfall he is complaining about is not so large as to be a headline item in his budget speech. What is more important for him to answer is why the pace of increase in direct taxes, particularly agriculture income taxes, has been so painfully slow, despite achieving what the

provincial government claims to be complete computerisation of all landholdings in the province. The current chief minister has brought some vigour to the Sindh government, but unfortunately the budgeting priorities will not change.

More load-shedding

THE government is celebrating the fact that power generation in the country crossed a peak of 19,000MW a few days ago, while the people are left to wonder where all this power is going. A few urban centres, notably Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad, have experienced some improvement in their load-shedding schedules since the April heatwave, and the rising arc of protests that were engulfing KP province has died down. So there has indeed been some respite. But in order to determine whether or not this can be relied on to carry us through the summer months, we would need to know far more than the headline generation number. Already the government's desperation has been sensed by the independent power producers that are using the moment to demand larger releases of their outstanding payments, a move that has reportedly been dubbed as "blackmail" by the water and power ministry. However, the fact that the cash constraints of the IPPs are indeed beginning to bite has not been disputed, and even as the turbines rev at top speed, hectic efforts are afoot to arrange the funds to at least minimally satisfy the IPPs and forestall plant closures.

Perhaps those in government celebrating the peak generation number should share a few other figures too while they are at it, so that the country can obtain a proper picture of the state of affairs in the power sector. For instance, now that things are said to be normalising, can we return to the practice of regular disclosures of the demand and supply gap? Can we also be provided the figures for the units billed by each respective distribution company in the month when peak generation was reached, and their recoveries? Finally, may we know how many overbilling complaints were filed in that month? This is the minimal information required to gain a better idea of how meaningful the peak generation figure really is. One can rev the turbines, but if the bills that pile up cannot be paid from the power sector's own cash flows, then it cannot be said that a solution has been found. There are months to go before summer ends, and this is the time when the government badly needs to improve its performance in the power sector. We can only hope that the headline figure of peak generation has more substantive grounding beneath it.

Rain preparations

WITH many parts of the country in the grip of a severe heatwave, two thunderstorms within a span of 12 hours came as a mixed blessing for the residents of the Islamabad-Rawalpindi area on Tuesday. Strong winds — estimated by the Met department to be blowing at some 93km per hour in the capital city and in excess of 130km in its garrisoned sister — brought the mercury down somewhat, but also caused the electricity supply to be suspended in some areas and disrupted the train and metro bus services. Trees were uprooted and hoardings blown down. Thankfully, no loss of life or major damage was reported, but the events ought to be taken as a harbinger of the days ahead. Within a few weeks, the monsoon season will be upon us, and scientific quarters are expecting a robust amount of rainfall in the region.

While it is to be hoped that the outcome is not the kind of devastating floods that were witnessed in several parts of the country in past years, tackling the challenges posed by the rainy season — whether or not the rains turn out to be unusually heavy — depends on the steps taken by the authorities now. This is the time that the canals and waterways need to be cleaned and de-silted, drainage systems in cities and towns prepped, and standard operating procedures to be spelt out and shared with all relevant authorities. In all cities, there are spots where even an average increase in the volume of water can prove a hazard, an example being the Leh Nullah in Rawalpindi along whose banks are located slum settlements that often find themselves in danger when the waterway swells. Encouragingly, de-silting work has been initiated this year but a plan for evacuation still needs to be prepared should it become necessary. Meanwhile, civic authorities need to coordinate with the Met department as closely as possible, which itself needs to make sure that all its equipment, such as weather radars, are fully operational.

Steps not taken in Pak-Afghan ties

BACK-to-back meetings by the civil and military leaderships of the country have emphasised that Pakistan is deeply concerned by the deterioration of security in Afghanistan. What remains to be seen is if Pakistan and Afghanistan can salvage from the series of recent crises a semblance of mutual cooperation. A military huddle in Rawalpindi on Tuesday was followed by a relatively rare convening of the civil-military National Security Committee led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Wednesday, the country's security leadership coming together to express its support for peace and stability in Afghanistan, while at the same time rejecting Kabul's accusations of Pakistani involvement in violence inside Afghanistan. The prime minister's agenda for the ongoing Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in Kazakhstan will also have

likely featured — the SCO embracing as it does several of the key state actors in Afghanistan.

Official pronouncements are necessary, though they can be of limited value when repeated year after year without any change in ground realities. The situation in Afghanistan again appears to have reached that point, with neither Kabul nor Pakistan seemingly able to find the will for true collaboration and the major outside powers once again unsure about how to make cooperation possible between the two state powers critical to peace. The current situation is familiar. A spate of attacks on either side of the Pak-Afghan border causes both states to harden their line against the other; escalating regional tensions cause alarm among outside powers; urgent efforts are made to ratchet down tensions; vague promises are elicited from the two countries; and then matters are left to rest until the next spike in tensions. Meanwhile, the mutually beneficial measures that can be taken are allowed to languish; border cooperation remains weak and shutting down militant sanctuaries is yet to become a priority.

Part of the problem is that in periods of relative calm in the Pak-Afghan relationship, neither side appears to take the steps that could help prevent the next eruption of tensions. The deteriorating security and political situation in Afghanistan may have many reasons, but a great deal of the responsibility lies with Kabul. The disarray in the National Unity Government makes it impossible to improve governance or strengthen Afghan security — a situation that Pakistan can hardly be blamed for. Meanwhile, Pakistan recognises that a political solution is the only realistic way to end the conflict next door, but its influence over the Afghan Taliban is either receding or not being leveraged to prepare the latter to at least accept that a political solution is inevitable. Important as it is for periods of acute tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan to be immediately addressed, the quiet, long-term diplomatic track does not get the attention it deserves. Peace eventually can only come from determined efforts now.

PPP desertions

THE mystery continues to deepen. Some well-known members of Mr Asif Ali Zardari's inner circle have deserted him recently. Many others who had long been sitting on the fence appear ready to go over to the other side, most eying the PTI as their new home, but with a few rare ones among them apparently wanting to join the PML-N. Many of the politicians who have joined the PTI claim they have been forced by circumstances to play the role of modern-day turncoat. They accuse Mr Zardari of inaction or only soft opposition to the PML-N. Their talk appears to imply that there is some kind of an understanding between the PML-N and what remains of the outfit inherited by Ms

Benazir Bhutto's spouse at her passing in late 2007. Outside Sindh, the party has all but crumbled — in less than 10 years. It has been almost a decade of political inaction in the name of reconciliation that has reduced the PPP to its present-day tiny existence in Punjab and beyond. Yet there are no signs that the leadership is any more bothered by the recent wave of defections than it was previously when Mr Zardari was confronted by evidence of how the party was losing its moorings. Its fortunes have plummeted in not just Punjab but also in many other areas such as KP — and even Azad Kashmir where it was once quite the people's favourite.

True to tradition, there is not much by way of reaction from Mr Zardari as his 'friends' ditch him. And if this were not strange enough, the lack of resistance seems to have been transferred from Mr Zardari to his son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. The young man who was until recently considered by diehard PPP jiyalas to have been blessed with special powers that could resurrect the party appears to be copying his father. At a time when he should be agitated and making efforts to build dams against the torrents that threaten to wash away his party in the plains of Punjab and elsewhere in the country, all he can manage is a faint smile and a few quiet words that are lost in the din of departures. Very little effort is visible on his part to save the party or its legacy. This is a new for the PPP. It seems to have conceded without a contest.

KP budget

THE government that promised change is starting its final fiscal year in power in exactly the same fashion as the other provincial set-ups ie with an election-year budget. Promising 'no new taxes', the finance minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa unveiled a budget that contains its largest hike for salaries and pensions of government employees, clearly an appeasement tool, with no additional resources to show for the innovative new revenue measures that were announced last year. The development budget appears more than three times larger this year, but only because of a metro bus project funded by the Asian Development Bank. Other than that, the provincial ADP is the same as last year's, reflecting the paucity of resources despite a four-year run during which much could have been done to open up new revenue lines.

It is true that KP faces more acute challenges in its economic management than Sindh and Punjab, the other two provinces that have announced their budgets thus far. It is a frontline province in the war on terror and its economy is particularly resistant to yielding revenue considering a larger share of it is in the informal sector than in the other two provinces. Nevertheless, the ruling party had entered power with claims of bringing about rapid change simply by cleaning up corruption, which they claim they have done.

If that is so, where are the results in the economic sphere, particularly as far as the budget is concerned? This question arises now because the party has entered its final year in power with intentions of not doing much beyond the metro bus project in Peshawar, and giving a big pay raise to all its employees. One bright spot for the provincial government is its relatively better track record in making resources available to local governments, where there is a healthy increase for next year too. But with this budget, it seems the PTI is now gearing towards elections like all its rivals.

Kazakhstan summit

ORIGINALLY, a security pact in which there have been some halting steps in recent times towards broader economic cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation could offer Pakistan some advantages in the years ahead — if Pakistan uses its membership effectively. In an address to the SCO summit in Kazakhstan, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif spelled out his vision: “As leaders, we should leave a legacy of peace and amity for our future generations, not a toxic harvest of conflict and animosity. Instead of talking about counterweights and containment, let us create shared spaces for all.” Now that Pakistan has become a full member of the SCO, along with India, Mr Sharif has an opportunity to put his vision to the test.

Theoretically, SCO membership offers Pakistan several opportunities to improve ties in the regional context. The two pivotal actors in the SCO, Russia and China, are both countries that Pakistan is already seeking deeper relations with — China is on the path to becoming Pakistan’s pre-eminent global ally. The SCO’s original focus is Central Asia, a region Pakistan has long sought more access to and deeper ties with. The platform could help in the efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, while its emphasis on counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing over the last decade could be useful in the regional fight against militancy. Pakistan, then, has an opportunity to enhance security cooperation with a region where stability could unlock the enormous potential of trade and connectivity. Yet, there should be no illusions about the long and difficult road ahead. To begin with, Pakistan and India must resist the impulse to turn multilateral forums into little more than arenas for venting bilateral concerns. Already, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s hawkish speech in the summit, there is evidence that India may want to turn the SCO into another Saarc. That may not be possible because of the presence of other powerful SCO countries, but Pakistan must resist the Indian bait of solely focusing on South Asian disputes.

Beyond that, Pakistan will need clarity on what it is seeking to achieve in the SCO and must dedicate year-round resources to furthering those goals. From the fight against the

militant Islamic State group to linking Pakistan to Central Asia's energy field, the SCO could be a platform for meaningful Pakistani leadership at a regional level. Yet, sustained contributions to an important regional forum go beyond aspirational speeches. It is perhaps telling that Mr Sharif's speech appeared to embrace SCO membership as an end in itself rather than a means to achieving specific and well-thought-out goals. If the civilian leadership wants greater space for itself at the policy table nationally, it will need to demonstrate it has the will and capability to put flesh on soft visions for regional peace and stability.

Comey's plea

THE plea that former FBI director James Comey brought to Congress is one that is familiar to us here in Pakistan. In essence, he told Congress that he was 'fired' from his job because his department was leading an investigation into a large attempt to hack the American elections by Russia, and that some members of President Donald Trump's inner circle seemed to have suspicious contacts with various Russian players while this was happening. He went on to add that in one private conversation, the president went so far as to express the hope that Mr Comey could find a way to let one of these key players — Michael Flynn who served briefly as national security adviser — off the hook. When Mr Comey did not comply, he learned through the media that he had been fired. A powerful head of state, whose team is under investigation, allegedly tries to influence the person leading a probe, and failing to do so, fires the individual. This story, in various forms, has played itself out repeatedly over the decades in Third World countries, and ours is no exception.

What is interesting to note in the American enactment of this familiar drama is the role played by independent institutions and the system of checks and balances built into the structure of government. In many other countries, including democracies, arbitrary action, such as the one taken against Mr Comey, may pass without notice, and, in fact, be considered routine. But given an empowered legislature that can summon affected parties and conduct public hearings, and given a free media that is willing to highlight such issues, actions of this sort can have consequences for the highest in the land. Mr Comey may never get his job back, and the hearings themselves yielded nothing that could directly imperil the president's future. But the kind of attention the episode has attracted and the minute scrutiny of the president's actions that it has engendered means it may never be business as usual for Mr Trump, at least not without incurring even steeper costs. Democracies work in mysterious ways to weed out damaging behaviour as this episode illustrates. But for that powerful self-correction to operate, three vital ingredients must be present: independent institutions led by people of

credibility, a system of checks and balances to provide oversight, and a free media. Democracies such as ours can learn this important lesson.

Fifty years on

A STUNNING military victory it may have been, but 50 years later, Israel finds ‘the’ occupied territories an albatross round its neck. ‘The’ above is within single quotes — an indication of Israel’s diplomatic sophistry which has for the past five decades attempted to obfuscate the relevant UN resolution by taking refuge behind the absence of the definite article before the word ‘territories’. The historic UN Resolution 242 sought Israel’s withdrawal “from territories” it occupied in the 1967 six-day war. According to some people, a definite article before ‘territories’ would have meant that Israel would have to withdraw from all the occupied territories. Instead, Israeli diplomatic logic would have the world believe that by withdrawing from some territories the Jewish state has already complied with Resolution 242. It has not. It withdrew from the Sinai peninsula because of the US-brokered Camp David accord following the 1973 war, but the Palestinian territories are still under occupation, with East Jerusalem and Syria’s Golan Heights annexed by Israel. However, even where there has been no ambiguity about language, as for instance in the 1993 Declaration of Principles signed on the lawns of the White House, and which called for a two-state solution and a halt to settlements, Israel’s leadership has shown no sign of abiding by agreements.

Israel is not likely to have any qualms about annexing the West Bank and Gaza, and there is no doubt that President Trump would go along. But a Greater Israel would mean a Palestinian majority, which in turn would not allow Zionist ambitions to turn Israel into a Jewish state to succeed. The 1967 war was an Arab blunder. Gamal Abdel Nasser by all standards was a great man. But he miscalculated the two sides’ military strength and ordered the blockade of the Tiran straits. The ensuing war was a one-sided affair. The Muslim world lost Jerusalem, which Glubb Pasha’s Arab Legion had saved from Israel during the 1948-49 war, and ‘the’ Palestinian territories thus continue to remain under occupation.

Guidelines to curb terror financing

THE State Bank has just updated its rules for banks so they can be more diligent about handling funds that could be connected with persons or entities designated by the UN as terrorists. The move is obviously linked to the upcoming review of Pakistan's compliance with global money laundering and anti-terror financing regulations that is due in July. It will be conducted by the Financial Action Task Force, the UN body tasked with developing the regulatory architecture to prevent the use of the banking system by terrorists and criminals. The costs of failing such a review can potentially be high and lead to the disconnection of the country's financial system from the global financial system, making it impossible for the economy to transact with the outside world. There is little chance that Pakistan will land up there in the near future, but it is a slippery slope; one wrong step can have very damaging consequences — which could mean a terrible hit for our external trade and remittances.

A drama has always played out whenever Pakistan's case has come up for review before the FATF — the last time was in February 2015 when the country was actually removed from the 'grey list' of jurisdictions whose financial system pose a risk to the global financial system. The drama preceding this was linked to the unfinished business of ensuring compliance with the regulatory framework created by the FATF, to which Pakistan is a signatory. The unfinished business has to do with certain individuals and entities that have been designated by the UN body as terrorists, but who roam freely, with some openly operating large organisations and charities that collect donations across the country — work that requires the use of the banking system.

Pakistan managed a step forward in 2015 because it gave a commitment to the FATF to move against these groups before the next review due in July. Of course, that commitment was never delivered on; a small step towards sensitising key stakeholders about the importance of the issue led to the outbreak of civil-military tensions that have only recently subsided. Now we are moving towards another review when Pakistan will be asked again whether action has been taken against the designated groups as it is committed to doing — perhaps, a long-winded answer will have to be furnished. It is in preparation for this review that the State Bank has apparently acted to update its regulations and guidelines, bringing in clauses that hew closer to the requirements mandated by international regulatory authorities. It seems the government is preparing to go back to the FATF with yet another 'commitment' to take action — at a later date — against designated terrorist groups, hoping this will be enough to get past the referee until the next review.

Chinese victims

THE kidnapping was a worrying enough sign. The victims were two Chinese nationals and the scene of the crime was a supposedly secure zone inside Quetta. Now, with both Chinese and Pakistani officials saying the two nationals could have been killed and the militant Islamic State group claiming responsibility, a decidedly more serious problem has revealed itself. Earlier in the week, the ISPR had claimed a major success against a Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and IS nexus of militancy in a remote warren of caves in Mastung district, suggesting that local militancy continues to evolve and that the IS is far from the marginal threat some sections of the state have tried to cast it as. It is not known if the Mastung raids and the Quetta kidnapping are linked, but what is clear are two things: Balochistan's security troubles remain complex with seemingly no end in sight, and Pakistan remains an IS target. Before a strategy can be evolved to address both issues, there must be a frank acknowledgement of the realities.

Balochistan is an integral part of CPEC and there is no future imaginable in which the province is not rapidly opened up to Chinese and domestic investments and infrastructure projects. But the surge in economic activity was always likely to attract threats in a province that has myriad security challenges and therefore demands an approach that goes beyond further militarisation. The low-level Baloch separatist insurgency is more than a decade old; neighbouring Afghan and Iranian regions continue to pose security problems; Balochistan has seen the rise of sectarian and Islamist militancy; and now, with the expansion of the Chinese footprint in the province, pre-existing threats could fuse with new strands of militancy to create an unprecedented threat. There is no realistic scenario in which Pakistan can wage a full-scale war against all those threats at the same time in the same province. In the convergence of the IS and the anti-China threat, there is an opportunity for the state to craft a fresh strategy that politically stabilises Balochistan in order to focus on a militant danger that is spreading to other parts of the country. There must be no space for the IS in Pakistan. The current approach has failed to prevent the group from gaining space; institutional differences must be put aside for the sake of a joint and effective strategy to defeat it.

Pilgrims' progress

SUCH is the level of hostility between Pakistani and Indian officials that even the most harmless of opportunities for exchange can fall prey to a resolute refusal to consider the bigger picture. Of late, India seems set to take the lead in this unsavoury competition. Some time ago, Pakistani artists working in India had come under intense fire. And now, Sikh pilgrims who were scheduled to visit this country to observe the death anniversary of Guru Arjan Devji on Friday at the Gurdwara Punja Sahib in Hassanabdal have fallen victim to their own administration's myopia. Up to 300 yatris are able to visit the gurdwara to attend this particular event. This year, 96 pilgrims applied for a visa, 14 of whom were given permission to cross the border by foot at Wagah, with the rest left to travel on a special train sent across by Pakistan. On Thursday, with local authorities still not having been given permission by their Indian counterparts to send across this special train, Pakistan said that the yatris could travel on the Samjhota Express that was in any case scheduled to make the trip to Atari and back. However, the pilgrims were stopped from boarding by Indian authorities on the pretext that this was not the special train reserved for their travel. At this, Pakistan once again reminded India that permission for the special train to cross the border was pending. But in the back and forth, the day dwindled away and these pilgrims lost their chance to attend the event — which, as it turned out, was attended by only a handful of Sikhs who had successfully crossed at Wagah.

If such is the level of obstruction demonstrated by the bureaucracy, it is difficult to harbour much hope for a future where ties between the two countries will normalise. In acting as it did, the Indian authorities not only rebuffed Pakistan's offer they also punished their own citizens by undermining their right to honour religious duties. In the future, better sense must prevail.

Muslim world in turmoil

THE Muslim world — a vast construct of over 1.5 billion souls stretching from Southeast Asia to the Sahara — is today facing a unique series of tumultuous events.

Extremist militants have unleashed an orgy of violence across vast swaths of the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

On Friday, the militant Islamic State group claimed responsibility for a suicide attack near Karbala in which around 30 people were killed, while a day before the East African

terrorist group Al Shabab had stormed a military base in Somalia, slaughtering around 70 people.

Only days earlier, the IS had made its first major inroads in Iran, attacking parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb complex in Tehran.

Apart from these atrocities within Muslim-majority lands, terrorists have also struck the UK, France and other states in recent weeks.

But, instead of combining forces against the menace of terrorist violence, the rulers of Muslim lands appear too busy in acrimonious exchanges and petty rivalries.

The Saudi-Iran spat was already a matter of serious concern, spreading beyond the borders of these lands and affecting sectarian relations in other states.

Moreover, the message sent from the Arab-Islamic-American Summit last month in Riyadh was not one of unity and progress, but of divisiveness and confrontation, as Iran was pointedly excluded from the comity of Muslim states.

In the days since, tensions between Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other have exposed even more rifts and divisions within the Islamic bloc.

The message this confrontation is sending is that despite the dangers posed by extremists, the rulers of Muslim countries are far too obsessed with infighting and power plays, as their societies implode.

The scenario may be grim but not beyond repair.

There is still time for rulers of Muslim nations to shun their petty differences and forge unity to face the monumental challenges that confront them.

Narrow considerations of sect, nationality, race and tribe will have to be jettisoned for the welfare of over 1.5bn people.

While major geopolitical differences exist between Muslim states and cannot be papered over, these should be discussed through diplomatic channels in measured tones, not played out in front of the gallery.

Muslim states must shun propaganda campaigns against each other as irresponsible and combative talk can very easily spark something far more dangerous in these combustible times.

The challenge ahead is quite clear: there are serious internal weaknesses to be addressed while states cannot be excluded on the basis of sect.

Without being unduly alarmist, it can be said that terrorist groups such as the IS pose an existential threat to nearly every Muslim nation, as well as to other states.

Therefore, the prime goal at this juncture can only be to join forces and to use energies collectively to combat the menace of terrorism.

Pak-Afghan ‘agreement’

ONE strained bilateral relationship – with India – was not addressed, but another was. On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kazakhstan, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and agreed to a revival of the moribund Quadrilateral Coordination Group to develop a verification mechanism for actions by Afghanistan and Pakistan against terrorists as demanded by the other side. The specific language used by the Foreign Office hints at continuing difficulties: “The two leaders agreed to use the Quadrilateral Coordination Group mechanism as well as bilateral channels to undertake specific actions against terrorist groups and to evolve, through mutual consultations, a mechanism to monitor and verify such actions.” Translation: the agreement in Kazakhstan is a tentative one, with both sides yet to agree on the specific steps that are to be taken and possibly verified by the other two QCG members, the US and China. Welcome then as any dialogue or potential cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan is, there is some way to go before the results can be achieved.

Perhaps a starting point would be for Afghanistan, Pakistan and the QCG to understand why previous attempts at cooperation against mutually identified terrorists have failed. Is it because neither the Afghan nor Pakistani side has taken the exercise seriously? Or do they not trust the other to do what is required? Third-party verification can only help if the core parties are committed to making a process work. Moreover, Kabul can sometimes have conflicting demands: nudging the Afghan Taliban to the dialogue table is unlikely to work if Afghanistan is simultaneously demanding of Pakistan that the Taliban leadership be put under extreme pressure or be handed over to the Afghan government. If there is an obvious trust-building, potential area of cooperation it is against the militant Islamic State group, a threat to all members of the QCG. Whatever is agreed, the process needs to move forward quickly. History suggests that debating modalities and frameworks can become a way of delaying verifiable action. Afghanistan and Pakistan are publicly committed to peace. They can surely find a way to take the right steps in that direction.

Education challenge

IT is pointless to expect our public-sector colleges and universities to produce well-rounded graduates when the state has failed to offer quality primary and secondary schooling to all. Although there are some slivers of hope, these do not reflect the real picture of the decades of neglect that Pakistan's education sector has been subjected to. As reported last week, the National University of Science and Technology was ranked 431 in a global listing of 500 top varsities in the QS World University Rankings. Making this list, alongside six other Pakistani varsities, is an accomplishment for a university that also won a prestigious award for design technology at the Stanford Centre in April. Yet, its inclusion in the list does not obscure the abysmal state of learning at most other universities in the country. One of the criteria for evaluating universities globally is a sound academic reputation — grounded in the efforts of an expert faculty that stresses on quality learning. Unfortunately, in this country education is so neglected that only 2pc of students sitting the CSS examinations passed in 2016; 92pc failed the English exam. It is pertinent to note that appointments are made to the bureaucracy, judiciary, Foreign Office, police and other government departments based on these exam results. Moreover, intellectual vigour is critical for high-level appointments in these services. However, when the system is based on rote learning and poor science and math teaching, independent thinking eludes the students.

Only a holistic approach applied from the primary level up, and one that makes learning accessible and affordable, can reform the crisis at the top of the education ladder. For the large out-of-school population to be enrolled and retained, education investment and political commitment are prerequisites. Training teachers to improve learning outcomes and encouraging intellectual curiosity will catapult students towards progress. Our government needs to comprehend why a system based on quality education leads to a tolerant, inclusive and economically stable nation able to stand its own globally.

A neutral role for Pakistan

THERE may be many strands to the latest crisis engulfing the Middle East, but there is only one conclusion for Pakistan: this country cannot afford to get embroiled in conflict in the Middle East.

With Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa in Saudi Arabia, the urgent, high-level diplomacy by Pakistan should have a dual focus ie help defuse

tensions among the various state protagonists, each of which Pakistan has friendly relations with, and withdraw from the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance.

The bizarre and patently false assertion by a section of the Turkish state-run media that the Pakistani parliament is considering sending thousands of troops to Qatar underlines the risks involved in a conflict in which the media has become a weapon.

The possibility of false stories and propaganda setting off a diplomatic crisis for Pakistan is very real and the Foreign Office has done the right thing by quickly and emphatically denying the possibility of Pakistani troops being sent to Qatar.

While Pakistan's leverage may be limited and its diplomatic heft in the Middle East far from obvious, it occupies a unique and potentially useful position as it has friendly ties with all the Middle Eastern and Gulf countries embroiled in the current crisis.

From Saudi Arabia to Qatar and from Egypt to Iran, Pakistan has genuinely friendly and stable ties with all sides — precisely the kind of committed and relatively neutral stakeholder that can act as an interlocutor to help rescue a region from a greater crisis.

But if a crisis-fighting role is not something Pakistan can realistically take on, there must be an emphatic signal sent to all sides: Pakistan values its relations with all countries and the Pakistani national interest requires it to stay neutral in the current crisis.

That should not be impossible, but it would require Pakistan to suspend its military participation in the IMA and withdraw retired Gen Raheel Sharif from his command of future IMA forces.

Simply, recent events in the Middle East have shattered the assumptions on which Pakistan's original inclusion in the IMA was premised.

The IMA was supposed to be a counterterrorism force and there was no threat greater than the militant Islamic State group that Muslim-majority countries could jointly fight.

But the Saudi leadership has made clear that it primarily wants to contain Iran and, now, cut Qatar down to size — effectively destroying any possibility that the IMA can ever become a platform for all Muslim-majority countries to come together to fight militancy and terrorism.

Saudi Arabia is and will remain an important ally of Pakistan.

It is the responsibility of friends to stand by one another in times of crisis.

But responsible friends must also be unafraid to speak the principled truth and protect themselves from colossal errors by the other.

Withdrawal from the IMA has become essential.

Exchange rate fears

THE State Bank may want to paper over these matters, but fears about the stability of the exchange rate are mounting. At the moment, there are whispers among money market players, but given how skittish this lot can be, the whispers can grow into a chorus faster than the central bank can handle. At the bottom of this growing concern is the continuous fall in the level of the reserves although they are still sufficient to finance five months of imports — a comfortable level. But given how rapidly the trade deficit is ballooning, and the fact that debt service outflows are set to increase in the next fiscal year, the level of comfort is not likely to last long if there is no sharp reversal in the deterioration in the external account. And that is where the concerns acquire traction: no such reversal is visible, nor is any policy thinking to tackle the deterioration. The health of the external account is now tied almost exclusively to fortuitous factors, such as resumption in the decline of oil prices. If the economy must now float on a cushion of hope and luck, it is of little surprise that money market players are beginning to look around for signs of an impending devaluation.

That is where the deterioration is headed — a sudden and sharp devaluation of the rupee. If the State Bank will not allow the rupee to find its own value on the interbank market, the interventions through which money market players say it is being propped up will have to end at some point, perhaps when the level of reserves does not allow any further propping up. The longer the decision to let the rupee find its own value, the harder the eventual reckoning is likely to be. The rulers today can close their eyes to this problem for perhaps another fiscal year, leaving the unpleasant decision to the next government. But those with strong stakes in the exchange rate are unlikely to wait that long, and will start adapting to a possible hard landing at some point long before the moment arrives. Memories of 2008 are still fresh, and nobody wants to be caught long on the rupee when the moment arrives. It would be worthwhile for the State Bank to go the extra mile in sensitising the government on the risks of having rigid views on the exchange rate.

Threats to journalists

AFTER a brief period of comparative calm, recent events have served as a reminder of the mortal dangers that journalists in Pakistan face. On Sunday morning in Haripur, Bakhshish Ilahi, the bureau chief of an Urdu newspaper, was gunned down while on his way to work. Journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have demanded that the provincial government arrest the killers. While the motive behind the murder has yet to be determined, members of the media familiar with the senior journalist's reporting are convinced that his work was the reason he was targeted. Meanwhile in Lahore, Rana Tanveer, a reporter for an English daily who often writes about the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan, has seen his house vandalised and a death threat painted on the gate. A few days ago, in an incident that may have had a sinister motive, he was left with injuries requiring an operation after a speeding car struck him.

Pakistan has long been among the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Nearly 60 media persons, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, have lost their lives in this country since 2000 for reasons ascertained as being related to their work — either in direct reprisal, during the course of an assignment, or in crossfire while covering combat situations. Last year was the first after 2001 that no media person fell victim to a targeted killing. The almost complete impunity with which such crimes are carried out exacerbates the peril: to date, in only three cases have the murderers of journalists been brought to book — Daniel Pearl, Wali Babar and Ayub Khattak. In other instances, even credible investigations have not been carried out, let alone taken to the trial stage. Until this changes, journalists who unmask corruption in high places and the shady agendas of competing power structures will continue to look over their shoulder. And society will be the loser, for the media's oversight role is a vital ingredient of a functioning democracy.

Chinese nationals' safety

THE abduction and reported killing of two Chinese nationals in Balochistan was a security failure and the claim of responsibility by the militant Islamic State group was a troubling development. But instead of focusing on the crime and security lapse, the interior ministry appears to be more interested in victim-blaming. Following a meeting chaired by Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan on Monday, two new angles to the shocking crime in Balochistan were revealed: the abducted Chinese were allegedly Christian missionaries and they had falsely obtained business visas to Pakistan. It would seem the ministry would rather blame the victims than ascertain how and why militants were

able to abduct two foreign nationals in Quetta and security forces were unable to recover them before they were reportedly killed. The security lapse was serious — and no amount of shifting of blame by the interior ministry can obscure that reality.

The interior ministry's claims, however, do raise a further set of questions. Travel to Balochistan for foreigners is by no means easy and the ministry has repeatedly claimed to have helped streamline the visa process at Pakistani missions abroad. How then were the Chinese nationals able to obtain business visas to Pakistan and how were they able to take up residence in Quetta without any institution seemingly being aware that they had, as now alleged by the ministry, entered Pakistan under false pretences? Moreover, in Balochistan in particular, Chinese nationals are supposed to be well protected, but the interior ministry's version of events suggests the state is unaware of how many foreigners are in the province at a given moment. The recommendation that Nadra compile a database of Chinese nationals in the country and share it with all security agencies is so elemental that it is surprising it has not already been done. It calls into question all claims the state has made about the security of foreigners.

While Pakistan clearly needs to do better in its protection of Chinese nationals, and indeed all foreigners, there was perhaps one suggestion by the interior minister that Chinese nationals ought to pay heed to: comply fully with Pakistani law and cooperate as much as possible with officials. While the Pakistani visa regime is further improved, Chinese authorities should advise their nationals of all relevant Pakistani laws and discourage the exploitation of any loopholes. The abductions in Quetta, whatever the real motive behind them may be, and the killings claimed by IS have elevated the threat against the Chinese. So the common sense measures that can be quickly taken by all sides should be in place. The interior ministry's victim-blaming is troubling, but for the Chinese the safety of their nationals should be paramount. If a grave new threat has emerged, total transparency and scrupulous adherence to the law by foreigners can help mitigate the risks.

Stock market decline

IF there is one casualty on the trade floor these days, as the market struggles to find the ground beneath its feet, it is the credibility of the stockbrokers and their associated 'research' departments. The way in which many unscrupulous entities among them have misled investors in the run-up to the stock market's inclusion in the MSCI Emerging Markets category should be grounds for an inquiry by the SECP, which has made misleading research a crime. All we heard in the run-up to the big event awaited

for months was that 'passive funds' would come pouring in and that the stock market would rise in a rapid burst to heights nobody could anticipate. The hype surrounding the event reached near-delusional levels from the start of the year. But when it finally happened, first with an announcement on May 15 that the Pakistan Stock Exchange would be reclassified as an 'emerging market', and then again on June 1 when the PSX was formally inducted into the new category, we saw a rout the likes of which we haven't seen in almost a decade. In one epic trading day, through all those days of major declines, the PSX lost more than 1,800 points, with all stocks across all categories registering steep drops.

Suddenly the broker community changed its tune. The market was now in a panic over the JIT summoning the prime minister, we were told. Political uncertainty, it was said, was clouding the investors' outlook. The claim was spurious, unless one is willing to believe that the community of brokers is so naïve that it did not realise the Panama case was proceeding in the backdrop of the entire bull run since January, and that the JIT had been constituted on May 5. The link between the prime minister being summoned and the stock market declines is also difficult to understand; hardly anyone — not even the opposition despite its rhetoric — believes that summoning the prime minister would mean an abrupt change in the political fortunes of the country. Fact of the matter is, the PSX has been oversold in the run-up to its inclusion in the Emerging Markets category as broker rhetoric inflated a massive balloon of hype. The SECP ought to investigate who has been overselling the market through it all. Those 'analysts' who are found involved in selling the hype should not be allowed to work in the field.

Child labour survey

AN NGO has demanded a 'comprehensive' survey of child labour in the country, adding its voice to the growing calls for urgent intervention in a neglected area. Pakistani children have to perpetually wait for attention as their elders vie with each other for notice. There is, sadly, far too much evidence of how this country is neglecting its young ones to the point that it sometimes appears that we as a nation no longer have the sympathy we once possessed for our vulnerable segments. Many of those who feel this way have long been frustrated with a system that offers no quick remedies and that shows only a slow improvement in the most sensitive area of child labour. The progress that is visible lies most notably in greater awareness, even if sympathy is often lacking, of the issue as compared to the past. This is something of a feat given that there are many other issues on the state's priority list that take precedence over the objective of eliminating child labour.

The concerned NGO reminds us that there has been no child labour survey for two decades — the last one was conducted in 1996. To think that a whole generation has come of age in the interlude — the less privileged of its members having to toil in the workshops and in factories and in hidden places that are allowed to exist in the name of cheap labour — is shocking. However, there will be some who are not concerned about the delay in amassing newer details on the state of child labour. Such an exercise could have placed greater demands on our leaders who are otherwise happy to issue a statement or two on child rights or conduct a raid and free a few young souls from bonded labour. They would like to avoid bad publicity for the country. They want to continue pretending that child labour does not exist in the country.'

More controversy

IS the joint investigation team being impeded in its work, or is it distracting itself with unnecessary and potentially troubling side activities?

In a sensational confidential report submitted to the Supreme Court — a report that was quickly leaked to the media, creating yet another issue that will have to be resolved — the JIT appears to have both taken aim at the government and provided ammunition against itself.

First, there are the JIT's allegations of interference by state agencies presumably acting on behalf of the PML-N government.

The complaints are serious and too specific to be simply waved away.

Prima facie, government officials or agencies that are under the control of the government are either trying to prevent the JIT from completing its inquiry within the time frame that the Supreme Court has set or, more insidiously, to block altogether the JIT's attempt to access evidence that could be relevant to the inquiry.

If that is the case, it is entirely unacceptable and the court has the power to ensure that all agencies under the direct or indirect control of the government cooperate fully with the JIT.

Second, the JIT's own needs must be examined and the necessary instructions issued to it.

The leaked report makes for astonishing reading for two very different reasons: providing an insight into how delay-and-disrupt tactics work against investigations and

for indicating what the JIT itself considers disruptive and how it has gone about collecting examples of the alleged interference.

The vast report that the team has compiled on media and social media commentary allegedly against the JIT is remarkable and suggests the work of a huge monitoring system.

If the team has not compiled the monitoring report itself, then who has provided it to the JIT? Surely, the JIT must be able to explain and justify the use of any and all resources it has access to.

Deeply troubling too is the alleged surveillance of witnesses required to appear before the JIT — who authorised it, to what end, and is it legal or justifiable?

Given the task before it and the institution, the Supreme Court, that has created it, the JIT should take exceptional care to avoid any semblance of improper conduct.

Unhappily, the JIT seems to be lurching from one self-made crisis to another.

From its very composition to allegations of harsh and unnecessary conduct early on, the JIT appears to have a grander view of itself than what the law or norms of inquiry demand.

That Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family submit themselves to accountability in the wake of the revelations in the Panama Papers was necessary.

They are now doing so, with Mr Sharif to appear before the JIT today and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif to follow on Saturday. It is now the JIT that must urgently restore some dignity to the proceedings.

Protest epidemic

IMAGES of protesting medical cadres at public-sector hospitals in many parts of the country are becoming disturbingly frequent. In fact, so widespread are these protests that the most diehard of political partisans would find it difficult to put the blame on a particular government in a single province. Just when the Young Doctors in Punjab were taking a break from their incessant demonstrations, there were reports from Quetta that nurses there had embarked on the latest round of a campaign that has seen them pressing for their demands for quite a while now. They wanted, to begin with, to be paid on the same scale as their counterparts in, say, Punjab and KP. They have a valid concern: after all, decentralisation should not mean different pay formulas for different

regions in one country. An efficient system of perks and privileges for these indispensable caregivers is as central to a devolved health sector as are prompt services for those in need of medical care.

Improvement in the service structure was the basic demand behind the agitation of the Young Doctors Association in Punjab. But, over the past four years or so, the demand has developed into a running feud between the government and the ever-complaining doctors. There have been concessions given but these have proved to be insufficient, with the result that unrest continues in public-sector hospitals. KP, too, has had its share of on-hospital trouble caused by strikes called by the Young Doctors. One such strike is happening at the moment and, in fact, has taken an ugly turn. Physical force has been resorted to in Peshawar to prevent medical facilities from being shut down as Young Doctors, along with making other demands, resist the devolution of the Postgraduate Medical Institute. There are elements trying to give these sorry scenes a political tinge, whereas those who view this as part of the discontent at public-sector hospitals all across the country cannot help but wish for a solid effort at reform. What is needed is a comprehensive state-level study of the problem as this would help establish a new code. Already, a number of patients have paid a huge price for these seemingly never-ending protests by the medical community. It is clear that administrative interventions alone cannot address the grievances of the professionals assigned to mind a sector that has everything to do with people and resources.

Misogyny in politics

KHAWAJA Asif's penchant for derogatory, misogynistic remarks against women politicians shows no sign of abating. It is symptomatic of the contempt in which he holds women in general, and those who are in the public space in particular. On Monday night, in a series of tweets in which he ridiculed the recent defections to the PTI, the defence minister referred to Firdous Ashiq Awan as the party's "newly acquired dumper" and Shireen Mazari as a "tractor trolley", the latter insult being a repeat of what he had hurled at the PTI's chief whip last year. While Mr Asif did not take names, there was no doubting the identities of those he was targeting.

The minister's coarse language has undoubtedly elicited some amusement in a society where 'putting women in their place' is seen almost as a worthy exercise. That is even more so the case when women stake out their place in public life which in the eyes of many men is an exclusively male domain. Let alone parliamentarians or politicians, such patriarchal attitudes are an unpleasant reality for millions of far less privileged working women in Pakistan every day. Sometimes overt misogyny can take the form of

a more subtle chauvinism in which a woman's achievements are defined not in gender-neutral terms but in a patronisingly gender-specific way. A few days ago, for instance, during proceedings in the Senate, Environment Minister Zahid Hamid addressed Sherry Rehman as "lady senator". Ms Rehman pointed out — very rightly — that her gender was immaterial to her office. Not doing so would have been tantamount to tacitly conceding that as a woman she is 'trespassing' on what is assumed by default to be a male sphere. The incidents cited above illustrate that parliament is, dishearteningly enough, a microcosm of Pakistani society. Nevertheless, this does not mean the individuals elected to represent this country, and the tens of millions of women in it, cannot rise above their base instincts instead of reinforcing the prevailing sexist narrative.

PM faces the JIT

A SINGLE appearance may not mean a victory for the rule of law, but it is a welcome and important step towards equal justice for all. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's appearance before a joint investigation team empowered by the Supreme Court to probe the first family's finances has few precedents in the country's history. Several prime ministers have faced corruption allegations in the past and some have been ousted from office. But none have faced the kind of forensic scrutiny that Mr Sharif is likely to have been subjected to yesterday. If the JIT conducted itself professionally and if Mr Sharif attempted to answer the questions put to him frankly, the democratic project will have received a welcome boost. Stable, mature democracies hold public officials to account, but always in a fair manner. For now, given Mr Sharif's public statement after his JIT appearance, it can be assumed that both sides approached the session in a respectful and cooperative spirit.

Perhaps Prime Minister Sharif's appearance before the JIT will help reset the mood around the investigation and the court proceedings that will follow. The JIT has been mired in far too much controversy, a great deal of it avoidable, for anyone interested in the strengthening of democratic institutions to be comfortable. A process with implications as grave as the potential disqualification of a legitimately elected prime minister ought to be conducted very differently to what has been the case so far. But the Sharif family and the PML-N government must also bear some responsibility for the multiple controversies. At its core, as the prime minister's prepared comments yesterday again suggested, the PML-N appears to believe it is the victim of a vast conspiracy against the Sharifs personally and the government generally.

The Panama Papers, however, cannot have been and must not be allowed to become tainted as a conspiracy. A global dump of secret records, the Panama Papers ensnared public officials and private citizens across the globe. More than 11m documents with information on nearly 215,000 offshore entities that were pored over by over 100 media organisations in 80 countries — the sheer scale of the Panama Papers is so overwhelming that only hubris could lead any one person or family named in them to believe that a conspiracy is afoot. In truth, the papers revealed troubling questions about the Sharifs' financial practices and appeared to contradict previous public statements about the family's wealth and assets. Whether those practices and statements are a violation of Pakistani law is for the JIT to establish and the Supreme Court to decide. But all sides need to reconsider their positions. The JIT must focus on its work, the government must allow the JIT to do its work and the Supreme Court should ensure that the JIT can do the work it has been tasked with.

Karachi jailbreak

IN a country still battling violent extremists that have wreaked havoc on society for the past couple of decades, a recent prison break in Karachi indicates major shortcomings in our counterterrorism apparatus. While it has not yet been determined when the incident occurred as police were informed about it after a considerable delay — a troubling detail in itself — the audacious escape of two allegedly 'high-profile militants' from the city's main jail is alarming. Members of the banned sectarian group Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, the men — who are still under trial — are accused of multiple murders. According to an official from the city's counterterrorism department, one of them has slain 57 people, while the other had carried out seven targeted killings. As a consequence of the prisoners' escape, 12 jail officials have been suspended.

It is difficult to overstate the gravity of this security lapse. Some of the most hard-core terrorists in Pakistan are incarcerated within the walls of the Central Prison; it was a given that security measures had to be ironclad. The institution is an obvious target for resourceful militants on the outside seeking to spring their compatriots from behind bars. In October 2014, law-enforcement personnel discovered members of a banned outfit in the process of digging a 45-metre-long tunnel from within a house in a nearby colony towards a prison barracks housing 100 'dangerous militants'. The men were only 10 metres from their target when they were apprehended. It was claimed in the aftermath of this incident that security at the prison had been further enhanced. How then have two individuals belonging to one of the most violent extremist groups managed to elude all the measures put in place to keep them under lock and key? Jail personnel have been known to collude with inmates either in return for money or out of

fear; that is obviously where the investigation must begin. The delay in reporting the escape also raises questions. In short, every effort must be made to get to the bottom of the incident. There is already far too much evidence that law-enforcement authorities are not as vigilant as they should be about extremist outfits. Consider the fact that a large number of them still maintain a digital presence unhindered, and that the banned sectarian group Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat is reportedly operating in rural Sindh under a new name. We simply cannot afford to be lax on this front.

All ready for the final?

There are no other words to describe it: they played like a team possessed. Pakistan's astounding victory over favourites England in the Champions Trophy semi-final at Cardiff on Wednesday has taken the green shirts to their first-ever final in the 20-year history of the tournament.

For a team placed last among the eight competing sides to find its bearings in the run-up to the mega event, Pakistan turned in a performance the likes of which have seldom been witnessed in the country's 65-year cricket history.

Over the years, Pakistani players have acquired the reputation of being unpredictable; in fact, it was felt that they had become victims of such stereotyping, often losing important games in high-profile events.

A similar pattern was evident after the victory against South Africa in a rain-marred game last week and the tight win over Sri Lanka on Monday; most critics were convinced Pakistan's mercurial run would be snapped by unbeaten England in the semi-final.

But all such scepticism was banished by Pakistan at Cardiff in a contest that was ruthlessly dominated by Sarfraz Ahmed and his charges from the first ball to the last.

Sarfraz is proving to be a brave skipper. With his aggressive style of leadership and unflinching faith in his charges, he infused a hitherto absent fighting spirit in the players.

Besides, the intrepid batting of opener Fakhar Zaman and pacer Hasan Ali's coming of age have been crucial factors in inspiring the team to lift its game, especially after defeat at the hands of India in Birmingham.

The India spectre still looms large in the final. Despite the brilliant win over England, despite Sarfraz's dynamic leadership and despite the performance of Fakhar and

Hasan, Pakistan will be wary of the arch-rivals who have enjoyed a clear edge in recent contests.

Analysts have attributed this to psychological factors, with the Pakistan side finding it hard to keep its nerve, and losing focus.

One hopes that this equation is altered on Sunday.

Regional tensions

RUSSIA has offered to mediate between Pakistan and India. China appears to once again be preparing to take a lead role in dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the newly revived Quadrilateral Coordination Group framework. The US, in yet another review of its Afghan policy, has, according to media reports, broadened the scope to include its policy towards Pakistan, which in turn has widened to include the latter's ties with India. The conclusion is inescapable: the threats to peace and stability in the region are interlinked and dialogue is the only realistic solution. What remains to be seen is if the US, China and Russia, each of which has different relations with India and Pakistan but all of whom are invested in stability in Afghanistan, can do what previous administrations in those countries have been unable to do — help align the interests of Pakistan, Afghanistan and India in a way that reduces regional tensions.

At the very least, outside powers can try and stabilise regional dynamics that are threatening to spiral out of control. Kabul, riven by political tensions and under extreme pressure by the Afghan Taliban on the battlefield, has taken to blaming Pakistan for all its security troubles and has cooled to the idea of dialogue with the insurgents. Very recent events suggest that Kabul may be considering softening its approach, and coordinated diplomacy by outside powers could help in this. Pakistan, meanwhile, has two urgent concerns: the violent suppression of legitimate political discontent in India-held Kashmir and the actions a hawkish Indian government may be taking to stir trouble inside Pakistan. Finally, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's misguided, militarised policies in IJK and refusal to engage Pakistan could attempt to play on the latter's fears by pulling closer to Afghanistan. The LoC, racked by tensions and frequent exchanges of fire, is worryingly close to the possibility of a conflagration.

Helping reduce tensions in the short term and promoting dialogue among Pakistan, India and Afghanistan will only work if China, the US and Russia recognise the interplay between the various security concerns of the three countries. Demanding Pakistan put pressure on the Afghan Taliban without helping alleviate its concerns about India's growing involvement in Afghanistan has not worked in over a decade. Similarly,

Pakistan demanding India address the Kashmir dispute is unlikely to achieve results while New Delhi is focused on a perceived terrorism threat from Pakistan. The QCG, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the influence that the US, China and Russia independently have in this region — all can be for the good if used pragmatically and in a sustained manner. For all the tensions among India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the three states recognise that war is not an option and that peace and stability must be sought. Surely, that is a good starting point for big-power diplomacy in this region.

Land reforms

THE subject of land reforms does occasionally pop up on the margins of mainstream Pakistan. This time the opportunity for the issue to make a somewhat fleeting appearance was provided by a group of senators who sat listening to a set of legal minds. The briefing on Thursday was led by veteran lawyer Abid Hasan Minto who is pursuing a difficult petition in the Supreme Court for such a reform. The case is complicated by a Zia-era Federal Shariat Court ruling that outlawed land reforms on religious grounds. This is a very convenient judgement for those who have been resisting land reforms throughout the country's history. The feudal lot was able to scuttle Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's land reforms, even if we agree that the state at that time had the will and the capacity to see the exercise to its logical conclusion. According to some, the Federal Shariat Court decision during the Zia period did not completely close the door on land reforms. It was thought that a well-meaning initiative towards fixing the balance in favour of the tiller via an overhaul of landholding laws was still possible. In our peculiar situation, there was the crucial question about first establishing who actually owned the land before a transfer and a holding, large or small, could be justified. It was pointed out that since the big landlords in Pakistan had invariably possessed this asset during the British times, it could be successfully argued that the colonisers did not have the authority to gift the land to these beneficiaries. This could have then provided a reason for the state to repossess the land for a fresh and fair distribution that guarded against exploitation.

But the matter has lingered on, with the powerful and vigilant landlords accused of nipping any kind of attempt at reform in the bud. The same old concerns and possibilities have been discussed over and over again — down to the latest briefing of the members of the upper house on Thursday. A report on the meeting says there was a call for the Senate, or a committee within it, to become a party in the Supreme Court case being fought by Mr Minto. The legislators here could do well to pay heed to the suggestion voiced by the attorney general of the country, in response to the proposal to

make a new law — that is if there really is concern in the government at the absence of land reforms.

Balochistan budget

THE troubled province of Balochistan is mired in too many difficulties for its leadership to be able to devote much attention to economic responsibilities. It has shown the weakest revenue effort of all the provinces thus far; its own revenue as a proportion of federal transfers is the lowest at 5pc, while the absolute size of the deficit is the largest. But this is not surprising given the vast informal nature of its economy, which is far bigger than what official data reveals, because of the size of the cross-border trade with Iran and Afghanistan through the rahdari system. If the Balochistan government could tap even a small percentage of this trade through some form of provincial levy, it could easily double the revenue effort. But the security challenges of the province, the divided nature of its governing arrangement, the strong imperative to rent tribal loyalties in return for forming a government, and the inability of a home-grown political party to reach the position of ruling the province have severely hampered the efforts of the provincial set-up to manage the economy and dedicate resources to needs such as health and education.

In its latest budget, the provincial government has announced a development budget of Rs86bn, that is almost a quarter of total expenditures. This proportion is slightly higher in other provinces. For example, Sindh is devoting more than a third of its expenditures to development. In the case of Balochistan, much of this spending is going towards CPEC-related projects. To some extent, this reflects the muscle of the centre that is partially offloading the costs of CPEC-related spending onto the provincial government. Perhaps this is for the best and CPEC will help turn provincial fortunes. But one cannot escape the impression that far too many eggs are being placed in one basket at a time when Balochistan faces severe human development challenges. One can only hope that the bet pays off.

Billionaires' club

BEING the people's representative is a rich man or woman's job in Pakistan. The publication by the ECP of the statements of assets and liabilities of parliamentarians and their spouses and dependents has once again confirmed the obvious. Thanks to a handful of parliamentarians who have the decency to file financial statements that are relatively believable, it appears that parliament is a billionaires' club with a smattering of mere multimillionaires. For parliamentarians willing to give an indication of their true wealth, a relatively honest statement of assets and liabilities can be a double-edged sword: it fulfils a legal duty, but exposes them to media ridicule and public denunciation as out-of-touch elitists. Perhaps parliamentarians who are willing to give an indication of their extreme wealth can be encouraged to shame their colleagues into submitting more believable statements. The public deserves to know the true scale of the politicians' wealth and the almost immoral gap between the people and their democratic representatives.

Why, though, are so many parliamentarians able to get away with making patently false claims about their wealth? The ECP had considered the possibility of randomly auditing some of the declarations, but the suggestion appears to have gone nowhere. Until the ECP is empowered to verify the statements submitted to it, and not simply compile and publish them in the official gazette, parliamentarians have little to fear in submitting potentially false financial statements. The electoral reforms that parliament has pledged to enact before the next general election could help address the issue, but the problem is undeniably complex. It is unrealistic, and perhaps undesirable, to give the ECP the resources to establish the accuracy of parliamentarians' financial declarations. The alternative is for the ECP to obtain the services of institutions such as the FBR, SECP, NAB and FIA, but that would require the agencies to be able to operate independently. Events elsewhere at this time have made clear the problem with the 'independence' of investigatory bodies.

Yet, the current system is clearly broken and continuing with it untenable. A possible solution could be for the ECP, or members of the public via the ECP, to be able to demand of parliamentarians explanations for political or lifestyle expenditures. If a rally is held, how much did it cost and who paid for it? If a parliamentarian lives in a palatial home, how are the utilities paid for? Simultaneously, the practice of gifts being received by parliamentarians should be made illegal. So-called gifts are an obvious means for corrupt practices and have no place in a democratic system. Certainly, there will be loopholes in any new system and they will be exploited. But the status quo cannot be allowed to continue. If parliament is unwilling to legislate change, the ECP can suggest its own reforms and public pressure can be brought to bear on parliament to do the right thing.

IMF assessment

IN one of the bleakest assessments of Pakistan's economy, the IMF has warned that the "moment of opportunity" earned through macroeconomic stabilisation over the past few years is now at risk of unravelling. A short note issued at the conclusion of its last Article IV consultation — a regular exercise that the Fund carries out with all its member countries — warns of renewed pressures building on the fiscal and external accounts, as well as the re-emergence of the circular debt. This year's fiscal deficit target of 4.2pc is "likely to be exceeded" and next year's budget "will likely require additional revenue measures", the Fund warns. On the external front, it notes the widening of the current account deficit which will reach 3pc of GDP by year's end, a near tripling in three years. In a somewhat cryptic line, it says "[f]oreign exchange reserves have declined in the context of a stable rupee/dollar exchange rate", suggesting that the government is providing administrated support to the rupee; it calls on the government to "allow for greater exchange rate flexibility".

On the structural side, the report points to continued bleeding of the public-sector enterprises as well as "renewed accumulation of arrears in the power sector" as serious impediments to the sustainability of growth. Although it hails investments under CPEC as growth drivers, it also highlights a possible "failure to generate sufficient exports to meet rising external obligations from large-scale foreign-financed investments" as a key external risk facing the economy. It also appears to frown upon recent moves to water down the powers of Nepra by specifically calling for "maintaining a strong regulatory framework in the energy sector". As is customary for Fund pronouncements, the latest release also begins on a positive note by saying that the outlook on growth is favourable as the growth rate is expected to rise to 6pc by next year. But the warnings that follow are enough of a reminder that there is more to managing an economy than the growth rate. The complete and detailed Article IV report will be released soon now that it has been approved by the board, and if the early statement following its approval is anything to go by, the government's narrative of having turned the economy around is likely to be challenged by its contents. Given this is an election year, it is improbable that any of the warnings being sounded will find a receptive ear.

Mob ‘justice’

THERE is ample evidence that the country is being sucked down a vortex where the violence is steadily escalating. There have been many cases where citizens have suffered viciousness and even death at the hands of an enraged mob. Now it would appear that society does not even draw the crucial distinction between private citizens and state representatives responsible for maintaining order. Early Thursday morning in Rawalpindi, a traffic warden tried to intercept a motorcyclist who was doing a ‘wheelie’, or the dangerous and illegal stunt of riding a bike on one wheel. In response, the pillion rider pulled out a gun and shot the warden, leaving him injured; the unregistered motorcycle sped away. A day later, a traffic police post in an adjacent area was attacked by an enraged mob wanting to seize motorcycles that had been impounded during the ongoing drive against wheelies. A crowd of some 80 people fired shots, tried to set fire to police vehicles and pelted stones at the post. Order was restored when regular police and Elite Force commandos were called in, as a result of which five attackers were rounded up.

Those involved in these attacks must face the full censure of the law. However, the root causes of such behaviour are a societal problem that requires course-correction. Mobs take the law into their own hands when there is little faith in the justice system. But as the Rawalpindi incidents show, we have now reached a point where there is scant respect for the rule of law; hence the emboldening of wrongdoers. The answer lies, on the one hand, in bringing to book all those who flout the law, especially at the top tiers of society, so that a strong signal is sent out about the sanctity of the law; on the other hand, renewed efforts to reduce weaponry on the streets must be pursued. An armed and alienated population is fast becoming a frightening reality.

Declining exports to Afghanistan

THE collapse in exports to Afghanistan is an unnecessary and self-inflicted wound. The news that Pakistani exports in the current financial year may be in the region of \$1bn, a drop of nearly a third, and down from a high of \$2.4bn in 2011, is unsurprising. Pakistani exports have been declining for several years. But the reasons for this trend of fewer exports to Afghanistan are unique — a near collapse in ties with Afghanistan and several border closures. The closures were particularly ill-advised as the decline in the export of perishable goods hurt growers and small businesses in this country as well as in Afghanistan. A disruption in the trade of perishable goods such as fruit and

vegetables causes immediate harm and the losses cannot easily be made up by growers and traders.

A decline in trade has more pernicious effects than simply hurting local economies. It loosens the ties that are vital to sustaining a close relationship that regional countries, and none more so than Afghanistan and Pakistan, should have. That in turn makes it harder to have the kind of trust and cooperation to address problems that may develop between neighbours — and few countries have the kind of need to cooperate like Afghanistan and Pakistan. The trade setback has coincided with what is arguably a humanitarian crisis as Afghan refugees in Pakistan continue to face pressure to go back. The pace of return may have slowed in recent months as Afghanistan has struggled to provide resettlement resources that the returning refugees have been promised, and Pakistan has pulled back from some of the harshest tactics that were prompting refugees to go back. Nevertheless, the decline in Pakistani exports combined with continuing demands that Pakistan-based refugees return to Afghanistan has deepened the climate of mistrust and suspicion at the people-to-people level.

Clearly, Pakistan is not the only side making poor choices. On the matter of trade, the refusal by Kabul to engage Pakistan in trade-related discussions in recent times is egregious and self-defeating. Afghanistan may be trying to communicate its displeasure at the state of overall ties, but trade is a long-term issue that should be separated from political and security tensions. What, after all, does Afghanistan gain by giving Pakistan the cold shoulder on trade dialogue? Consider also that with the revival of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, and renewed efforts to open dialogue with the Afghan Taliban, Pak-Afghan ties could witness an upswing soon. Short-term thinking should be eschewed in a long-term relationship.

Budget debate

THIS year's budget session in the National Assembly was a lacklustre affair, especially considering the volatile political atmosphere in which it was conducted. According to a study by the watchdog group Free and Fair Election Network, this was the shortest budget session in many years, spanning a total of 15 sittings, nine of which were for general discussion, with a total duration of 37 hours only (last year's budget session logged a cumulative 80 hours). Moreover, lawmakers proposed 1,704 cut motions, but none were moved because the legislators were not present in the Assembly when these were taken up. The opposition decided to boycott much of the session because their speeches were not being aired live on PTV, with the result that one of the most crucial pieces of legislation — the Finance Bill 2017-2018 — passed with hardly any debate,

and no real input from the opposition. Apparently, grandstanding before the TV cameras is a bigger priority for many of the opposition lawmakers than legislation and budgetary allocations. More input was offered through points of order than any substantive legislative or budgetary matter. One-fifth of the time was spent dealing with the 489 points of order that were raised, and almost all of them were related to political matters and not the budget.

The opposition has displayed immense immaturity in this session by surrendering its role. The budget and the finance bill are two key pieces of business, and the role of lawmakers in shaping the allocations and highlighting the changes in taxation measures, as well as all other items that are snuck into the finance bill, is a crucial element of democratic lawmaking. The casual manner in which the budget was passed, after a cumulative debate barely lasting 37 hours over 15 sittings, shows that the opposition is more interested in generating political noise rather than shaping the nature of governance. The complaint that the debate is useless because it does nothing to change the government's mind or the outcome sounds more like an excuse for disinterest in real legislative and governmental business than a serious response. The finance bill contains many clauses that amend the law in subtle ways to produce winners and losers in society, and the opposition has a key role in ensuring that this power is not exercised arbitrarily. Relinquishing the obligation to read and debate the budget in a serious manner is inexcusable.

Conversion of minor

IT is a sadly well-worn script: a minor Hindu girl apparently abducted, forcibly converted and married to a Muslim. As in many such cases, the latest incident took place in Tharparkar, which is home to a large Hindu community. If reports are to be believed, 16-year-old Ravita Meghwar was kidnapped on June 6 by men from the influential Syed community belonging to a village near Nagarparkar town. Her father has claimed that despite approaching the police several times, he got no cooperation from them. On Thursday, the teenager accompanied by her Muslim husband told journalists she had converted of her own free will. The two of them have asked the Sindh High Court to provide them protection against her family.

Minority communities have once again been put on notice: their belief systems, even the law of the land itself, are of no consequence when the majority decides to ride roughshod over their rights. While at present there exists no legislation in the province denying recognition to the conversion of minors — even though one came very close to being passed into law last year — the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act, 2013, made

marriage below the age of 18 a punishable offence. That alone should be enough to prosecute all those who were party to Ravita's abduction and 'marriage'. Certainly, there are instances of individuals from minority communities — almost always girls and women — who have converted voluntarily, and that is their right. At the same time, the issue of conversion cannot be seen in black-and-white terms. For it is motivated not only by spiritual reasons but also by material concerns. Pakistan's social structures are such as to make it not inconceivable that Hindu girls belonging to the marginalised and impoverished 'scheduled castes' are sometimes drawn to the prospect of improving their lot in life by converting to the majority faith. This bitter reality only exacerbates the insecurities of minority communities who fear losing their younger generation as well as their own heritage in the process.

Rebirth of Pakistan cricket

IN overpowering India to win the coveted Champions Trophy title on Sunday at The Oval, not only has Pakistan cricket exorcised a decade-old jinx, it has also been given a lifeline to compete in the 2019 World Cup.

The handsome turnaround by Sarfraz Ahmed and his men, who played fearless cricket throughout to win four games on the trot including the final after having been humbled by India in the opening game, has had the critics searching for superlatives.

For a side in eighth place in the ICC ODI ranking, Pakistan has come full circle, after discarding the initial trepidation and thwarting the myriad odds stacked against it.

There is, however, no more gratifying an achievement than beating India in the final, after suffering years of disappointment and defeat at the latter's hands, especially in mega events.

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The brilliant show has now propelled Pakistan into sixth spot thus guaranteeing them direct entry into the World Cup.

Since the 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore, major cricket-playing countries such as Australia, England, South Africa and India have refused tours here citing security concerns; other nations including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and more recently Afghanistan have declined invitations after initially agreeing to visit, thus compounding the isolation of Pakistan cricket.

That has forced Pakistan to adopt the UAE as its 'home' venue, depriving thousands at home of a chance to flock to the stadium to watch their heroes on the field, besides financially burdening the Pakistan Cricket Board.

Cricket here has further been undermined by the poor administrative policies of those at the helm in PCB under an ad hoc system that has caused domestic cricket standards to drop, besides leading to a never-ending selection rigmarole.

The recent spot-fixing scam at the Pakistan Super League was perhaps the last straw, for the league had taken off superbly and was about to be relocated here.

The Oval win will hopefully help address most of these problems. It has clearly signalled the dawn of a new era for Pakistan cricket that could see the team scale new heights.

Under Sarfraz, an astute, bold leader, this relatively young team has rediscovered the pride, the discipline and the aggression that used to be the hallmark of Pakistan cricket, especially in the limited-over format.

The win puts the skipper in a better position to dictate terms on team selection and players' welfare — issues that are integral to the game's prosperity. More importantly, the entire cricket world — and not just the International Cricket Council — has taken note of Pakistan's incredible performance.

It is an emphatic reminder of the tremendous young talent available in the country — talent that has produced match winners like Fakhar Zaman, Hasan Ali, Shadab Khan and Fahim Ashraf. All this augurs well for the future.

Power planning

THERE are growing indications that the government's plan to expand power capacity is turning messy. From the very beginning, the planned addition of massive new generation capacity has been marred by the lack of foresight. This was evident in how plans for the plants envisaged for the Gadani power park had to be shelved due to unforeseen costs in their execution and how the imported coal power plants had to be switched to LNG because of unanticipated coal transport expenses. It was also apparent in how the two imported coal plants in Karachi had to be switched to domestic coal due to the burden on foreign exchange reserves. This lack of foresight was apparent in the Nandipur fiasco as well, shortly after the plant's commissioning. In almost all cases, the key ingredients of the messy mid-course corrections were haste and an undue emphasis on new power plants, with little thought given to fuel supply or financial- and transmission-related considerations.

Now it is being reported that concerns are growing about the huge capacity payments that will come with the new generation plants. We are hearing of a looming surplus in generation capacity as well as fuel supply complications that continue to bedevil three of the latest LNG plants. It is difficult to describe these issues as teething trouble because they concern an essential part of the power-generation plan. What remains to be discovered is the impact that this additional capacity will have on the fiscal health of the state and on its foreign reserves position. Being able to afford a big increase in power-generation capacity will take more than just commissioning large numbers of power plants. The ability to afford imported fuel, to transport it over great distances where the plants are located, and to enhance power-sector finances to be able to afford the additional megawatts without committing state resources, are all key to managing a power-capacity expansion plan. Thus far, there are growing indications that the government is taking a one-eyed view of the entire affair; it is looking mainly at additional plants as the panacea and fumbling with the rest. Given the scale of the additional megawatts that are being put in place, this approach could turn disastrous like the earlier IPP-led expansion of the late 1990s did. Once again, greater transparency is required to allay these concerns.

Indian army chief's claim

AS backpedaling goes, it is unconvincing. Indian army chief Gen Bipin Rawat waded deep into controversy last month when he vigorously defended the army's violent suppression of legitimate dissent in India-held Kashmir.

While Gen Rawat's outrageous claims were hailed by hardliners in India, sensible, right-minded Indians have expressed unease at the militarised approach to the people of IHK.

Now, perhaps recognising that whatever the benefits of appealing to hardliners across India, in IHK itself the general's remarks caused further anger and alienation, Gen Rawat has been quoted in the Indian media as saying that the army respects human rights and cares about the lives of the people.

It is a measure of how far the Indian army has slid down the scale of acceptable conduct and public standing that the army chief has to try and convince the people of IHK that it cares about their lives.

What the people of IHK need is a real, verifiable and manifestly obvious adherence to the law and human dignity, and not just the words of an army chief.

However, Gen Rawat's full comments suggest that the Indian army only intends to pay lip service to human rights while continuing with its oppressive tactics.

He did not rule out further instances of Indian soldiers using human shields in IHK.

He claimed that the Indian army is doing a good job in the region. He accused elements among the people of IHK of spreading misinformation and disinformation. And he talked of the Indian army continuing to take what he termed as necessary action in the region.

Moreover, there is absolutely no evidence at all, in reports from IHK and in the claims of the people there, that the Indian army is concerned about human rights, and that it respects the people.

Indeed, the Indian army seems to consider every man in parts of IHK as a potential fighter and every woman and child as a collaborator. Gen Rawat's words are utterly unconvincing.

Raid at Karachi prison

AFTER last week's jailbreak by two 'high-profile' sectarian terrorists from Karachi's largest prison, suspicion immediately focused on the personnel deployed to guard the premises. Twelve of them were remanded to prison for their role in the escape of the men who between them are allegedly responsible for around 65 targeted killings. A raid on Monday by the Rangers, police, and army personnel unearthed damning evidence that there is far more than negligence on the part of the jail personnel: there is active collusion. The Central Jail operation, in which the 6,000 inmates were physically searched, resulted in the recovery of an astounding amount of contraband. This included, among other items, anti-jamming devices, 102 mobile phones, 449 televisions, 163 LCDs, 45 knives, and Rs3.5m in cash — possibly for bribing prison personnel. There were also 10 additional kitchens on the premises, aside from the official ones, catering to a 'special class' of prisoners from where, disturbingly enough, 150 gas cylinders were seized.

A state that cannot effectively restrain its most dangerous outlaws behind bars is a state woefully unprepared for a battle against terrorism, or to discharge its duty to protect law-abiding citizens. It has long been known that some inmates, especially those affiliated with terrorist organisations or those in the top echelons of political parties' militant wings, continue their criminal activities from behind prison walls by giving directions to accomplices outside. Witnesses have been murdered before they could give evidence against these individuals in court and police personnel considered responsible for their

incarceration targeted in reprisal killings. The bomb attack in June 2013 on the convoy of Justice Maqbool Baqar that killed nine and left the judge injured was also planned from inside Central Jail. The installation of jammers at the prison was supposed to have severed the communication links between criminals and the outside world that have had such deadly consequences. However, Monday's raid proves that technology to properly secure lockups can easily be circumvented by that most lethal weapon of all — a corrupt prison police.

A thorough investigation into the goings-on at Central Jail is called for. No one, regardless of rank, who is guilty of pandering to inmates' illegal demands should be spared. Particular attention should be paid to the handling of undertrials whose judicial proceedings are held in court rather than at the judicial complex inside the prison: negligent/collusive police guards make it easy for contraband such as mobiles and drugs to be slipped to them on the court premises by accomplices. Elsewhere in the country as well, provincial authorities should conduct a similar exercise at correctional facilities within their respective jurisdictions to gauge whether security measures there are up to scratch. Without condoning dishonesty among the ranks of law enforcement, it is also high time that authorities revisited the promotion and salary structure of prison police.

Nepra amendments

A FEW more details of the amendments being planned around the power sector regulator ought to be cause for grave concern, if only the opposition parties could be counted on to play their role in the affair. According to a report in this newspaper, the government is seeking additional powers to be able to attach any number of 'surcharges' to power bills. According to the official reason, the powers are wanted to help pay for a list of costs that are anticipated in the future. The anticipated costs read like a vague laundry list clearly designed to give the government broad powers to impose surcharges at any time for almost any purpose it deems fit. In fact, the details of the proposed amendments confirm one of the worst fears about the move: that it is an attempt to turn the bill collection machinery of the power sector into a surrogate revenue line. If passed, the proposed amendments will render Nepra's powers to set power prices almost completely redundant, giving the government extensive authority to collect all sorts of other fees and charges through power bills.

If ever there was a role for the political opposition, it is now. The proposed amendments will deal a devastating blow to the powers of the regulator, despite the government's claims that it is trying to strengthen the former through them. Of all the other aspects of

the Nepra Act that are being revised through these amendments, the power to affect pricing is the central one, and even though Nepra will retain its authority to set tariffs, the fact that the government will be empowered to add on other fees and charges on its own means that all manner of costs will now be passed through to end consumers, without any chance of a public hearing. Many opposition lawmakers had raised strident objections when administrative control of the main regulators was transferred to their respective line ministries, but they appear to be acquiescent now that the real gambit has materialised. There are conflicting reports about whether or not the proposed amendments have been passed by the Council of Common Interests, but at some point they will have to be tabled in parliament. And if we do not hear spirited opposition in that crucial forum, it will be clear evidence that the opposition has caved in and cut some kind of a back-room deal with the government.

Celebrations that kill

A YOUNG life brutally extinguished in Karachi. A picture of a teenager lying in a hospital bed in Peshawar. There have been many more such images and reports. The guns have been blazing again in the wake of Pakistan's victory in the Champions Trophy, but many of the bullets have been shorn of celebratory status. Some of them, in fact, have proved to be lethal, transforming joy into sorrow. Meanwhile, the number of people injured in the celebratory fire runs into the hundreds. While this manner of jubilation must surely be considered odd in any civilised nation, what is more puzzling — and disheartening — in our case is the way in which the political elite not only tolerates such dangerous expressions of joy but is often willing to participate in the exercise. Further, it seems that our law enforcers, instead of cracking down on revellers with guns, prefer to stay at a safe distance from them. There may be the odd arrest or two at the insistence of the opposition and media, as in the case of a PPP politician in the latest instance. But then, everyone is aware that such action is taken usually to placate those sections of the public that are seen as 'overreacting' to the perilous fallout of celebratory firing.

This country is no stranger to stern administrators fond of firing policemen on the spot. Quite often, the law enforcers are threatened with dismissal for being unable to curb a certain practice. So why don't the same administrators use their authority to set policemen on the trail of all those who love to indulge in senseless shooting sprees? Indeed, the purge must begin with the gun-toting, firing goons who accompany all kinds of leaders, big or small, and who must celebrate all victories in this appalling manner. Unless the authorities show that they are serious about curbing the practice, celebratory firing will continue to take many lives that need not have been cut short.

Role of agencies

IT is egregious, possibly illegal and must stop.

The JIT process has underscored an unsavoury aspect of the Pakistani state: intelligence agencies seemingly running amok and answerable to no one but themselves or their political bosses.

The allegations that have been trotted out before the Supreme Court are riveting.

Civilian intelligence-gathering networks deployed against the JIT; military intelligence-gathering networks deployed against the civilian leadership; and a vast dossier compiled on the media, witnesses before the JIT and sundry citizens.

And yet, perhaps few of the allegations are surprising. In an era in which Pakistan's state and society face unprecedented threats from militancy, terrorism and extremism, the civil and military sides of the state have been unable to shed old habits.

The people need and deserve a state and intelligence apparatus that is focused on fighting internal and external threats to peace and stability, and not a system that is far too distracted fighting old, bitter political battles.

While the Supreme Court has rightly chastised the Intelligence Bureau for its unwelcome, arguably intimidatory surveillance of the JIT, the role of the military intelligence agencies has escaped meaningful censure so far.

That is unfortunate because, for decades, the intrusive, unchecked, unmonitored actions of intelligence agencies on both sides of the civil-military divide have done much to destabilise the political landscape — an undermining of the democratic order that the Supreme Court and parliament have a chance to help correct.

The almost unbroken history of intelligence agencies promoting the interests of an institution or a government as opposed to that of the state is a fundamental reason why Pakistan is still transitioning to a genuine democracy and why political governments are so often engulfed by crisis.

From Mehrangate to the JIT, the military-led intelligence agencies have engaged in conduct that has ranged from the questionable to the downright anti-democratic.

Meanwhile, the IB has remained the prime minister's political dirty tricks machine, including against politicians themselves.

Former prime minister Shaukat Aziz was notorious for spying on political foes and allies alike via the IB, a practice other prime ministers have readily followed.

Change is possible, but it will require great will.

Oversight of intelligence agencies would receive a boost if the nomination of intelligence chiefs is approved by parliament and if intelligence chiefs are required to regularly brief parliamentary committees.

A new set of laws that specify the responsibilities of individual intelligence agencies and limits their responsibilities could help curb excesses.

And when violations are identified, the courts should have the power to hand down meaningful punishments.

The intelligence agencies perform important work and are vital to protecting the country against internal and external threats.

If they are streamlined, reorganised and put under a new oversight regime, they should be better placed to execute their responsibilities.

Surely, that is a goal no intelligence agency will argue against.

Stock market alarm

IF one has money invested in the stock market, and wishes to know why the latter is falling so rapidly at a time when everyone said it would be rising, there would be no way of finding out. The news is full of quotes from brokers that the situation has arisen because the prime minister has been summoned by the JIT; others say it is because of the Trump administration possibly taking a harder line towards Pakistan, and yet others attribute it to whatever news is in the headlines. But beyond what these brokers tell us, there is no source of reliable information to allow one to build an accurate picture of where all the selling pressure is coming from. The stock exchange management maintains a website with some data, usually just about the trades conducted on that day, with volumes, opening and closing values and some rank-and-file information on listed companies. But when a broker says that there is selling pressure because mutual funds are pulling out, for example, there is no way of verifying this claim. In fact, the paucity of information that retail investors have on market drivers means they essentially operate blind.

Markets can rise and fall due to very complex factors, but it would be naïve to believe that large market players have grown jittery about the prime minister's prospects since the JIT hearings began, or that recent news items about the future of Pakistan's relations with the US have triggered enough concern to impact market decisions. Basic

common sense tells us that the market was oversold in the run-up to its inclusion in the MSCI index, and when the much-hyped inflows from foreign institutional investors did not arrive in the quantities anticipated, there was a stampede for the exit. History tells us that the big fish are the first out the door in such situations. And experience tells us that once a downswing of this sort kicks in, it acquires a momentum of its own. Far more than any political strategic uncertainty, it appears the market is in the grip of some such panic. The best antidote to quell such episodes is the release of sound information that can be used to build a true picture of where the buying and selling is coming from. The PSX management should consider revamping its website, and releasing relevant information to stop the panic.

Courtroom violence

THE ugly courtroom scenes in Lahore on Tuesday have been quickly linked to the increasingly violent ways of sections of the lawyers' community. A legal team from lawyer Asma Jahangir's office, together with its client, was physically assaulted and bombarded with invectives as it tried to exercise a basic right: the team sought to establish that its client had been aggrieved, and petitioned the court for redress. It was a habeas corpus case, and the use of physical violence and coarse language, according to reports, was linked to the alleged involvement of a lawyer — even though the petition did not mention his name. Without getting into the details of the case, the spectacle may well be taken as a kind of 'admission' by the attackers. After all, would lawyers with a powerful argument to support their own claims feel the need to physically go after those on the other side?

However incredulous it may sound to some, a day later, one version doing the rounds explained that it was actually an individual — long discarded by the bar and not linked to the case at all — who had masterminded the episode to settle an old score. If this is true, it merits an investigation of its own. Whatever the case, there is much recent evidence of an increasing tendency among lawyers to take the law into their own hands. There have been instances where it has appeared practically impossible to hold any kind of probe into criminal cases in which lawyers themselves have been implicated. The bar has repeatedly been asked to do something about it but there has been little by way of reform. According to one bleak reading of the situation, it is no more possible for legal circles to even discuss ways and means to fight the growing urge of lawyers to resort to physical violence, let alone devise a strategy for achieving that goal. It cannot get any worse. The bar must come up with an effective remedy soon.

Iranian drone incident

WHAT was the drone doing inside Pakistani airspace? The confirmation by the Foreign Office on Wednesday that the Pakistan Air Force had shot down an Iranian drone over Panjgur, Balochistan and the silence thus far by Iranian officials suggest that the drone did not accidentally slip into Pakistani airspace. The location also hints at increased Iranian surveillance of a region in which CPEC projects are in full swing. The latest incident along an already tense Pak-Iran border ought to serve as a warning to both states: address through dialogue the apprehensions of the other or risk an unnecessary and undesirable escalation in tensions that neither country can afford at this juncture.

From a Pakistani perspective, suspicions of Iranian motives are not unreasonable. Iran has positioned Chabahar as a rival to Gwadar, and India has hyped the seaport as the answer to landlocked Afghanistan's search for a reliable, uninterrupted trade route. With India's hostility to CPEC well known, and Iran perhaps worried about a greater Chinese presence in Balochistan, it is possible that Iran and India are working together along the Pak-Iran border to spy on Pak-China activities in the region. Yet, Pakistan has consistently maintained that it seeks stable ties with Iran, so it should be possible for the latter to raise diplomatically with Pakistan whatever concerns it has. If the concerns are reasonable, a framework can surely be prepared to address present-day and future bilateral complaints. From an Iranian perspective, the act of its drone being shot down by Pakistan could be seen through the prism of the current turmoil in the Middle East. Hawkish elements in Iran may interpret the shooting down as a signal from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia that Pakistan is taking steps to, at the very least, distance itself from Iran or perhaps even engage in low-level conflict with it.

While that characterisation would be wrong — Pakistan has made clear that it does not intend to be drawn into a conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran — it does underline the risks of a tense Pak-Iran border in the absence of a robust bilateral dialogue. Before this drone incident, there were already increased terrorism- and crime-related concerns on both sides of the border. Instead of adding to bilateral problems, the Iranian and Pakistani leaderships should remember that the two countries have had stable ties for much of their history. That history of stability and warmth was made possible by putting bilateral friendship at the heart of the relationship and not allowing third-party interference. The border region between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan must be carefully managed given competing regional and global interests. But the Iran-Pakistan relationship must not be reduced to simply a zone of anxiety and concern that has to be constantly managed. Dialogue is the only sensible way forward.

Beyond cricket

A POSITIVE statement was needed at the state level following the friendly interaction between Pakistani and Indian cricketers during the recent Champions Trophy tournament. Pakistan's high commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, has attempted to provide Pakistan-India proceedings with such a stimulus. In a media interview, the envoy called for the play to go on irrespective of the stalemate over many bilateral issues. His views echo the sane voices that must continue to remind the two neighbours that it would be a mistake to close all doors that can show a path to peace. There are obviously many hurdles to overcome — although many of these exist only in the minds of those who want to see the two countries held hostage to a bitter past. The cricketers — tough and uncompromising during the game, but humane and appreciative of each other off the field — have demonstrated that it is not impossible to keep trying for the sake of coexistence and in the true spirit of the age we live in. The sheer control that these men had over their actions in the tensest of moments on the field fully qualified them to set an example for the leadership of the two countries they represent. Their positive attitude and interaction brought out the remarkable ability of the game to cast aside the long history of rivalry between Pakistan and India. It brought out the power of people belonging to different countries to move together and without resorting to foul play.

No doubt the challenges are many, and the Pakistani envoy pointed to some of these in his interview. He was very candid when it came to conveying Pakistan's genuine concerns about India-held Kashmir, though his take on New Delhi's conditions for an earnest resumption of dialogue was subtle. At the same time, he said his government was ready to participate in a bilateral search for solutions to all outstanding issues. Of course, there will also be certain Pakistani stipulations for engagement with India. Still, when he talked about the painfully slow pace at which Pakistan and India have moved towards an understanding, the high commissioner was conveying the frustrations of peaceniks on both sides of the border and of the people at large who want to see a South Asia prosperous and free from hostility. Surely both countries should move towards peace at the speed of a limited-overs match from here onwards.

Violence against journalists

IN a society where a culture of violence and machismo seems to have become entrenched, journalists — whose job it is to report on events and developments both positive and otherwise — can often find themselves in a difficult situation. This was again illustrated by a couple of incidents that transpired earlier this week. At the University of Agriculture Faisalabad, the institution's security personnel rained blows and kicks on journalists belonging to Samaa TV who had arrived to cover a student-related incident. The media persons had earlier been refused entry into the premises but were filming the university from outside, as was their right, when the guards attacked them. Journalists from other TV channels who reached the scene in support of their colleagues were meted out the same treatment. Then in Islamabad, media persons filming what appeared to be electricity theft by a madressah, were set upon by the seminary students who beat them and pelted them with stones.

Both incidents reinforce the dangers that journalists in Pakistan have to contend with on a daily basis, even when they are not engaged in tasks that may be hazardous. However, despite the injuries sustained, it is fortunate that no one lost their life on this occasion. Far too many times, journalists in this country have paid the ultimate price for attempting to fulfil their duty to keep their audience abreast of up-to-date, accurate information because very often that information is deleterious to the interests of one party or the other. Earlier this month, Bakhshish Elahi, senior journalist and bureau chief of a local newspaper, was shot dead; his colleagues are convinced that his reporting was the motive. Admittedly, our rambunctious electronic media has not always conducted itself according to journalistic ethics. There have been many instances when it has been intrusive, voyeuristic and sensationalist. That said, there is no excuse for violence, and the government should ensure that the culprits are brought to book. Shooting the messenger should not be an option.

Tragedy strikes again

DESPICABLE attacks in Quetta and Parachinar yesterday — one of the most sacred days of Ramazan — have caused a terrible loss of life and injury.

The immediate emphasis must necessarily be on providing the best possible care to the wounded and the families of those who died in the cowardly attacks in two very different regions of the country.

What the attacks suggest is that the approaching Eid holidays across the country are very much a moment of elevated threat.

Whether it is the rising threat of the militant Islamic State group or the old danger posed by the Pakistani Taliban, the militants, together or separately, have demonstrated that they have the ability to strike inside Pakistan.

It is obvious that complacency will not keep the country safe over the upcoming holidays and that safety will only be incrementally re-established if security standards are urgently tightened.

The country has not suffered a major attack over the Eid holidays in several years — a record for which the security forces deserve credit — but past successes should not obscure the continuing threat.

Beyond Eid, however, there remain fundamental questions that have yet to be answered.

Why, for example, has Quetta, a provincial capital that ought to be the most secure of all regional cities, continued to suffer militant attacks?

Many a time, the attacks are on the outskirts of the city — a zone in which it is difficult to provide security — but far too often the attacks occur in neighbourhoods of the provincial capital where tightened security ought to prevent militant infiltration.

The problem appears to be that any particular attack is not regarded as a failure of defensive networks and that none has led to meaningful accountability or change in standard operating procedure.

Quetta is a city that faces myriad threats, but it is also a city that has manifold security resources that ought to prevent significant militant attacks.

Parachinar, of course, remains a region that years — perhaps more than a decade — of counter-insurgency operations has not been able to return to normality.

Why? Some explanations focus on the terrain, a region in which it is possible for militants to escape to multiple surrounding areas, while others focus on the chronically inadequate resources committed by the state of Pakistan to fight the sophisticated militant threat in the area.

More than a decade on since the first counter-insurgency operation in Fata, all explanations are akin to excuses; there is no strategic, tactical or operational reason why Parachinar continues to suffer such regular violence.

The difference is perhaps this: an attack in Lahore, Karachi or Islamabad would attract such widespread anxiety that the state apparatus would necessarily have to take actions to try and prevent further incidents.

Parachinar and Quetta deserve to be treated in the same way.

An attack anywhere in Pakistan is an attack against the entire country.

Another confession

A SECOND confession, and yet more revelations.

The ISPR on Thursday released another video recording of convicted Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav in which he gave further information about his subversive activities in Pakistan.

They include details about the specific areas he was targeting, his modus operandi for facilitating the infiltration of RAW agents into the country from the Makran coast, the illegal transactions undertaken to finance the operations, etc.

The ISPR's stated objective of placing the confession in the public domain is "that the world should know what India has done and continues to do against Pakistan".

It is a welcome opportunity for an establishment that has long bristled at the world's dismissive attitude towards its regional concerns.

For Jadhav, making a clean breast of what he has been orchestrating in this country has no obvious downside: he has already been found guilty on all counts and sentenced to death by a Field General Court Martial.

His fulsome account and expression of contrition may even help him in his appeal for clemency to the army chief.

Jadhav's culpability aside, it is in Pakistan's interest that the authorities proceed in a procedurally fair and transparent manner.

This would to some extent help reverse some of the world's negative perceptions about this country.

Any other course will work in India's favour by enabling it to divert international attention from the actual, substantive issue, that is, its meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs.

Our neighbour has already proven itself adept at such a smoke-and-mirror strategy.

Moreover, if this is an open-and-shut case, as it so appears, Pakistan should share the details of the proceedings in the special military tribunal with the International Court of Justice which is hearing India's petition alleging lack of consular access to its citizen during his detention and trial.

Such a measure would counter the country's claims that it had sought recourse to the ICJ because Jadhav was convicted in a sham trial and that his life was in danger.

It would also negate India's criticism following the latest development that the video confession is a selectively culled, manufactured statement, and an attempt to influence ICJ proceedings.

That said, given that this case involves a foreign national, that too of a country with which Pakistan has a long and bitter history, it would be prudent to let the final decision lie with the president.

Growing deficit

DURING the announcement of the economic survey this year, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar had issued a somewhat sombre assessment of the current account deficit, while talking of the overall growth numbers that the economy has registered. This deficit, he said at the time, could grow to \$8.3bn before the year ended — more than triple the figure it was last year. The announcement did not escape notice amidst all the good news that was being touted by the minister, when he spoke at length about the rebound in the growth rate of the economy, expected to reach 6pc by the end of next year. Throughout the year, he had dodged the growing alarms around the current account deficit, the very same indicator which eventually buried the short-lived growth boom of the Musharraf years. By May it appeared that the finance minister could no longer ignore the yawning deficit, and grudgingly acknowledged that there could be a problem here.

But even so, the current account deficit had already touched \$9bn. The data for the period from July to May has only just been released by the State Bank, and it shows that the current account deficit stood at \$8.9bn at the end of May — which was when Mr Dar gave his news conference on the economic survey. Considering that the deficit has been more than a billion dollars each for the months of April and May, the possibility that it could, in fact, cross the \$10bn mark by the end of June cannot be ruled out. In less than one month, the finance minister's reluctant acknowledgement of this growing gap has been overtaken by some hard facts. Realistically speaking, there is very little that one should expect this government to do to bring this situation under control. The economy will now be on autopilot as it flies into the strong headwinds of politics. We can only hope that it does not run out of fuel through it all.

Islamic alliance controversy

THE message may be muddled, but the consequences could be serious. Earlier in the week, foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz appeared to have told a parliamentary committee that former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif could not be recalled from Saudi Arabia, where the general is now based as head of the Islamic Military Alliance. The Foreign Office soon rejected media reports of Mr Aziz's remarks to the Senate foreign affairs committee, claiming that the adviser had been misquoted in the in-camera briefing. The Foreign Office claimed that the Saudi-led alliance's terms of reference had yet to be finalised, and that once Pakistan received them, the government would in consultation with parliament decide which aspects of the alliance to participate in. Tellingly, the Foreign Office clarification did not address whether Gen Sharif is in Saudi Arabia in his personal capacity or whether the government has the right to withdraw the retired army chief from IMA command.

Perhaps the government is unable to truthfully or accurately inform parliament about Gen Sharif's post-retirement agenda because it has not been involved in the discussions that led to his accepting the position of military commander of the IMA. But that hardly absolves it of responsibility for the bizarre and damaging episode that Gen Sharif's stint in Saudi Arabia has already become. Whatever the law and whatever the Foreign Office claims about his command of the IMA, there is an undeniable public perception that the ex-army chief's position is seen internationally as Pakistan's commitment to the alliance. More worryingly, Saudi Arabia itself appears to believe that his command is a sign of Pakistan's support for the Saudi-led IMA, regardless of whether the state here publicly insists that it is committed to neutrality. The recent spike in tensions with Iran and the denial by the Saudi ambassador to Pakistan that the latter

is acting as a mediator in the Qatar stand-off underline the complexity of the foreign policy crisis the government may soon be confronted with.

It is obvious that Pakistan has no easy options. Yet, the official government stance that no decision will be taken without consulting parliament is the correct one. Pakistan, it appears, has little leverage and not enough influence to act as mediator in the GCC crisis. Saudi Arabia is a country that Pakistan has a strategic and long-term relationship with. Disagreements or differences in the short term ought not to obscure the foundational reasons for a close Pak-Saudi relationship. At the same time, Pakistan cannot afford to follow an ally — no matter how close to Pakistan — blindly. It is not clear why Gen Sharif himself believes his continued command of the IMA can help Pakistan. The general ought to surrender his command and allow Pakistan to follow its true national interest.

Online terror threat

PAKISTAN'S track record of internet governance this year has been a combination of bad decisions and questionable motives thus far. We have seen bloggers go missing, with no answers as to who abducted them and why. Online activists have been detained for allegedly criticising the security establishment on social media. The interior minister has expressed his hope to end online privacy, saying that proposals have been submitted to have each person's social media accounts connected to their mobile phone numbers by law. And once more, voices have been raised for the banning of Facebook.

In this mess, the very real issue of the spread of terrorism online has been largely ignored. It is then somewhat encouraging to learn that last week the Counter-Terrorism Department, Sindh, provided the PTA, FIA and other authorities a list of websites and social media accounts linked to the spread of extremism and terrorism. The CTD wants these websites closed or banned as they have been used to glorify outfits such as Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, or provide updates of activities carried out by the likes of the banned TTP. Data analysis identified the potential emergence of new sectarian militant groups and separatist movements. It was also shared that "Pakhtun ethnic extremism" was active on social media, though this was not probed further. The CTD's effort is a small step in the right direction, indicating that at least one agency is prioritising what was termed a vital component of NAP against terror. However, this has been a provincial effort to win a fight in a space that has no physical boundaries. Without similar coordinated efforts by multiple law-enforcement agencies in all provinces and at the federal level, the growing menace of militancy and extremism online cannot be tackled

in a meaningful manner. A recent investigation by Dawn uncovered the presence of over 700 Facebook pages and groups operating publicly using the names of 41 banned outfits, indicating that the problem is widespread and ever growing. Beyond the sharing of intelligence, the state apparatus needs to be on one page when it comes to technology, human resources, workflows and best practices in global counterterrorism. Most importantly, there must be political will on the part of all stakeholders to prioritise the issue and pursue it relentlessly. Far more needs to be done, even if this means putting the detainment of online activists and banning of social media on the back-burner.

Disease of the bones

GIVEN its demographics, healthcare in the country is skewed towards what afflicts the younger generation — eg maternal and child health, and polio. What the authorities should be giving equal attention to is another brewing crisis: osteoporosis and its associated infirmity that is having a debilitating effect on another fast-growing segment of the population — the elderly. Currently, the number of aged people in proportion to the entire population is believed to be about 6pc. But life expectancy has gradually increased from 61 years in 1990 to 67 years in 2011; it is expected to be 70 years in 2025 and 77 years by 2050. The International Osteoporosis Foundation, in its Asia-Pacific Audit that became available recently, now warns that by 2050, some 30pc of the country's population — or 87.2m people — will be over 50 years of age, and vulnerable to osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis is a condition where the density and quality of bone are reduced, significantly increasing the risk of fractures and a difficult recovery. The IOF audit finds that Asian populations in general stay well below the WHO-recommended levels of calcium intake, with most countries in the region having seen a two- to three-times increase in the incidence of hip fracture over the past three decades. However, in Pakistan matters are compounded by a lack of awareness, the fact that no fracture registry has been established to consolidate figures related to high-risk patients, and societal factors such as poor nutrition, and low vitamin D and exercise levels. Such is the case even though several studies have found that the prevalence of osteoporosis in Pakistan is high. We stand on the brink: interventions set in place now could prevent the crisis from coming to a head in the years ahead and even more burden being placed on health infrastructure that is already run ragged. Healthcare policies must cater to the young and old alike.

Riyadh's policies

WHILE it is critical how Mohammed bin Salman — the new Saudi crown prince and de facto ruler as his father Salman has been slowed by age and reported illness — will handle the desert kingdom's internal issues, the international community will be keeping a keen eye on how he handles Riyadh's external relations. Saudi Arabia sits in a region beset by crises and violence, as several wars rage on or near its borders. Across the north-eastern frontier, Iraqi forces are fighting to dislodge the militant Islamic State group from Mosul. To the north, Syria has been devastated by a savage civil war. On its eastern flank, the kingdom has led a relentless campaign — together with the UAE — to isolate Qatar. And directly on the kingdom's southern border, Yemen is in flames, partly due to the Saudi-led campaign started in 2015 to neutralise the Houthi militia and supporters of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Relations with Iran are also at a low ebb, as the crown prince has threatened to take 'the battle' inside the Islamic republic. Arguably, in his role as defence minister and as the power behind the throne, Mohammed bin Salman has been the architect of many of these confrontations, specifically the Yemen war. Now, as he has been elevated to the second highest slot in the Saudi hierarchy, it remains to be seen which direction he steers his country in.

For decades, Saudi Arabia has backed conservative political regimes in the region and closed ranks with other autocratic states. However, the elders of the House of Saud played their cards carefully, using their influence as 'custodians of the two holy mosques' and petrodollars to shape events in the Muslim and Arab worlds. Today, the Saudi leadership has eschewed this approach in favour of sheer hard power. Regrettably, there is little evidence the changed approach will bring the kingdom greater security or stability. Backing rebels in Syria — moderate or otherwise — has added to the chaos in the region, while Yemen today is a human catastrophe. Moreover, ratcheting up tensions with Iran will only engender a matching response from the hard-liners in Tehran. The new Saudi crown prince stands at a crossroads: he can choose to engage neighbours and geopolitical rivals at the negotiating table and arrive at a modus vivendi. Or he can continue to pursue a confrontational foreign policy and prepare for the many unknowns such a course will bring.

Plastic pollution

FEW issues facing the globe are of such urgency as tackling environmental pollution. From climate to the food we eat, our very existence is impacted by it. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan, the unabated dumping of plastic products in the waters off the coast has become a serious threat to marine animals and to plants that are native to offshore waters. To illustrate the spread of pollutants, the organisation reported that a needlefish caught a couple of days ago 270km south of Karachi was stuck in the handle of a plastic cup. Studies carried out by the WWF-P show that on beaches such as Clifton, plastic contributes up to 50pc of beached garbage. However, it seems only the KP government assigns environmental pollution the importance that it deserves, and is taking measures to address it. The provincial environmental protection agency on Tuesday issued a notification banning the manufacture of non-biodegradable products across KP.

The world is reaching a critical stage where environmental pollution is concerned — some would even argue we have crossed the tipping point. While Pakistan, in global terms, figures far down on the list of contributors to greenhouse gas emissions and solid waste, our disposal mechanisms of the solid waste that we produce and how we dispose of it has dire, ongoing implications for our quality of life. Non-biodegradable plastics leach harmful carcinogens, among other lethal substances into the soil, polluting our sub-soil water and increasing the health burden on the country's already overburdened health sector. When plastics are ingested by marine life, including by plankton — the lowest rung on the food chain — many of the toxins ultimately end up inside humans. According to a reputable organisation working on global environmental issues, there are over five trillion plastic pieces afloat at sea. Forward-thinking, civilised societies dispose of their waste responsibly and are increasingly switching to the use of biodegradable products. Other provinces should take a leaf out of KP's book.

Bahawalpur inferno

AN unspeakable tragedy in Bahawalpur district in the wake of devastating terrorist strikes in Parachinar and Quetta has cast a further pall over the Eid break. At a time of religious commemoration and cultural celebration, far too many families will be mourning their dead or praying for the injured.

The country joins them in their grief.

The Bahawalpur tragedy is numbing not only because of the vast number of dead and injured, but also because it was totally avoidable. It remains to be determined if the inferno was accidentally started or the work of an arsonist, but a catalogue of errors is already apparent. Whatever the origins of the accident, the poor preparedness of local emergency services has been thoroughly exposed.

An oil spill on a busy highway ought to have immediately triggered a response by the local authorities. The area should have been cordoned off and the threat of exposed petroleum contained.

Then, in the panic and desperation that followed the blaze, the emergency services were further exposed. Bahawalpur, it has become painfully obvious, has nowhere near the kind of emergency and medical facilities that nine years of PML-N rule should boast and that billions of rupees said to have been pumped into south Punjab ought to have created.

How many of the injured could have been saved had better emergency services been available at the site of the incident and in nearby hospitals will perhaps never be known. The chain of flaws —from highways with inadequate safety resources to medical services that were quickly overwhelmed — is a failure of government.

South Punjab has historically been underserved by all governments at the centre and in Punjab; there can be no quick fixes. But nine consecutive years of PML-N rule in the province do not appear to have set the region on the right trajectory.

Perhaps the most churlish response has been the insinuation in some quarters that the people trapped in the blaze have only themselves to blame. It was not poverty or desperation that caused people to race towards the spilled petroleum; it was a lack of safety awareness — again the state's failure.

The victims had been unable to recognise the risk that the exposed petroleum posed to their lives. A broken public school system and a state that does not invest in creating safety awareness on the roads and in homes has meant individuals cannot easily recognise the dangers they may be exposing themselves to.

There is the original failure, too: the road accident that caused the oil tanker to spill its deadly cargo. Was the driver speeding? Does the business that owns the truck give safety training to its drivers? Did Eid-related traffic or driver exhaustion play a role? The Punjab government invests in gimmicky schemes like automated traffic tickets; what it has not done is overhaul the driver training and licensing system.

Pakistan-US ties

THE devastating attacks in Parachinar and Quetta have bloodily underlined an inarguable reality: Pakistan needs the support of its allies and friends in the fight against militancy.

Unhappily, as the administration of US President Donald Trump debates its strategy in Afghanistan, there are signs that the US is preparing to revive its 'do more' mantra and willing to consider troubling actions against this country.

That would be a mistake. For more than a decade and a half, since the start of the US-led war in Afghanistan, the US has viewed relations with Pakistan through an Afghan prism.

Whether money has flowed to Pakistan or assistance has been sought of it, much of what the US has done has been linked to its quest to defeat the Afghan Taliban or degrade their strength.

To be sure, Pakistan's own policy choices and perception of its security interests have been flawed at times.

But Afghanistan has not been, is not and will not be unstable fundamentally because of Pakistani security policy choices. The Taliban are strong and Kabul weak for reasons that are mostly intrinsic to Afghanistan.

The foolhardiness of a get-tough approach towards Pakistan can be gauged by two questions: who is advocating it and what can it achieve?

Unsurprisingly, the most ardent advocates of this get-tough US approach are strategists and policymakers who are perennially hostile to Pakistan and advocate for India as a hegemonic power in the region.

But if the bilateral Pak-US relationship is used by the US to try and rebalance power in South Asia, it will surely only exacerbate Pakistan's security concerns and increase the risk of conflict in the region.

Moreover, it is not clear what such a policy can realistically achieve on Afghanistan. Across administrations, the US has articulated a similar desired outcome in Afghanistan: eroding the Taliban threat to the extent that Kabul can negotiate a political settlement favourable to the current dispensation.

But the US has also visibly struggled with the idea of a peace settlement with the Taliban.

So could getting tough on Pakistan just be a slippery slope towards trying to militarily defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, the real, unstated goal of the US?

Therein lies a further problem: suspicion of US motives by regional powers other than India and concern that the US is fundamentally on the wrong course in Afghanistan.

Complicated as the Pak-US relationship is, the US ought to recognise that Pakistan is locked in a long-term fight against militancy — a fight that aligns with US interests — and that Pakistan, a country of 200 million with a growing economy, is an important country to maintain relations with in its own right.

Reviving the ‘do more’ mantra runs the risk of Pakistani policymakers saying ‘no more’ in response — an outcome that can and should be avoided.

Power sector appraisal

THE annual report of the power sector regulator makes for grim reading. Despite the voluble and celebratory rhetoric we hear from the government about the benefits that are about to flow from all the new projects being implemented in the sector, the regulator is warning that whatever progress we see is accompanied by equally regressive steps. “Governance of public-sector entities is a major cause of concern”, the report says, pointing out that the absence of any substantial improvement could “defeat the overall objectives of the government to lower the costs of energy mix and to provide least expensive electricity to the common man”. This has been a common refrain of power sector experts for many years now. The problems that afflict the sector go beyond raw megawatts and are not going to be fixed by commissioning a few projects and adding more capacity to the system. A wider set of reforms is required, particularly in the area of pricing, but also to bring greater efficiency to the overall system. This can only be done by strengthening the regulator and reducing the role of government dictation in the functioning of the overall system.

Such progress requires well-thought-out reforms in the power sector. A step in that direction was taken during the second PML-N government in the late 1990s when Nepra was created and enabling legislation for privatisation was passed and the unbundling of Wapda began. But then, it all stopped, and the focus shifted largely to a projects-based approach. Today, plans are being considered to dismantle the regulator, and centralise further control in the hands of the government, where the failure to manage the country’s growing power requirements originated. “Any backtracking from the reform process would be disastrous” warns the report in its most strident sentence, pointing out that 75pc of the power sector is still controlled by the water and power

ministry, and further centralisation of powers within it would mean “reinforcing the failure”. The authors of the report are correct to point out that the steps being contemplated are “disastrous” and that they take the entire enterprise in the wrong direction. The power sector needs a strong regulator to safeguard the public interest against the rent-seeking private interests that are circling it, as well as a revenue-thirsty government. Around the world such reforms have succeeded in bringing down the price of electricity. Pakistan cannot be an exception.

Glacial lake outbursts

THERE are increasing reports of glacial lakes bursting in the mountainous regions of the north, causing widespread damage to people and property in the path of the devastating release of waters that follows such events. Recently, reports came from Haramosh, a village in the Hunza valley, that a glacial lake on the Rakaposhi mountain had burst and destroyed homes and cattle in some pastures located below. It was sheer luck that the scale of the devastation was not larger. Reports of such events are coming in with growing regularity every summer. The increasing number of glacial lakes owes significantly to climate change: rising temperatures cause glaciers to melt, creating lakes at high altitudes that are held in by thin walls of ice or dirt. These can burst at any moment.

Unfortunately, little can be done to stop the process of glacial lake formation. But there is plenty of room in which to fashion a response, beginning with the mapping of all areas vulnerable to possible glacial lake outburst floods (also known as Glofs), and running long-term programmes to slowly drain a lake, while shoring up the walls that hold its water in. The process requires the application of specialised knowledge that can be accessed through international agencies with experience in managing glacial lakes in many parts of the world. It is important for the government, in conjunction with the Gilgit-Baltistan administration, to make a vigorous effort to tap this knowledge and to start imparting the right training to people living in the mountainous north, so that local communities can take the lead in running Glof management programmes of their own. The dangers posed by glacial lakes are serious as the flash floods in Chitral in 2015 demonstrated. Multiple Glofs that year wiped out an entire district following a torrential downpour. Improved forecasting of extreme weather events and mitigating risk through on-ground programmes are vital to surviving the challenges of climate change. They should be taken more seriously.