

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of May 2017

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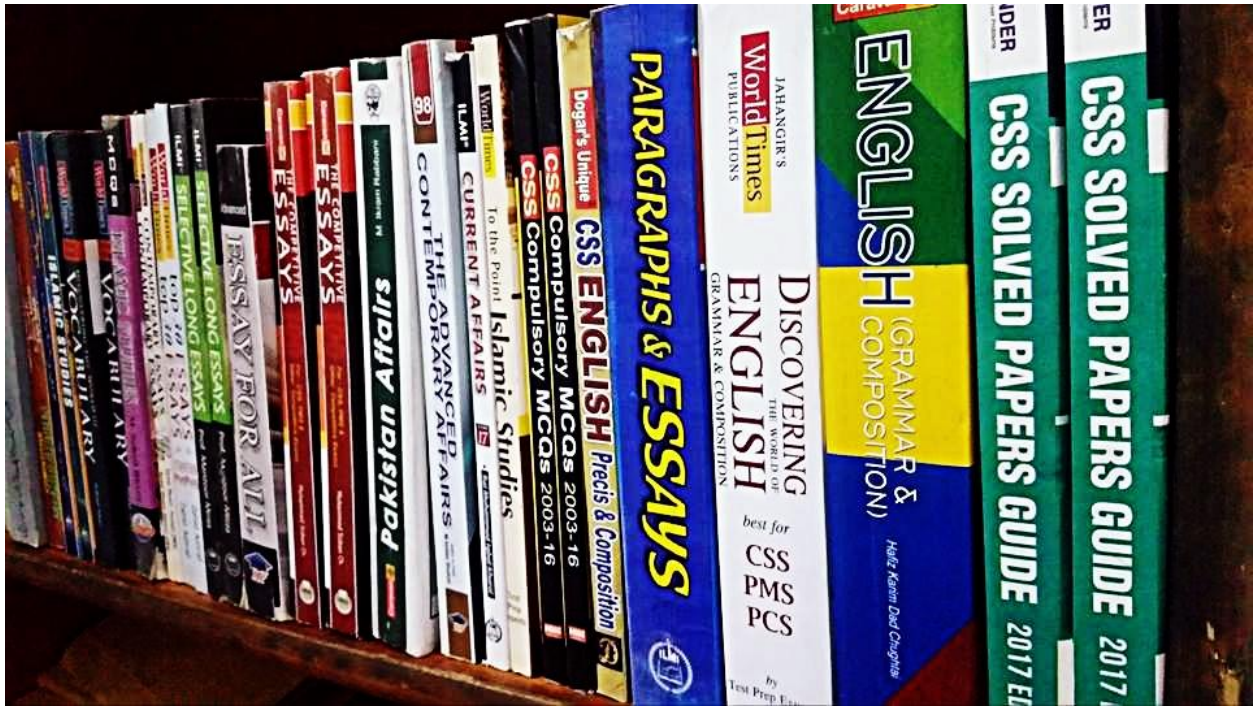
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Civil-military tensions

What ought to have been the end of a destabilising period in civil-military ties has instead erupted into a fresh, unnecessary and undesirable crisis.

In the murky world of politics, facts about inter-institutional relations are often hard to come by, but a path forward had seemingly been found.

Nearly eight months since the publication of a report in this newspaper, an inquiry committee consisting of representatives of both civilian and military institutions produced a consensus report and a set of recommendations that were presented to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The government had publicly pledged to accept and implement the inquiry committee's recommendations and it seemed the matter was about to come to a close. Perplexingly, the government appears to have mishandled the public announcement of the committee's recommendations. Even more astonishingly, the military issued a stunning and public rebuke to the government.

Five months to the day since a new army chief assumed command, Prime Minister Sharif and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa were at the centre of an instantaneous national storm.

Cooler heads must prevail from here, and for that both sides must acknowledge their mistakes and take steps to ensure they are not repeated.

For the government, making public the committee's report and recommendations may help dispel the clouds of suspicion and mistrust. Beyond that, the government must realise that too many centres and too many conflicting messages are a recipe for instability or worse.

Even after the crisis erupted, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's news conference only added to the confusion. Indeed, at some point it appeared as if the interior minister were suggesting his ministry is administratively superior to instructions from the Prime Minister's Office. Whatever the technicalities, the need at that moment was to bring clarity to the matter, not further obfuscation.

Surely, whatever the deficiencies in the government's handling of the inquiry committee's recommendations, the startling tweet by DG ISPR Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor was a line that should not have been crossed for the sake of the system. It is inconceivable that the army chief could not have urgently and privately reached out to the prime minister to have the military's reservations addressed quickly and publicly by the government.

It is also unlikely that the military leadership did not anticipate that the DG ISPR's tweet would be interpreted nationally and internationally as a shot across the bow of democracy.

Shamefully, the political opposition in the country has leapt into the fray in a way that has put it on the wrong side of the democratic project. Urgent introspection is necessary for all sides.

Women police

NO amount of 'gender sensitisation' of Pakistan's police force can make up for the abysmal numbers of women within its ranks. According to data compiled by the National Police Bureau, out of 391,364 police personnel across the country, only 5,731 are women — a ratio of less than 2pc. A region-wise breakdown puts Gilgit-Baltistan, where women make up 3.4pc of the police cadre, at the top of the table. Balochistan comes in last, after Islamabad, Punjab, Kashmir, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: out of a total of 32,850 personnel in the province, only 156 — in other words 0.48pc — are women. And in the latter instance, virtually all of them are serving at the lowest tier as constables. Officials from NPB cited cultural norms and institutional apathy towards female recruitment as contributing factors. Even though the overall ratio has gone up since last year when it was less than 1pc, women, according to them, should comprise at least 10pc of the police force.

Law enforcement has been the subject of much research worldwide, which has proved time and again that women officers bring distinct advantages to policing, including better communication and interpersonal skills that are vital in de-escalating fraught situations before they turn violent. However, in the culture of machismo that prevails in our part of the world, especially since terrorism became a major threat, policing is equated with brute force. It has become reactive rather than preventive. Muscular strength is seen as a prerequisite, whereas studies show that it is the quality of training — not to mention inherent traits such as integrity and sense of responsibility — that makes the difference between a good cop and a bad one. In a conservative society like ours, well-equipped women police stations are also a vital tool in fighting gender-based violence because victims are far more likely to report such crimes to female police personnel. Unfortunately, the general image of police culture as a male domain — boorish, crass and sexist — where females only play a peripheral role means that few women consider law enforcement as a viable career option. To overcome the appalling gender imbalance, there needs to be a well-thought-out strategy to recruit and retain women: it must offer them attractive benefits, skills enhancement training and paths to career

progression. Women entering the force also need role models — in other words, they need to see female personnel serving in senior positions. That would also do the policemen some good.

Chikungunya concerns

OVER the past few months, the mosquito-borne illness chikungunya has affected a large number of people in Karachi; while the ailment is rarely fatal, it has a debilitating effect on the human body, causing excruciating joint pain. The issue was raised by a lawmaker during Friday's Sindh Assembly session, to which the provincial health minister replied that since an outbreak in the metropolis was reported last year, the number of patients had crossed 75,000. Many of these patients hail from the city's low-income areas. As the World Health Organisation notes, "the proximity of mosquito-breeding sites to human habitation is a significant risk factor for chikungunya". Local medical experts have observed that chikungunya exacerbates poverty levels and brings about a reduction in the quality of life. Unfortunately, due to the large piles of filth and puddles of foul water that can be found in abundance in Karachi, mosquitoes are given ample breeding grounds, which leads to epidemics of chikungunya as well as more deadly mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria.

In the short term, local and provincial health authorities need to chalk out a strategy to eliminate the breeding grounds of the mosquitoes that cause chikungunya. The Sindh health minister has talked about an awareness campaign to warn people about how to protect themselves from mosquitoes. However, as WHO recommends, fumigation of breeding grounds is essential to contain the spread of the disease. In the long term, what Karachi — and indeed all other areas of Sindh — needs is an environment free of filth. Whether it is mosquito-borne ailments or other health hazards, piles of garbage and pools of sewage pose a threat to human health. Unfortunately, public health and sanitation have never been priorities for our rulers, especially now as provincial and municipal authorities in Sindh wrangle over waste management issues. As this tussle continues, the public suffers, which is why the earlier sanitation and waste management affairs are transferred to local bodies, the better.

High-level visits to Afghanistan

In the always difficult Pak-Afghan relationship, there are few certainties. However, this much is clear: when the two sides are not talking to each other, relations can only worsen.

Two high-profile Pakistani delegations to Afghanistan in the last week, therefore, have sent the right signal and, it is hoped, privately communicated a desire to urgently stabilise bilateral ties.

First, Chief of General Staff Gen Bilal Akbar led a military delegation to Kabul to condole the unprecedented loss of soldiers in the attack on a Mazar-i-Sharif army base. In addition to offering a symbolic gesture of medical treatment in Pakistan for the injured in the attack, talks were also held on border coordination measures between the two militaries — a key step in reducing bilateral tensions.

Then, a first by the Pakistani parliament as a delegation led by Speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq visited Afghanistan for a range of high-level political meetings. In one of the meetings with the Pakistani parliamentarians, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reiterated there was still space and time for regional peace, though he warned that time was running short.

The benefit of such delegations and meetings, even if they do not yield immediate benefits, are manifold. They open a door to dialogue and, at the very least, allow for a face-to-face discussion on issues.

Speaking through intermediaries and the media has the potential for further misunderstandings; what may be said in frankness and honesty may be interpreted by the other side as threatening. Moreover, after an unprecedented attack such as in Mazar-i-Sharif, a public and heartfelt gesture can help take the edge of some of the most strident criticism of the country.

The Afghan leadership should now announce reciprocal high-level visits. Since the Afghan government pulled out of the Saarc summit last November, there have been several further missed opportunities by the Afghan government. Not only has the senior leadership avoided meeting the Pakistanis, it has also appeared unnecessarily cool on efforts involving Pakistan to restart an intra-Afghan dialogue.

The recent revelations of the involvement of Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies with the banned TTP are particularly unfortunate and must be addressed by Afghanistan forthrightly. Kabul needs to publicly disavow any interference inside

Pakistan, and take clear, identifiable steps to reduce the space for the TTP and other anti-Pakistan elements to operate from Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the Afghans themselves must find a way to strike peace inside Afghanistan among the various actors in the country. Pakistan, as a neighbour with publicly acknowledged security interests in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, can play a vital role — but only through the Afghan government.

If the leadership of the Afghan state remains closed to dialogue, there is little Pakistan will be able to do.

Organ trade raid

IT could be described as a textbook case of organ trafficking. Transplant operations in a rented house, desperately poor 'donors', well-heeled kidney recipients, and, at the very top of the pyramid, avaricious doctors raking in millions by preying on the despair of the most deprived in society. On Saturday, the FIA carried out a raid on a villa in an upscale Lahore neighbourhood and busted an organ trafficking ring that they said had been operating since 2009. The law-enforcement team discovered two Omani nationals at the location: one of them had already undergone a kidney transplant a short while ago while the other was under the knife at the time. The individuals whose kidneys had been just removed for transplantation included a rickshaw driver and a 20-year-old woman, both of whom, according to the FIA, had sold their kidneys to pay off debts. The two doctors caught red-handed at the scene were arrested and cases registered against an absconding doctor and a couple of paramedics.

The raid, the first by the FIA since it was given the mandate to take action against the crime, can be a crucial step towards casting off Pakistan's shameful reputation as a market for vended organs. However, only a successful prosecution — which could lead to 10 years' imprisonment and loss of licence for the doctors — will serve as a deterrent. For this is an organised crime, involving powerful, well-connected individuals and vast networks — often transnational ones as in the present instance — that include 'agents' who trawl for 'donors', and police who take a cut for looking the other way. And it is deeply entrenched in this country, despite the fact that a law against organ trade has been on the statute books since 2007. But as we all know, having a law is one thing; implementing it quite another, especially in a country where the state does not expend itself to protect the poor. A number of investigations carried out by Dawn have exposed how institutional apathy and/or collusion have allowed lawbreaking doctors to mint fortunes through their illegal transplant enterprises, sometimes in full view of the

public. Aside from perpetuating social inequities, this has worked to undermine the campaign by advocacy groups to create a viable deceased organ donor programme in the country which is critical for expanding ethical transplantation practices. It is time that organ trade racketeers realised that it is no longer business as usual.

PM's anti-women words

It has been a few days since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made some snide remarks about the participation of women in a PTI rally.

The honourable prime minister, who represents 200m Pakistanis in the country — half of them women — was addressing a public meeting of his own near Okara. The meeting was to herald the wheat-harvesting season that, he and his associates should note, sees the participation of a significant number of women.

The mention of his associates is necessary since the remark about the PTI's women supporters in the capital points to a more widespread thinking. The 'objectionable' participation by the women in PTI activities, which the more forward-looking would see as a progressive aspect of Imran Khan's party, has routinely met with the crudest of PML-N reactions.

The PTI rallies have time and again been given a derogatory colour. All those ministers who were out to shame the opposition party for promoting the 'song and dance' culture would now consider themselves to have been vindicated by the all-clinching prime ministerial quip that many justifiably found so distasteful.

There is no need to go too deep into the factors that may have caused this outrage. The government is a bit uncertain these days and prone to taking awkward steps.

Not too long ago, a handful of young students were held in Lahore for chanting anti-government slogans and now we have the Okara incident. Who will it be after the youth and women? Again, we can leave aside this question to focus on the ignominious tradition of misogyny in Pakistani politics.

The prime minister's was a remark that could have been avoided but just as painful were the words spoken in objection by some opposition politicians. They sharply advised the Mr Sharif to mind 'his own' women but in doing so, the opposition politicians only underscored their own failings and the need for them to take joint lessons with the prime minister and his aides in how not to disrespect women.

The state's secrets

SIX years from the shocking episode, and in the midst of today's turmoil over national security, Minister of State for Information Marriyum Aurangzeb has bluntly rejected the possibility of making public the Abbottabad Commission report. Ms Aurangzeb did suggest that, at some indeterminate point in the future, a government may decide to release the commission report, but made it clear that the so-called sensitive nature of the report would have to be kept in mind before publication. The minister's remarks appear to be in line with official thinking on the matter and are highly regrettable. There were two questions at the heart of the Abbottabad episode. One, how was the world's most-wanted terrorist, leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, able to live undetected in Abbottabad for many years? Two, how was the US military able to insert troops deep inside Pakistan; conduct an operation on the ground in a major town far from an international border; and withdraw its troops several hours later without being detected or challenged by the Pakistani security forces at any stage, in any place, on ground or in the air? To those two fundamental questions, a third must be added: was anyone held responsible for the sanctuaries Bin Laden was able to find in Pakistan for many years and for the inability to detect or stop a major US incursion on Pakistani soil?

With the first two questions unanswered, or perhaps with the answers buried in the secret Abbottabad Commission report, the question of public accountability is impossible to answer. Therein lies the real threat to national security: how can Pakistan be made more secure and its people safer if the state is unwilling to acknowledge its failures, explain what went wrong, determine who was at fault, identify who is to be held responsible and clarify what steps have been taken to prevent a repetition of a convulsive episode? In the US, the events of Sept 11 led to a 9/11 commission report that exhaustively detailed both the attacks and the institutional failures that allowed the attacks to happen. As a result, wide-ranging intelligence and security changes were made in the US, including the creation of a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security. Fifteen and a half years later, there has not been another attack inside the US that has remotely approached the scale of the 9/11 destruction.

Can any reasonable citizen of Pakistan or observer of the state claim with any degree of confidence that the country has been secured from a repeat of an episode like May 2, 2011? The problem is really of institutional culture and a resistance to change and censure. From the Hamoodur Rehman commission to the inquiry into the Salala attacks, a culture of secrecy has dominated. If Pakistan is to have stronger institutions, transparency and accountability must be embraced. The state's secrets.

National Water Policy

QUITE possibly one of the most important agenda items on the last meeting of the Council of Common Interests, the National Water Policy was not taken up due to lack of time. The policy acknowledges for the first time that water is a finite resource and Pakistan has to learn to at least recover the costs of the irrigation system from water charges. Sadly, the fact that the meeting never came around to discussing it indicates the level of priority the government attaches to its own policy formulations. Achieving full financial self-sufficiency in water is going to be a challenging task in the best of times though, since the power of the vested interests that stands in the way is considerable. One recalls the fate of the telemetry system, installed around a decade ago, whose purpose was simply to measure the water flows in the system. It had to be dismantled within a short time due to pressure from a powerful feudal lobby which preferred to use its leverage to generate its own figures on how much water was flowing through which canal system at any given time.

The more interesting ingredient in the new policy is where it calls for trans-boundary cooperation in watershed management. The Indus Waters Treaty has performed admirably in channelling the water disputes between India and Pakistan, but its framework is now coming under growing pressure. One new area of concern that the treaty does not cover is the sharing and management of underground aquifers, as well as the sharing of real-time water-flow information, particularly in low-flood months. Large underground aquifers connect India and Pakistan, but there is no regime to regulate extraction on either side. This creates a built-in disincentive against developing such a regime by any one country since unregulated extraction by the other will give the latter an advantage. Both countries need to work together to better manage their common underground water resources. The same goes for stream-flow data, as well as the sharing of meteorological data that can better enable weather forecasts and help provide superior flood warning. Nature does not heed the boundaries that divide us. In order to meet the challenges posed by a changing hydrology, whether related to climate change, surface water flows, or underground aquifers, India and Pakistan have no option but to find a way to cooperate with one another.

Twitter temptations

IT would appear that there is a limit to the freedom even a 'member of the ruling family' can exercise while commenting on issues of public interest. Ms Maryam Nawaz has emerged as a star, one who cannot quite resist the temptation of indulging in power politics, and she is visibly fond of making social-media interventions. On Tuesday, it was conveyed to her in no uncertain manner that not everyone was ready to take her remarks lying down as some sort of a royal rebuke. At least not the journalists based outside Pakistan. Ms Nawaz began her Twitter onslaught with hard-hitting statements against the opponents of her father Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over the Panama allegations. That was usual and would have passed without much notice had she not got carried away and highlighted "the misery of journalists who broke the Panama story...." Journalists? That was asking for trouble, and she was provided a summary reconfirmation of just how potent some of the evidence thrown up by Panama can turn out to be.

The lecture in the potential value of Panama came from the Pulitzer-winning journalists who had revealed the scandal. In their response to Ms Nawaz's claim, the two journalists were quite categorical that the Panama Papers were about corruption. They seemed to be especially upset at Ms Nawaz's dubbing the papers as trash and reminded her that the very pile had led to investigations in so many places around the world. Needless to say, this exchange, where the two sides defended their respective legacies, led to a discussion that the PML-N and Mr Sharif could have done without — adding to the list of things that Ms Maryam Nawaz could have avoided. Given today's stresses and methods, the episode could also trigger calls for training in the use of Twitter and other social media tools, beginning with the rulers and influential individuals and those who are seen as being destined for big positions.

Pak-Iran diplomacy

A VIOLENT boundary incident with the potential to push already tense bilateral relations into further tumult, the fallout from the killing of Iranian border guards in an attack last week appears to have been handled diplomatically by both sides. In an unscheduled, day-long trip to Islamabad, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif met the top political and military leaders in the country on Wednesday. Following meetings with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, the Iranian foreign minister appears to have received a number of assurances from Pakistan that the state is both willing and able to address Iran's security concerns. To

be sure, the long, remote and sparsely populated border with Iran poses a number of problems for both sides. Over the years, both Pakistan and Iran have urged the other to do more to secure the frontier, curb smuggling and human trafficking, and crack down on dissidents operating on either side of the border. But the 11 deaths in an attack last week by Jaishul Adl, a Sunni militant group active in Sistan-Baluchistan, Iran, was both a particularly serious incident and took place at a time of heightened Pak-Iran tensions.

The decision by Pakistan to formally participate in the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance, allow former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif to lead the IMA and revisit allegations of Iranian interference in Balochistan following the conviction of Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav appears to have contributed to a fierce initial response by Iran after the Jaishul Adl attack. Diplomacy, however, appears to have prevailed and the credit must go to both sides. Unlike Afghanistan and India, Iran expressed its concerns through diplomatic channels and demonstrated it was willing to follow up with meaningful interactions. Where Afghanistan and India have acted petulantly and refused to talk to Pakistan, the Iranians quickly sent a high-level delegation led by its globally respected foreign minister. A full day of meetings yielded a clear set of understandings for both sides and cooperative solutions in the form of better border coordination and an increase in the strength of border forces by Pakistan. Moreover, the meetings were an opportunity for Pakistan to allay Iranian concerns about the IMA. Neither the border problems nor the overall strategic concerns will be solved overnight, but it is a welcome sign that Iran and Pakistan have turned to greater diplomatic engagement.

For Pakistan, two things will be of importance. First, when it comes to concerns about foreign interference in Balochistan, the Iranians have shown they are open to diplomatic engagement at the very highest level — Pakistan should do the same. Second, border management should be an ongoing undertaking by both sides and communication channels up and down the chain of command should be kept open. There is simply no alternative to dialogue and diplomacy.

KP's blue-sky thinking

WITH three different parties ruling the four provinces, one would have thought that the public would have benefited from a competition in good governance. Unfortunately, overall indicators remain poor and progress towards a healthy, educated society has been tardy. Just the fact that there are some 22 million out-of-school children in Pakistan and the country continues to be a reservoir for the crippling polio virus is indication enough of how little priority we attach to such issues. Still, it would not be fair

to overlook the positive points — few though they may be. For instance, the Sindh government that can be justifiably criticised for its abysmal neglect of civic issues has spearheaded some of the most forward-looking legislation in the country to strike at the foundations of regressive traditions such as underage marriage. In the same way, Punjab, though slower than Sindh to legislate on key human rights issues, has focused on alleviating transport problems for its people — even though the difference between the urban and rural parts of the province remains visible. For its part, the KP government, which is often accused of soft-peddling militancy in a province that is on the front lines of the battle against terrorism, has introduced a number of initiatives for improving people's lives.

KP's record is of interest here and perhaps much of the PTI government's blue-sky thinking can be attributed to its enthusiasm as a newcomer to power — unlike the PML-N and the considerably jaded PPP. It is, perhaps, too soon to say whether its efforts have achieved what the government intended — that will be decided by the electorate in the next elections. But there is little doubt that KP certainly has its goals and optics right as the advertisements about its various programmes indicate. Take the Sehat ka Insaaf campaign and interventions for mother and child health, or the tree plantation drive. Or the most recent initiative communicated through the press: raising awareness about and providing interventions in government schools for children with dyslexia. The provincial government promises, starting next year, remedial therapy and policy-level options. How well it follows through on its pledge remains to be seen, but even the realisation of a problem that is little discussed in the country is laudable. The other provinces would do well to follow KP's lead and come up with workable schemes aimed at improving public life.

Hamas policy shift

WHILE Israel's rejection of it makes sense from the point of view of the long-term Zionist project, the policy document unveiled by the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) also evoked criticism from the Palestinian Authority, which reminded the Hamas leadership that wisdom had dawned on it 43 years late. Released to the media on Monday by Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal, due to retire soon, the document shows a degree of realism and adjusts if not repudiates some fundamentals of its policy contained in its 1988 founding charter. Back then, its aims were radical and reflected the deep frustration in a large section of the Palestinian people over the continued occupation of their land and the hastened pace of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Identifying itself with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Hamas's objectives had included the liberation of the territory between the river Jordan and the

Mediterranean and the creation of an Islamic state in Palestine, all this being part of a confrontation between Muslims and Jews worldwide. Its military muscle and charity networks also added to its appeal to the Palestinian people and enabled the militant movement to capture power in Gaza through the electoral process in 2006.

However, Monday's documents outlining Hamas's "principles and general policies" mark a major departure from the 1988 charter and call for establishing a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 war borders. More significantly, the document makes no mention of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is now anathema to Egypt and some Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Released two days before President Donald Trump was to meet President Mahmoud Abbas, the documents attempt to create a soft image for Hamas and seek its entry into the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. While a PLO spokesman ridiculed the Hamas policy shift, saying it did what the PLO had done decades ago, all sides should realise Palestinian unity is now needed more than ever before. The PA and Hamas should bury the hatchet and fight together for a sovereign Palestinian state.

Institutional weakness

THE Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has some sensible advice for the political class: keep political disputes in the political domain and learn to avoid dragging other institutions into the political fray. The chief justice's remarks came as a Supreme Court bench resumed hearings on a petition by the PML-N seeking the disqualification of PTI supremo Imran Khan and the party's secretary general Jahangir Tareen. Without prejudging a sub judice matter, the political dimensions of the case are obvious. Barring a sensational disclosure in court or the introduction of some damning new evidence, Mr Khan and Mr Tareen will likely remain a part of the political process. Indeed, few in the PML-N expect that the disqualification petition will succeed; most privately acknowledge that the petition is a tit-for-tat move after the PTI sought the disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The chief justice could not say so directly, but it was apparent that he was deploring a waste of the court's limited time and warning against tarnishing the court's public image.

The politician's habit of dragging other institutions into the political fray is not limited to the judiciary. The military is frequently called upon to intervene and it is not always clear that it is interested in or relishes that role. And, in the era of Article 58(2b), the president was willingly and unwillingly pulled into every political crisis in the country. Some may argue that there was a time when institutional weaknesses and the uncertainty of the political process necessitated reaching out to power centres outside the political process. But the transition to democracy is now nearly a decade old. Surely, it is the

politicians' responsibility to strengthen democratic institutions and support them. Instead, parties such as the PTI are routinely at war with institutions of democracy, such as the ECP. Meanwhile, the PML-N government has systematically defanged institutions of accountability.

Unhappily, as political parties appear to be switching early to campaign mode, the unfinished business of strengthening democracy through institutional reforms looks set to be passed on to the next parliament. From electoral reforms to overhauling the accountability process, the tasks are significant and wide-ranging. And while some progress has been made towards a political consensus in some years, the run-up to polls tends to produce either hasty compromises or further delay. If positive change is to come, a change of mindset will be needed first. If political parties stop regarding the courts or perhaps the military as the default options for resolving political conflict, they would be forced to work on improving political and democratic institutions. Perhaps a nudge in that direction could come from the other institutions. And, maybe, the Supreme Court could start the process by declining in future to adjudicate on matters with a clear political taint.

Hunting for taxes

EVERY year, in the month of May, a familiar ritual begins to play itself out. With the approach of the end of the fiscal year, the tax authorities begin to ramp up their efforts to extract as much revenue from as many parties as they possibly can. They use tactics such as holding up refunds, blocking company accounts against frivolous tax notices that everyone knows will be eventually overturned, and serving up equally petty orders in pending disputes that will inevitably be shot down in appeal. But for the moment, till the announcement of the budget speech and the compilation of the fiscal numbers, every effort will be made in May to show as much performance as possible, with the knowledge that later these orders and encumbrances placed on accounts will have to be reversed. But 'later' is another matter.

This time around, a new ingredient appears to be asserting itself. The provincial revenue authorities, also under pressure to increase revenues, appear to be jumping in as well. In Sindh, but particularly in Punjab, where the majority of big companies are headquartered, outlandishly large tax bills are beginning to arrive in the offices of big corporate enterprises. One is left wondering whether the timing is coincidental as it is right at the end of the fiscal year when the revenue performance of each of the authorities is going to be tallied up. This rhythm has become so familiar to many enterprises that they begin preparing for it months in advance. Sometimes the resultant

battle turns nasty, with offices being sealed and accounts being frozen, but most of the time it is negotiated between the parties and a settlement amount agreed upon. Much of the country's tax effort is, in fact, negotiated, showing the fundamental weakness of the tax authorities to conduct proper assessments. This is a sad ritual, and the fact that the notices are served ferociously but later quietly overturned shows that many of them are meant only as a secondary revenue exercise, albeit creating a temporary inflow for the state. On top of the more routine delays in refunds, which severely hamper the liquidity position of firms, this annual exercise speaks to the broad dysfunctions that plague our tax machinery. Inability to assess incomes and the misuse of coercive powers given to the tax bureaucracy create the stage for this theatre of the absurd.

Shiv Sena's threats

THAT tensions between Pakistan and India flare up from time to time is a damaging, decades-long reality. Quite apart from diplomatic relations, however, in recent years a trend of pettiness has emerged, particularly across the border, that is deeply disturbing. In the latest of display of such disgraceful hostility, a group of 50 Pakistani students and their teachers were forced to return home on Wednesday via the Wagah border after the organisation hosting them in India received threats from the Shiv Sena. The circumstances under which the youngsters were there makes their ejection particularly ironic: they had been invited on a five-day trip by a Delhi-based organisation as part of its student Exchange for Change programme to promote peace and harmony. They had been scheduled to visit Agra as well as meet Indian students at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi. Instead, over dinner, they were informed that Indian officialdom had advised that the current Pakistan-India situation was 'unfavourable' for such interactions, and were escorted back to Wagah amid tight security. The students' ages ranged between just 11 and 15 years.

The Foreign Office said it intended to take the issue up with the Indian government. It is for the Indian government and officialdom to introspect over how such a climate of hostility has been fostered in its polity that even such small efforts at normalcy cannot be tolerated. This is far from the first time that 'soft' diplomacy between the two countries, based on cultural interaction and people-to-people contact, has been threatened. Pakistani theatre groups have been prevented from performing despite, as in the case of these students, being there at the invitation of Indian organisations and having been issued visas. Just recently, Pakistanis legitimately working in Bollywood found themselves in the extremists' cross hairs. Saner counsel must prevail and India must find ways of tamping down the intolerance in its society that appears only to be growing.

Growing lynch mobs

THE growing incidence of mob lynchings all over the country is grounds for concern. In the past fortnight alone, we have seen three horrific examples of angry mobs chasing individuals alleged to have committed blasphemy. The latest incident took place in Hub, Balochistan. However, it is not only those accused of blasphemy who are hunted down and often killed. There have been many incidents in which individuals suspected of being involved in theft have faced the mob's wrath as in the tragic case of two brothers, wrongly identified as robbers, who were lynched in Sialkot some years ago. This is a dangerous trend and if allowed to continue, could reach a point where no one would be able to control the angry crowds.

Perhaps only a comprehensive study can identify all the causes for this kind of vigilantism. A broad canvas though would show that socioeconomic frustrations, the lack of access to justice, the religiosity and intolerance set in motion during the Zia regime and, critically, poor enforcement of the law have a large role in the making of today's fanatical crowds that are ready to take matters into their own hands. And it is unfortunate that very often this tendency is opportunistically fanned by sections of the media especially with regard to blasphemy accusations.

Any solution to reverse this trend — that has been years in the making — would have to be multipronged. But first, the state must see the flaws of its own acts of commission and omission. As a beginning, the state must recognise that this tendency represents an erosion of its own writ. Only then would it be possible to take steps to correct it. Further, it must ask itself what has been done to alleviate socioeconomic challenges, and to strengthen the judiciary and police. It must also ask itself how far its own curriculum, with its overtones of bigotry and discrimination, is feeding into the problem. The larger problems of growing intolerance will take time and political will to resolve. But in the immediate term, a sobering of our national discourse is needed to soothe anxieties and calm the passions that ignite such mobs. The mass media has a critical role to play here, in sending out the message that no matter how powerful the provocation, taking the law into your hands is not justifiable under any circumstances. There must be no exceptions, and no caveats applied to this principle.

Border attack

AN ugly and seemingly premeditated attack resulting in the death of several civilians and a couple of security personnel, the incident near Chaman along the Pak-Afghan border on Friday is a grim reminder of the toll on ordinary civilians of tense relations between the two states. There was no reason at all for Pakistani census teams accompanied by security personnel in border villages to come under attack. Neither the enumerators nor the security personnel posed any kind of cross-border threat. Moreover, Afghan security forces stationed at the border were given advance notice of the census-taking activity. It appears the Afghans used the very information given to them by the Pakistani side in the hope of preventing any misunderstanding to attack the villagers and the census teams. Perhaps it was to lay down a marker in the ongoing diplomatic and security tussles between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Or perhaps it was the age-old refusal of Afghanistan to officially recognise the Durand Line — the census seemingly a threat because it would officially count the villagers on the Pakistani side of the border as Pakistani citizens. Whatever the case, the attack was utterly unacceptable. Thankfully, urgent diplomatic and military contact by Pakistan caused the firing and shelling from the Afghan side to stop.

In the aftermath of the attack, with the Afghan side conceding that it had made a mistake, Kabul must act to repair an increasingly fractious bilateral relationship. With President Ashraf Ghani refusing to visit the country and all manner of Afghan officials routinely attacking Pakistan, it is inevitable that the climate of hostility will permeate the lower tiers of a security force that is young and prone to indiscipline. The message from the very apex of the Afghan leadership is itself the problem; if the country's leaders routinely allege that Pakistan is at war with Afghanistan, will not even lightly armed Pakistani security personnel on a peaceful mission in the border region be regarded as legitimate targets? The senseless and dangerous demonisation of Pakistan by Afghanistan must stop. On Pakistan's part too some adjustments are needed. Perhaps the immediate challenge is an internal one: what is Pakistan's Afghan policy and who decides it? Instead of separate military and civilian Pakistani delegations to Afghanistan, potentially conveying very different messages, and instead of separate deliberations inside Pakistan, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif should convene his national security team to jointly debate the latest challenges to the relationship with our western neighbour.

Heritage conservation

IN a heartening example of history triumphing over revisionism, the iconic seventh-century Buddha at Jahanabad, Swat, defaced by militants in 2007, was restored last November. The exhaustive four-year project was jointly undertaken by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, KP, and the Italian Archaeological Mission, using best practices and imaging equipment. As reported recently in this newspaper, however, the same local department is responsible for undertaking dubious “restoration and preservation” work on the Bhamala Stupa near Haripur. Earlier efforts on this unique World Heritage site had unearthed a number of significant artefacts from the Kushan era, including a 14-metre-long statue portraying Buddha’s death and another with a double halo. Insider sources allege that the current phase of restoration was conducted without prior approval from international and local authorities, and in contravention of Unesco-mandated practices. Whether this disfigurement can be reversed without further damage to the ancient ruins remains to be seen, and why the stupa was subjected to it at all can only be speculated on.

Lack of funding and specialised resources may be perennial problems for conservation in Pakistan but, as demonstrated by citizen campaigners in Lahore and local efforts in Gilgit-Baltistan, a lack of community engagement need not be one of them. Indeed, mobilising local communities to take ownership of their shared heritage is not only vital to ensuring the long-term success of such projects, it also spurs economic and social development. For that, awareness needs to be raised about the various aspects of conservation, including preserving authenticity. There is clearly no lack of enthusiasm to put KP on the cultural map, but short cuts should not be taken to make sites tourist-ready. Given that we often fail to protect our heritage against a litany of threats — religious intolerance, institutional neglect, military appropriation, real-estate development, antiquities theft and the inevitable ravages of time — the least we can do is safeguard them against the self-inflicted wound of shoddy, albeit well-intentioned, interventions.

PM's observations on corruption

IT was said in a matter-of-fact way and caused few ripples. Indeed, both the speaker and the audience seem to have accepted it as an inalterable reality of the state here. Speaking at the inauguration of a metro bus track between Islamabad and a new airport in Fatehjang catering to the capital region, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made some very frank observations. It is worth reproducing in full Mr Sharif's remarks on corruption within the state apparatus. "There is so much corruption in the country that if we get involved in probing them all our time will be consumed in the investigations and we will not be able to deliver. There are so many scandals and frauds that they cannot even be listed. There are a number of projects which could not be completed in 20 years due to which their cost increased manifold," the prime minister said.

Mr Sharif is both completely right and utterly wrong. In acknowledging the scope of corruption, the prime minister's assessment is in line with that of most observers of the state here. Corruption is rampant and there are no parts of the state which have remained immune from this scourge. Where the prime minister is wrong is in his understanding of the government's role in fighting it. Mr Sharif appears to believe that simply repeating over and over again that his government is different, that it does not indulge in dishonest dealings and that delivering projects on time or ahead of schedule is enough to dispel the perception of rampant corruption. But that ignores a fundamental responsibility of the government: to expose and punish corruption, and demonstrate through deeds, not words, that this menace is being seriously addressed.

One remarkable fact alone disproves the prime minister's claim that his government takes fighting corruption seriously: there has not been a single case of a leading politician, whether in government or outside, who has been transparently investigated and fairly prosecuted for corruption. Indeed, stretching back through the decade-old transition to democracy, there is not one instance that can be cited where anyone of significance in the political class has been successfully prosecuted and a conviction upheld on appeal. With past corruption unpunished, there is no deterrence. Equally troubling is the PML-N government's lack of transparency when it comes to handing out contracts and the reluctance to strengthen rules. In fact, government officials have routinely complained that onerous government rules make completing infrastructure and development projects on time difficult — an implicit acknowledgement that rules continue to be bent. Surely, the government must know that it has both a responsibility to deliver on its promises and to do so in a transparent, rules-based and corruption-free manner.

Film policy

IN recent years, the country's film industry has seen some signs of a revival. But unfortunately, we cannot yet say that the industry is out of the woods. Having achieved a high point in the 1960s and 1970s, when Pakistan was producing cinema that was of a fairly high production and intellectual level, standards began to plummet. The reasons were myriad, but boiled down to essentially one sad reality: never had the country made the effort to take the sector seriously enough, even as a driver of economic growth or cultural narratives, to follow through on any policy framework within which the business could flourish. A change in attitude may be on the horizon though: Friday saw the inaugural session of a consultative conference in Karachi regarding the formulation of a national policy on film, production and broadcast. In her speech, Federal Minister of State for Information, Broadcasting and National Heritage Marriyum Aurangzeb said that the government had decided to take ownership of the industry, and noted that the absence of a powerful medium such as film had contributed to the more extremist narratives that have taken root in society over the past three decades or so.

If the state has finally woken up to the medium's powerful potential, it is a case of better late than never. However, much more than platitudes and good intentions is needed to put the film industry back on its feet, including a robust and multifaceted policy. First, Pakistan needs to take up the task of establishing a film institute where the mechanics and technical aspects of the profession, from scriptwriting to production, can be taught in a targeted fashion. The existence of film departments in universities here and there is far from enough. Another point of concern is finances: the existence of some source of funding to which budding filmmakers can apply would go a long way towards jump-starting the sector, as well as having an impact on the editorial content of the work being put out. There are concerns regarding distribution too. Cinema owners maintain that local fare cannot yet sustain the financial costs of their business, and to some extent, they are right. Even so, ways have to be found to give local productions a boost. To her credit, the minister has shown some signs of seriousness of purpose. It is to be hoped that she can keep a firm hand at the helm.

Few skilled midwives

FOR centuries, midwives have served as the backbone of a country's healthcare system. Adept at saving lives, they empower women to make sound healthcare and family planning choices. On May 5, their invaluable and oftentimes tireless contribution was acknowledged by medical experts on the International Day of the Midwife. This year's theme, 'Midwives, Mothers and Families: Partners for Life!', underscores the role that these women play in preventing maternal and newborn deaths. However, there was a note of caution in the experts' applause as they observed the alarming rise in Pakistan's maternal mortality rate — 178 deaths per every 100,000 live births — because of the lack of skilled midwives. With post-birth complications being the single largest cause of maternal deaths, there is a need for door-to-door services by trained midwives, especially in areas where conservative customs restrict women's mobility. Moreover, gaps in healthcare include the absence of safe motherhood programmes and midwives who are paid poorly for their services and have an irregular status in the medical care framework.

Despite these impediments, women who give birth in the rural areas can be saved if under the care of well-trained midwives working with local health units and district hospitals. The first step towards building a trained cadre would require structured community midwifery programmes at teaching hospitals so that licensed practitioners can offer obstetrical care. Another proposal involves recruiting more midwives in rural districts because of the unavailability of transport for expectant mothers to get to the hospital in time. With persistently weak health indicators for women — especially those who are IDPs or live in conflict zones — there is an urgent need to improve the state of maternal and infant health. This can only materialise if the state is committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030 and supports institutions in alleviating poverty and gender inequality. As the government goes into election mode, it should know that delivering key healthcare services may have some advantages worth considering.

Power sector adrift

THE onset of summer brings with it the usual reminder that the country's power sector is struggling to meet peak demand in the hottest months of the year. Despite the massive expansion plan currently under way, the problem of prolonged and widespread load-shedding across the country continues to bedevil the government. It is true that we have seen the hottest April in over a quarter of a century, and a heatwave has been gripping many parts of the country this month. And no doubt, April and May are difficult

months to meet unusual peak loads because hydro generation is shut down due to the lack of water in the dams. But this leaves the power system dependent exclusively on thermal power plants that have a total capacity of around 18,000 MW, still a little below what peak demand hit on Sunday. Clearly, there is a shortage of generation capacity to meet this unusual demand, which came due to a heatwave that saw temperatures go beyond 40°C in many areas of the country.

We are being reminded on an almost daily basis now that the new generation capacity that is in the pipelines at the moment will remedy this problem, and by 2021, according to the power-sector expansion plan, there will be a surplus of electricity in the country. At that point, we are told, we will have a properly functioning power system, with appropriate capacity to allow maintenance shutdowns of plants as well as sufficient reserve capacity that can be fired up if an unusual peak in demand hits the system. One can only hope that these predictions prove correct because other than raw megawatts, and increased transmission capacity, there is practically no sign that other reforms in the power system are being undertaken — apart from the regressive attempt to disempower the regulator and give the government control over power pricing.

With the augmented megawatts, a new generation of problems could well descend upon us though. Many of us remember the late 1990s, when there was a surplus of power in the country — and yet, Pakistan could not afford the power in its own system. With the new megawatts in play, the capacity charges that the government pays to power producers will double by 2021. And an outmoded power system, already creaking under the burden of micromanaging a growing set of investments, could be overwhelmed by the massive vested interests that it will be hemmed in by. This was the unexpected byproduct of the Independent Power Policy of 1994, which drained Wapda finances to the point of creating a fiscal crisis. The new investments coming in these days will have their own knock-on effects, and managing those would take a major overhaul of the power-sector governance regime. But such reforms are nowhere to be seen.

Delayed Fata reforms

THE announcement itself was long delayed and now it appears the implementation is being put off too. On Saturday, a multi-party conference organised by parliamentarians from Fata issued a declaration urging the government to convert the cabinet-approved Fata reforms package into law. The MPC issued an ultimatum of sorts too, announcing a march in Islamabad if parliament did not approve the Fata reforms by May 20. As with the consultation and recommendations, the government appears to have lost either the

interest in or the will to introduce reforms in Fata. Privately, officials deny that the government is delaying Fata reforms, but neither have they offered credible timelines in which the necessary legislation will be made. While the details are complex and the scope sweeping, there is a straightforward reality at the heart of the approved Fata reforms package: without parliamentary approval, reforms in Fata are effectively stalled. The administrative and structural changes, even those that are to be introduced later, can only be initiated with parliamentary and presidential approval. Inside parliament, there may yet be further tweaks to the reforms package, making it all the more puzzling that the government would delay a central piece of legislation that would have the most far-reaching effect on the federation since the 18th Amendment.

The culprit does appear to be politics once again. It has long been known that the JUI-F is not keen on Fata reforms and that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is perhaps not keen on upsetting the JUI-F. Moreover, Mr Sharif and his PML-N government have had a series of political crises to contend with in recent weeks: from the Panama Papers judgement to load-shedding to convulsions on the civil-military front. Meanwhile, Mr Sharif has been under attack for his determination to forge a path to dialogue with India, while the Pak-Afghan relationship has seen a number of highly concerning developments recently. The path since March 2, when the federal cabinet approved the Fata reforms package, has been littered with both familiar and surprising political and security-related events — but that is in the nature of government, not least in a country with myriad problems and multiple interests to defend. Surely, a third-term prime minister with a highly experienced cabinet ought to be able to deal with both short- and long-term issues simultaneously. Fata reforms are fundamental to national stability and must be put into effect.

PIA's wakeup call

A PIA CAPTAIN has been accused of taking a two-hour nap after entrusting the reins of an Islamabad-Heathrow flight — and the destiny of scores of passengers — to a trainee pilot. The incident, that has been denied by the pilot in question, has been followed by a familiar routine in which ridicule, disbelief, disappointment and outright contempt have mixed liberally with facts and fantasy to paint the once proud national carrier in the most depressing of colours. While there is, of course, no justification for any person in charge of the cockpit to proceed to the land of Nod while on duty, it is nevertheless interesting to note that, generally speaking, instances of pilots falling asleep while in charge of the aircraft are not uncommon. According to a 2013 study by a pilots' union in the UK, more than 50pc of fliers charged with the safety of hundreds on board confessed to falling

sleeping while in the air. The same research found that there was no dearth of incidents where not one but both pilots had dozed off while flying.

So while the incident must be investigated to find out if and to what extent safety regulations were breached, the focus must be on the larger problem that ails our aviation sector as well. The research study cited above reflects the strain that many pilots find themselves under. With this latest scandal in the air, Pakistan's flight industry must start to exhibit greater concern. Each story about PIA's incompetence is accompanied by speculations as well as suspicions that deliberate attempts are being made to malign the airline. It is not PIA alone that has been criticised; the safety records of other local airlines have also been called into question. But as the national carrier, PIA must take the lead in following rigorous standards, and ensure that it is not pushing its pilots too hard. It must probe this incident thoroughly and impartially, not only to protect its reputation but to also signal the start of the process of self-evaluation.

Pak-Iran tensions

A WEEK after Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Pakistan and appeared to have helped re-establish diplomatic and security cooperation between the two countries over border management, the top Iranian military commander has threatened to launch cross-border attacks inside Pakistan against so-called militant safe havens. Maj-Gen Mohammad Baqeri's extraordinary comments have elicited a sharp reaction from Islamabad and yesterday's summoning to the Foreign Office of Iranian Ambassador Mehdi Honardoost may be the start of a fresh series of accusations and recriminations between the two countries. It is not yet clear if the proposals agreed upon during Mr Zarif's visit have been implemented — both sides had agreed to ramp up border cooperation while Pakistan has pledged to send more troops to the boundary to help fight cross-border smuggling, crime and militancy. What is clear is that Maj-Gen Baqeri's comments are utterly unacceptable.

The general was elevated to the highest military post in Iran last June, replacing a general who had held the post for 27 years, and is believed to have been picked by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for his hard-line background at a time when the Iranian armed forces appear to have a growing say in national security policy. It is, therefore, not possible to dismiss his comments as that of a military commander lashing out after his forces suffered casualties in a border attack. For Pakistan, the path forward must emphasise two aspects of the bilateral relationship. First, Pakistan has an inherent interest in a stable and peaceful relationship with Iran and a violence-free border. Over the years, both sides have built up a number of complaints, mostly as a result of the

border between the two countries being a vast, poorly governed space with local populations often at odds with their respective states and other countries having an obvious interest in interfering on both sides of the frontier. However, despite the occasional incident, the Pak-Iran relationship has never been as troubled as Pakistan's border with Afghanistan and India or the Line of Control in Kashmir. Surely, then, both Pakistan and Iran can find ways to cooperate over border management and curb incidents of violence.

Second, Pakistan and Iran need to have sustained diplomatic engagement to address the range of issues that could be causing friction. From the Kulbhushan Jadhav incident to Pakistan's participation in the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to helping stabilise an increasingly precarious Afghan state, there is much that needs to be addressed by both sides. Moreover, long-term projects, such as the Pak-Iran pipeline or electricity transfers, offer the opportunity to bring economic stability to a tense security relationship. Indeed, if truly creative solutions are wanted, the ports in Chabahar and Gwadar could greatly complement one another. Surely, whatever the path chosen, it must lead to stable, productive ties.

Stock market rising

THE wild swings that the stock market has been going through lately may be dizzying, but there are signs that these are driven more by good news than concerns. In the past three sessions alone, the index has climbed more than 5pc, closing above 51,000 in the last session. Most of the activity appears to be centred around index-heavy blue-chip stocks, and market participants confirm that local brokers are staking out positions in advance of the impending inclusion of Pakistan in the emerging markets index, known as the MSCI. This suggests that the climb in the market is built on solid ground, although that does not preclude the chances of more volatility in the days to come. Blue-chip stocks in banks, cement, fertiliser, oil and gas, and energy are seeing the majority of trading activity. The good news is that the market has shrugged off whatever political uncertainty is currently prevailing, and has its eyes squarely on the forthcoming graduation from a frontier market to an emerging one. Some amount of positive energy is also being injected into the market as a result of the approaching budget, which market participants are betting will be laden with schemes and incentives, as this is an election-year budget and will provide a boost to certain sectors of the economy.

That said, retail investors should exercise caution. At times like these, greed can be unleashed and unscrupulous players can try to oversell the activity in the market by holding out the prospect of unrealistically high gains in short periods of time.

Unscrupulous, back-alley brokers can do a lot of damage to a strong bull run by staking out excessively risky positions using borrowed money, and small investors should exercise extreme care when assessing the brightening prospects of the stock exchange. It is good to see the apex regulator of the stock market, the SECP, moving actively against such fraudulent practices, but its efforts need to be matched by due investor diligence at the retail level. It is always a good idea for small investors to keep a long-time horizon when approaching the stock market and avoid getting sucked into schemes that are basically little more than gambling. With appropriate care, and strong regulatory oversight, the stock exchange looks like it means business given its latest bull run.

Killing female infants

ON Sunday, this newspaper reported a harrowing case of murder in Muzaffargarh. According to the story, a young woman and her child were set on fire by the woman's husband on April 2. Their crime? The woman was punished for giving birth to a girl, and the infant for being one. Sadly, the mother died this weekend although her eight-month-old daughter has miraculously survived. When the dangerously obsessive preference for having boys supports the patriarchal notion that the latter can provide economic stability — unlike girls who are considered bad fortune — many mothers find themselves contemplating sex-selective abortions or abandoning their newly born daughter. The Edhi Foundation's ambulances pick up dead babies from streets and garbage dumps in many parts of the country. Some of the infants have been strangled to death, others burnt, starved and even stoned — most with their umbilical cord still intact. It is commendable that the foundation has urged people to deposit unwanted infants in cradles placed outside its offices with no questions asked. However, its efforts also underscore the state's negligence — the state has turned away from protecting the lives of vulnerable infants. For their part, police rarely investigate cases of female infanticide.

With infanticide more common in societies where there is poverty and poor development — such as India and some African countries — combating this scourge requires public-awareness campaigns and education. Addressing the social stigma faced by women when they have girls is critical to dispelling the notion that boys are more valuable than girls. This is especially significant where misogyny is rampant from the get-go. The authorities must make it clear that killing female infants is tantamount to murder and that the perpetrators will be punished. Above all, the state should know that one way to stop anti-women and anti-girl practices is to support universal girls'

education, because educating a girl means educating an entire community, thereby changing cultural attitudes.

How China connects

THE comments were made to an Indian audience, but they are of profound relevance here in Pakistan. In a recent speech to a think tank, the Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, who has also served as ambassador to Pakistan, invited India to join the One Belt, One Road project and reassured New Delhi that for all of China's close ties with Pakistan, China seeks stable and prosperous ties with India too. Mr Luo's comments come ahead of a major OBOR summit in Beijing, which India has declined to attend, and build on recent attempts by China to align India's so-called Act East policy with OBOR. For Pakistan, there are vital lessons to be drawn from the Chinese overtures to India. First, China's policy of putting trade ahead of disputes, and not just verbally emphasising but working practically for regional connectivity, is something that Pakistan must seriously consider emulating. Second, Pakistani policymakers' reflexive argument that China is Pakistan's friend first in South Asia ought to be reconsidered in the light of the very sensible formulation by Mr Luo of a 'China first' policy — national interest rightly trumping the more irrational hopes of even close allies.

There continues to be a great deal that divides India and China. The intensive military build-up by both countries, for example, may have extra-regional dimensions, but the simultaneous economic rise of China and India has hawks in each country worried about the ambitions of the other. Yet, rational voices in China and India have prevailed and pulled the countries into closer, near-irreversible economic ties. In setting out a long-term vision for China-India relations, Mr Luo, surely speaking with the explicit approval of Beijing, suggested four initiatives, three of which are economic in nature and only one — “strive for an early harvest of the border issue” — pertaining to past conflict. Contrast the forward-looking, economy-focused message of China with Pakistan's relations with three of its four neighbours in recent times. True, officially Pakistan does endorse regional connectivity, but in practice it has only embraced CPEC; connectivity with other neighbours is being spurned for ever-more-militarised borders.

Mr Luo's comments are also a warning against giddy notions inside Pakistan that CPEC has solidified Pakistan as its greatest, and possibly only, ally in the South Asia region. With a simple but frank phrase, “China first”, Mr Luo demolished not just expectations that China will automatically side with Pakistan in its disputes with India but also drove a stake through hyperbolic assertions that CPEC and Pakistan's ties with China will help achieve a fair and just settlement on Kashmir. Indeed, policymakers here should be

thankful to Mr Luo and his superiors in Beijing for their clarity — and for offering Pakistan a template to follow. A ‘Pakistan first’ national security and foreign policy could help reduce the many situations of conflict this country finds itself in regionally.

Dismantling Nepra

THERE can be little doubt now that the power sector is being prised open to enable powerful vested interests to gain entry. In fact, the amendments being made to the Nepra Act show that the power sector is going to be turned into a large racket — not that it was not already well on its way to becoming one. The amendments will impact two of the core powers that make the regulator a meaningful entity in the first place. The first is the power to issue generation licences to prospective investors in the sector. This would enable the regulator to weed out substandard applications, as well as manage the overall fuel mix and monitor the locations where future energy projects are coming in, and ensure that these plans align with the grid expansion plan. The second is the power to issue tariffs, whether for end consumers or power producers. This is even more crucial. There are not many countries left where the government of the day has the power to determine the price of electricity. This work must be invested either with power markets, or with independent bodies because it involves very delicate and minute determinations of the costs of the power producers. If done poorly, it can result in all sorts of frivolous costs being included as the ‘cost of generation’ and passed on to the consumers.

There is little doubt that this is exactly what is being prepared. If allowed to succeed, the government’s moves will turn power plants into the next sugar mills saga, with the wreckage of a licensing and pricing regime that basically serves to preserve rackets and regulate entry. A confluence of interests between the two big political parties in the National Assembly is driving the process forward — and not a vision for reforming the power sector’s governance regime to prepare for the next generation of regulatory challenges once the new capacity being installed has been commissioned. If these moves are part of a well-thought-out plan of reforms, the government should come out with its vision and explain what the future shape of the regulator is going to be, what challenges it expects it to face, and how the proposed reforms will best enable this. Instead, we have a deal being cut: you get your power plants, we get ours, and we both vote for the amendments.

Delayed VC appointments

ADDED to the calls for the swift and early appointment of vice chancellors in 15 public-sector universities in Punjab is the urgent voice of the province's higher education commission. The commission has given the government a nudge after a recent Lahore High Court ruling resolved the issue of whose jurisdiction it was to supervise the selection of the VCs. A 2016 ruling by a single bench had given the right of appointment to the federal government. The new judgement by the full bench recognises and approves of the federal government's role in setting minimum standards to be adhered to in the selection of VCs. Other than this, the court has observed that it was a matter for the provincial government to address. The confusion here was not dissimilar to the situation faced in some other areas, for example the health sector, where court intervention has been sought to fix jurisdiction following the transfer of subjects to the provinces from the federal level.

The decision was rightly hailed by those alarmed at the delay in the appointment of VCs. It didn't need too many arguments to establish that the stop-gap arrangements in the absence of a 'permanent' VC were impeding life on campus. Not just that, the uncertainty bred other problems, not least politicking among various groups who want their own candidates to get the coveted posts. Lobbying, with its pros and cons, will never go away and some of the acrimony generated by bitter rivalries and politics will linger on. But there's no doubt the negatives can be contained if there is speedy redress. In the first phase, four universities are to appoint VCs in accordance with the Lahore High Court's directions. They must streamline the procedure and have search committees, tasked with short-listing the candidates, playing the pivotal role. The process has to be immaculate and transparent for the benefit of the other 11 institutions waiting for the appointment of VCs in Punjab and indeed for all future references.

A rift ends

THE rift was unnecessary, making sensibly handled closure all the more welcome. Eleven days after DG ISPR Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor tweeted a rejection of a prime ministerial directive — a move that even at the time appeared hasty and ill-thought-out — the civil and military leadership have choreographed the end of a wrenching saga that at the very outset, some seven months ago, seemed vastly overblown. Gratifyingly, the military leadership has now not just publicly reiterated its support for democracy, but also embraced core principles of a democratic state: respect for the Constitution and acceptance of legitimately issued prime ministerial orders. History will judge the current

military leadership kindly for its willingness to admit a mistake and stand on the side of principles against expediency and cynically manipulated populism. Both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa deserve praise for pulling back from the brink. Hopefully, the democratic project will continue without further setbacks.

If the end is sensible, the beginning was anything but. Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the saga has been why the previous military leadership created a national frenzy over a report in this newspaper in the first place. Given the veil of secrecy that the military throws over ongoing internal debates and the self-aggrandising speculation in sections of the media, it is difficult to ascertain in the present tense what may be motivating certain decisions by the military leadership. However, with the exit of former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif and the dismantling of his small but powerful coterie of advisers, it does appear that a desire to seek a full-term extension by him may have tainted the response by the military leadership last October. While that is now history and Gen Sharif has secured for himself a sinecure in Saudi Arabia, perhaps the military leadership needs to address what has emerged as a problem since the transition to democracy began nearly a decade ago: the old rule of military chiefs retiring on time and not seeking an extension needs to be made a norm once again. For reasons of democracy, but also for reasons of the institutional strength and dynamism of the military, regular change at the very top is necessary and desirable.

For the civilians, the lesson remains the same: unless decision-making is institutionalised, civil-military dialogue formalised and the institutions of democracy strengthened, democracy here will remain vulnerable to attack. The prime minister and his cabinet are too experienced to justify a whimsical, desultory and closed decision-making process. There is also no room for ego and a sense of victimhood at the very apex of the national policymaking process — if the civilians believe they can carve a better path, why not try and work with the military to do so?

Human rights record

WEDNESDAY saw the release of the annual report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Islamabad. Unsurprisingly, it constitutes an indictment. It is no secret that the country's human rights record is grim, and has been so for decades. Unhappily, a perusal of the statistics laid out in the State of Human Rights 2016 shows that matters are getting worse, perhaps rapidly so. One figure given in the report stands out in particular. According to the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, quoted by the HRC report, the total number of missing persons in the country currently stands at 1,219. Of these, 728 vanished within the span of just 12 months, the year under

review. This is astonishing given that the issue has been at the forefront of public debate as a major human rights outrage for years. The commission files monthly performance reports with the federal and provincial governments, leaving the state no possibility of being able to deny the problem. That this figure rose sharply over 2016 indicates that not only is there lack of purpose when it comes to the state's 'promises' to resolve the issue, but that the perpetrators are operating with greater confidence and impunity.

Other data presented is no less shocking: growing restrictions on freedom of movement, increasing blasphemy allegations and a trend towards mob lynching, and intimidation of the judiciary and the media leading to a climate of fear — and to self-censorship where the latter is concerned. Punjab, it appears, witnessed an increase in cases of rape, gang rape and abduction last year, while in Karachi the frequency of bank robberies and theft of motorcycles and mobile phones went up. Taken together, the picture presented is one of a society increasingly prone to violence and anarchy, with the state, whose duty it is to ensure the rule of law, standing by helplessly. Ponder, for example, another figure that ought to be taken as a clarion call for action: the total number of cases pertaining to child sexual abuse — including abduction, missing children, and child marriage — stood at 4,139 during the year under review, a 10pc increase from 2015. While this could, as in cases of 'honour' crimes, partly be a result of increased reporting of such incidents, it nevertheless brings the number of child abuse victims to 11 per day. The country is on a grim human rights trajectory — and is ignoring this dangerous reality at its own peril.

Overselling CPEC

It is easy to understand that the volume of trade going through the ports of Pakistan will increase once the CPEC project gains momentum. But when the chief economist of the Planning Commission claims, as he did in a recent interview with Reuters, that 4pc of global trade will pass through this route, it can only be called a gross exaggeration.

In fact, that figure is absurd since it implies that approximately \$700bn could be flowing through the CPEC infrastructure, going by figures of global merchandise exports alone. Clearly, this is an overstatement of colossal proportions.

The same individual then went on to claim that Pakistan could earn up to \$8bn a year just from toll taxes and 'rental fees' from this traffic, helping it to easily tide over the repayment obligations from the various investments that have come in under CPEC, and which he claims will peak at \$5bn per year.

Once again, this sounds like an overly optimistic assessment. First of all, nobody is sure of what toll taxes and 'rental fees' he is talking about, and, secondly, whether his projections of the volume of traffic that would be generated by CPEC are realistic. Thirdly, who will be responsible for the cost of maintaining the road infrastructure in the years to come?

For a long time now, there have been calls for more transparency in CPEC implementation, particularly regarding the financing arrangements. Thus far, the government has kept silent. If this is the best that the Planning Commission has to offer in response to repeated calls for more disclosure, then it suggests that the government itself does not know what it is getting involved in.

Ahsan Iqbal, the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, has repeatedly urged those who are asking questions about CPEC to avoid "negative propagation", hinting that doing so plays into the hands of Pakistan's enemies. But what else are we supposed to do when we are fed this sort of overoptimistic information, if not ask questions?

The decline of CSS

THE collapse is alarming, but care should be taken in diagnosing the reasons for it lest superficial solutions end up worsening the problem. The Central Superior Services exam, for many years a prestigious entry point to a career in public administration, has hit a new low point. According to the Federal Public Services Commission, just 2pc of candidates passed the examination in 2016. The actual numbers are even starker — 9,643 candidates appeared for the written exam and only 202 individuals secured enough marks to qualify for the interview state. Following the interview, 199 candidates survived and of those individuals 193 have been recommended for appointment. The latest results confirm a long-term decline that appears to have accelerated in recent years. Halting that trend, let alone reversing it, will take an almighty effort by the state.

The first stage of the problem is the number of candidates who consider it even worthwhile to apply to take the CSS exam — a host of factors, including job security and pay, draw new graduates towards the private sector. While that may be a global phenomenon, more developed economies have enough quality candidates to fill both the public- and private-sector pipelines. Pakistan does not have that luxury. What Pakistan does have is an especially broken bureaucracy — heavily politicised; few effective checks and balances; and honest, diligent bureaucrats always running the danger of being sidelined by colleagues or political masters. With a higher education

system that already produces so few talented individuals, can the latter be faulted for preferring careers outside the public sector? Compounding the problem are the 18th Amendment reforms — while devolving higher education to the provinces was arguably necessary, implementation has been particularly weak in the sector. Could the CSS results have been hit particularly hard by the uneven and weak performance of the new provincial higher education commissions?

There are also problems with the CSS examination itself. A recent opinion piece in these pages highlighted a number of remarkable flaws and mistakes in the 2015 and 2016 CSS exams and concluded: “This kind of examination would surely rule out the wise in favour of the dull, the timid, and the clever — those who memorise appropriate answers, refrain from speaking their minds, and say what would curry favour. A selection mechanism cannot identify selectees wiser than the selectors. That might explain the dilemma of the civil service in which each cohort is weaker than the one it succeeds.” And while the CSS exam itself may be self-limiting in the search for the best candidates in the application pool, there is also the question of diversity that remains unaddressed. Allocations for women and non-Muslim vacancies often go unfilled, undermining what ought to be a core principle of a representative bureaucracy serving a diverse public. Change is possible, but only if honest critiques are accepted.

Memories of May 12

EVEN tragedies of great magnitude tend to be quickly forgotten in Pakistan, overtaken as they are by the latest outrage. This has been the case with the May 12, 2007 violence, a day of infamy for Karachi, when the state either looked away or even, as some would note, encouraged the bloodshed on the city’s streets. The root cause of the mayhem was the growing rift between the then ‘suspended’ chief justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Chaudhry, and the country’s military strongman at the time, Gen Pervez Musharraf. In a defiant mood, the chief justice arrived in Karachi on that fateful day to speak at a function of the bar. However, the general was in no mood to let him speak. After he had touched down, Mr Chaudhry could not leave the Karachi airport, as rival parties — the ANP and the PPP to welcome him, and the MQM to thwart this welcome — were out on the streets flexing their muscle. Considering the MQM’s close ties with Gen Musharraf at the time and its vice-like grip on Karachi, the whole city was held hostage by the party, and as the day ended, around 50 people had lost their lives in the violence. A decade after these gruesome events, hardly anyone has been brought to justice.

Mainly because of the MQM's history of violence, even today people are hesitant to go on record and discuss the events. Perhaps this explains the lack of progress in the cases. While the issue was brought up during Friday's Sindh Assembly session, there has been little action, beyond the usual rhetoric, to bring the perpetrators to book. Karachi in 2007 was a different place — arguably, a much more violent place. However, the MQM, now riven with internal dissensions, has largely been brought to heel by the state, which means that there should be little standing in the way of a transparent probe that can bring closure to the events of May 12. The probe must also examine why the police and Rangers, who today have succeeded in 'cleaning up' Karachi to some extent, failed to do their duty on that fateful day, and what role the military regime of the time had to play in the violence. The state must pursue the May 12 case and bring it to its logical conclusion without further delay. Otherwise, it will join the long list of other tragedies that have been swept under the carpet.

Monitoring timber mafia

THE Metropolitan Corporation of Islamabad wants to get serious about stopping the smuggling of timber into the capital. It is proposing to set up a series of checkpoints to examine incoming timber cargoes and interdict those deemed illegal. The plan involves setting up five checkpoints around the main roads that lead to the capital, and maintaining a record of all wood shipments into and out of the city. This initiative can be lauded once it begins to show some results, but at the outset there are grounds for scepticism. The timber mafia is far too entrenched an entity to be tackled through a number of checkpoints alone. The initiative would be more credible if it were to be expanded to cover timber markets within the city, and if plans to have a muscular presence of forest officers and guards in the national park area of the capital are put in place.

For the moment, all we seem to be getting are checkpoints. If the initiative stops at that, it will be only a matter of time before the timber mafia is able to make arrangements to get its consignments past these points with ease. It will take a coordinated effort on the part of the various city government entities, the DCO, police and environment department, in addition to the MCI, to mount a credible challenge to the timber mafia. At the end of the day, the effort must also include an awareness campaign about trees and how they are our collective asset, the valuable role they play in the ecology of the city, and how great a crime it is to wantonly destroy these gifts of nature for private gain. Tree cover needs to be nurtured and protected from property developers and the timber mafia; a few local departments of the city government working alone will not be up to

the task. The checkpoints can only be called a welcome development if they are followed up swiftly with more vigorous action.

Attacks in Balochistan

THE contrast could not be grimmer and is almost certainly deliberate. As the country's civilian leadership gathered in Beijing for a milestone summit of the One Belt, One Road project, Balochistan has come under vicious attack. In Mastung, Deputy Chairman of the Senate Ghafoor Haideri's convoy was bombed during a visit to a local madressah. At least 25 people were killed in the attack, which has been claimed by the militant Islamic State group. A day later, in Gwadar, 10 labourers belonging to Sindh were killed, with separatist Baloch militants quickly claiming responsibility. The complex, multilayered, seemingly never-ending security crisis in Balochistan continues. What is apparent is that neither the state's militarised approach to security in the province is working nor has the latest civilian government, led by one of Balochistan's most powerful tribal sardars, had much success in engaging Baloch separatists in dialogue.

The Mastung attack is potentially more ominous because of the IS connection. For more than a decade, as the state has focused on fighting Baloch separatists, sensible observers in the province have warned of a parallel, rising religious extremism threat. Indeed, at various points, local leaders have accused the state of colluding with religious extremists to help fight the secular Baloch separatists. Whatever the truth to those allegations, there is an undeniable fact: a vast infrastructure of mosques, madressahs and social welfare networks has been created in Balochistan, helping turn a traditionally non-extremist population towards certain brands of deadly religious radicalism. Mastung itself has been playing host to a virulent cocktail of extremism and Baloch separatist thought, leading to a steady series of attacks over the years in the district. The attack on Friday is particularly troubling because it underlines an IS presence in the province, the ultra-violent, ultra-radical fringe taking on mainstream political parties from the religious right.

It can be expected that the country's civil and military leaderships will unite to condemn the attacks and bemoan them as an attempt to sabotage CPEC by outside forces. While there may be some truth to those allegations, the twin attacks in Mastung and Gwadar almost certainly have very local roots. The long-running, low-level Baloch insurgency may be thoroughly riddled with inconsistencies, infiltrated by the state and too weak to mount a serious challenge to state authority, but neither is it any closer to being ended by the militarised approach of the security establishment. For all the state's claims, Balochistan effectively remains a vast no-go area and the frenzied hubs of CPEC-

related activity are guarded by extraordinary security. In the long term, this is not a viable approach for what is envisaged as a trading corridor with pockets of industrial activity. But is anyone in the state apparatus willing to acknowledge the flaws of a militarised approach to Balochistan's security troubles?

OBOR summit

IT might yet be the largest delegation from any country attending the One Belt, One Road summit in Beijing that was seen alighting from the aircraft on Friday. Pakistan's delegation consists of 11 senior leaders — from the prime minister to all four chief ministers — five members of the cabinet and the prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs. Then they are a number of other junior officials who have been blessed with an invitation to travel with this group to Beijing. The OBOR summit is an important event for Pakistan, whose participation is crucial by virtue of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and high-level representation is necessary. But although there are important memorandums of understanding to be signed, one wonders how many of the delegates have come because their attendance is actually required, and how many have taken it as a joyride and a chance to press the flesh. Most other countries in attendance have opted to send far leaner delegations, because this is, after all, about diplomacy and business. It is not a wedding ceremony.

We are entitled to ask how many of the agreements and MoUs that are signed during this trip will be shared with the public or parliament. Most importantly, when does the government intend to make the long-term plan for CPEC, which is going to be finalised on this occasion, public. All other economic documents that have a far-reaching impact on the economy are made public, so why should this document be an exception? Since Pakistan's leadership has chosen to represent the country with such force at this summit, perhaps they can now opt to communicate the understandings reached during it with equal emphasis to their own people back home. China is embarking on a historic venture with the OBOR initiative, and although the real fruits of the venture will take time to materialise, it is crucial for Pakistanis to know what exactly they are agreeing to, and what sort of changes they should expect. Thus far, CPEC has been little more than several rounds of smiles and handshakes for people here, and a growing number of them are now asking when the bill is expected, and how much it is estimated to be. Perhaps the visiting delegates should be required to present a detailed report to the national parliament and the provincial assemblies on all that they did during this visit.

Banning cold drinks

WHILE the state should ideally not be in the business of telling people what they can eat or drink, when it comes to vulnerable and impressionable segments of the population — such as youngsters — some regulations are necessary. In this regard, the Punjab Food Authority's recent move to ban the sale of carbonated beverages in and around schools should be welcomed. Fizzy drinks have a magnetic effect on youngsters who are attracted to their sugary flavours and neon colours. However, the effects these drinks have on young bodies can be highly negative. In fact, some countries, on the advice of experts, have considered slapping a 'fat tax' on sugary drinks as a way to fight high obesity rates. Justifying its decision, the PFA took the action as it says "carbonated drinks [are] ... injurious to health, affecting [the] physical growth of children". Legal action will be taken against those selling such drinks in school canteens and within a 100-metre radius of educational institutions. The ban is due to take effect after the summer vacations.

With the fizzy drinks' ban, we are reminded of tobacco makers' earlier targeting of youngsters with cute mascots and cartoons. Through the successful campaigns of activists, such deceptive advertising designed to attract young smokers was shut down. Manufacturers of carbonated beverages should be free to market their products — but not directly to children too young to understand what is and what is not good for their health. The PFA's move should be studied and replicated by other provinces so that children across Pakistan are kept away from sugary drinks while in school. According to figures published in *The Lancet* some years ago, Pakistan ranked 9th out of 188 countries where obesity was concerned. Instead of allowing the powerful producers of junk food to target children, more efforts must be made to encourage healthy eating habits so that youngsters are provided with nutritious foods and snacks that aid their physical and mental growth.

LoC violence

THE pattern of violence along the Line of Control in the disputed Kashmir region is familiar, but against a backdrop of an unravelling security and political situation in India-held Kashmir, the latest LoC tensions are particularly troubling. The usual set of accusations and recriminations have followed the violence over the weekend along the LoC: Pakistan has accused India of targeting local populations across the LoC; India claims it was Pakistan that started the exchange of fire. And as ever the brunt of the violence has been borne by the local population — numerous injured and several

reportedly dead by Sunday. With Pakistan's civilian leadership in Beijing for the One Belt, One Road summit and India declining to participate because of its objections to CPEC projects linked to China through the Gilgit-Baltistan region, the cross-LoC violence is also a reminder that the local and the regional are closely connected in Kashmir.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same. Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has been a frequent visitor to the LoC in recent times and has had a consistent message: Pakistan will defend itself against Indian belligerence while drawing international attention to India's crimes against the people of IHK. It is a sensible approach and should be complemented by counselling restraint to local commanders along the LoC. If India is keen on escalating conflict to draw attention away from the trouble it faces in the occupied territory, Pakistan should not allow attempted Indian diversions to succeed. Since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office three years ago, there have been periodic tests, varying in intensity, of Pakistan's resolve along the LoC. By now, Pakistan should be able to separate genuine incidents from possible Indian attempts to cause a flare-up along the LoC for political purposes.

On the political front, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Mr Modi need to return to the path of dialogue urgently. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kazakhstan presents an early opportunity, especially since the gathering will mark the accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO. The absence of dialogue has allowed Mr Modi to pursue ever more aggressive policies in IHK and for all of Pakistan's attempts to bring global attention to bear on India's violence against the Kashmiri people, the whole spectrum of Pakistan's relations and disputes with India has suffered. Indeed, for hawks in both countries, the argument that dialogue in current conditions is meaningless is part of the problem – arguably, it is the absence of dialogue that has allowed the situation in IHK to worsen and Pak-India tensions to remain at worryingly high levels. Mr Sharif has shown great courage in adhering to his dialogue-focused approach to India. The Indian prime minister needs to reciprocate and demonstrate that he truly understands the demands of statesmanship.

Closed border crossing

EVEN for a relationship that has historically been uneasy, ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan have reached a new low with the latter's deadly May 5 attack on villages on this side of the border in the vicinity of the Chaman crossing in Balochistan. The crossing has remained closed since then, and the event has left the inhabitants of these areas terrified with many of them having been displaced from their homes. It is

encouraging, then, that the operations chiefs of the militaries of both countries held a face-to-face meeting recently and agreed to end the acrimony as well as to make efforts towards building cooperative relations. The ISPR announced on Friday that a two-star Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral meeting had been held at GHQ in Rawalpindi. However, even before this announcement was made, the security forces of both countries traded fire across the border in Kurram Agency in the northwest that left at least two Pakistani soldiers wounded — an unfortunate occurrence that holds the potential of pulling the talks process back. While that should not be allowed to happen, the related issue of the closure of the Chaman border crossing must be resolved immediately.

The fact is that thousands of people are reliant on that crossing, for the exchange of goods and for their livelihoods; shutting it down amounts to punishing the very people who have already been grievously harmed by the events of May 5. A local trade leader in Chaman city told this newspaper that some 30,000 of his colleagues cross the border every day to work inside Afghanistan, and that as a result of the closure, many families have no source of income. It is such humanitarian concerns that ought to motivate the government into reopening the crossing. Consider, for example, that even at times when Pakistani and Indian forces are trading fire across the Line of Control, when diplomatic relations are acrimonious, the Wagah border crossing has remained open. The people must not be held hostage to what is happening between the two countries in the realm of diplomacy. Especially for the people living in the Chaman area, for whom cross-border movement is a part of daily life, it amounts to having been punished not once but twice — and for no fault of theirs. Better sense must prevail; Pakistan must now reopen the border so that the affected population can resume their normal routine.

Body as battleground

NOW more than ever, women's bodies represent the front lines for many an ideological battle. In parts of South Asia, women are being forcibly converted to depress religious minority demographics. In India, the 'medical wing' of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is advocating 'procedures' by which prospective mothers can supposedly have fair-skinned babies, a literal whitewashing of indigenous identities at the altar of Brahmanical supremacy. In Pakistan, the drive to mainstream Fata — while generally positive — may legitimise inhumane tribal practices against women in the bargain through the riwaj act. For many, the battle for survival begins in utero against sex-selective 'treatments' and abortions, and against possible abandonment once born — decisions mothers rarely make without coercion. And so the circle is complete; a woman's reproductive rights exercised by someone else while she is punished for giving birth to more of her kind. Most will be denied healthcare and education, and be

subjected to various forms of gender-based violence and its associated stigma — all of which essentially amount to power grabs.

Weeding out the pernicious roots of patriarchy requires state intervention, but it also requires that our societies shed their prevarications. Yes, economic conditions play a significant role, but these issues intersect across all classes. While advertisements promoting women's empowerment may have some positive effect on social attitudes, expecting capitalist entities alone to solve an issue that is fundamentally about inequality is absurd. And although NGOs serve an important function, an overreliance on foreign aid depoliticises and fractures women's movements. Educational and medical organisations must do more to inform women of their rights and the attendant risks of elective procedures. Most importantly, the view that this is a niche struggle — the burden to be borne exclusively by women — will continue to provoke hostility unless it is adopted by society at large. Increasing female participation across all spheres will bring change, but for women to fully reclaim ownership of their bodies, men must start behaving like allies, and not perpetrators and abettors.

CPEC transparency

NOW, more than ever, transparency in the CPEC project has become crucially important. As a report in this newspaper yesterday showed, the economic corridor goes far beyond highways and power plants, and its scope needs to be understood by everyone and its implications extensively debated in public. The denials issued by the planning minister via his Twitter account, calling the story “factually incorrect”, and one that is aimed to create fear, make little sense. The general sentiment is pro-CPEC; and this newspaper also supports the project. But that does not mean the government has carte blanche to negotiate the terms of this massive enterprise entirely in secret. The people have a right to know what exactly is being negotiated; this is especially crucial given the scale of the joint enterprise.

The government is now claiming that an “abridged version” of the Long-Term Plan has been shared with key stakeholders, including industry and the provincial governments, and that their feedback has been incorporated. But why has only an “abridged version” been shared? Even this looks almost identical to the longer version upon which yesterday's story was based — except that the details have been removed. Saying that the story was based on a “redundant document” sounds disingenuous at best. Pakistan's feedback on the plan was discussed at a Joint Cooperation Committee meeting held in Karachi on Nov 12, 2016. The plan was finalised on Dec 29, 2016. Less than two months separate these two dates. How many revisions did the Pakistani

government manage to incorporate in the Long-Term Plan during this period considering there was only one “special bilateral meeting” in between?

The larger issue here remains one of greater transparency in the execution of CPEC. If there are reservations on the part of China to widen the debate on the project, then it becomes the government’s job to explain to their Chinese counterparts that our political traditions demand greater transparency. All economic documents that contain plans for the medium term are public documents in this country. This includes the five-year plans and the IMF agreements. The CPEC Long-Term Plan cannot be an exception, especially since it goes further than any past economic plan in terms of its impact on the economy. There are no reasons to fear CPEC, nor should there be an automatic aversion to greater Chinese entry into our economy. But any anxieties on that count can only be alleviated through greater disclosure of the terms on which the project is being negotiated. Keeping matters secret, then issuing indignant denials that will clearly not survive scrutiny, only fans anxiety. The government should immediately prepare to reveal the full extent of the understandings it has entered into with the government of China, including placing whatever document that has been signed as the lead agreement on CPEC before parliament.

Dismal job creation

UNEMPLOYMENT is a much bigger and more complex problem than a faulty official headcount of jobseekers. A special report carried by this newspaper on Sunday shows that the official labour force surveys conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics are, to begin with, flawed on several counts and unable to capture the true extent of unemployment. The number of the unemployed is much larger than the one depicted — 5.9pc of the total workforce — in the latest survey carried out in 2014/2015. For example, even if, for a moment, we accept that the bureau actually had the exact number of “people actively seeking jobs as a percentage of the total workforce at a given time”, it would still have left out millions, especially women, living in the rural areas and not looking for paid work at all. Moreover, those who have stopped searching for jobs because they think they are not eligible, or who are unaware of vacancies in the market, also do not figure in the official numbers of the unemployed.

Unemployment in all its manifestations is but a reflection of the state of a country’s economy. Ours is not growing fast enough to absorb the millions entering the labour market every year. The two largest employers of the country’s workforce — agriculture and manufacturing — are shrinking. The services sector, on the other hand, has grown rapidly in recent years, but it can only create a limited number of jobs. The government,

whose capacity to provide large-scale employment is constrained by economic liberalisation and the implementation of free-market policies over the last three decades, appears mindful of this situation and is, therefore, encouraging self-employment. Joblessness with all its attendant issues, including underemployment and skill gaps, is a problem that takes long years to resolve even in the presence of a government keen to tackle it. Unfortunately, jobs simply do not figure prominently on the agenda of Pakistan's major political parties. The Nawaz Sharif government has put all its eggs in the CPEC basket, hoping that the connectivity initiative financed by Beijing will automatically take care of all economic problems, including unemployment. But it has not so far and will not. The government needs to realise that jobs are at the core of an inclusive economy. It must come up with policies that seek to resolve the unemployment problem and encourage the private sector to step up job creation.

Pakistan's cricket win

THE nail-biting third Test win against the West Indies on Sunday, that gave Pakistan a historic series victory over the hosts, was a befitting tribute to the two departing stalwarts of the game — Misbah-ul-Haq and Younis Khan. Pakistan, stretched to the penultimate over owing to an unexpected rearguard effort from the home side led by Roston Chase, eventually held their nerve to achieve a sensational win that epitomised the way both Misbah and Younis played cricket during their illustrious careers. Never ones to indulge in needless bravado, the two greats invariably preferred to adopt an intelligent approach to the game. They may have been understated but never underestimated by the opposition; their placid demeanour concealed an aggression that made both tough adversaries. There is only so much that pure passion can sustain. In modern sport, the edifice has to be built on with diligence, a strong vision and integrity — qualities Younis and Misbah had in abundance and that let them to excel and emerge as role models.

The 2-1 victory, which came after a long wait of nearly 60 years since the two teams have been playing international cricket with each other, saw leg-spinner Yasir Shah rediscovering his Midas touch after a prolonged bad patch. His 25 wickets in the three Tests were clearly the difference between the two sides. Besides, Pakistan can also take heart from the way young pacers Mohammad Abbas and Hassan Ali bowled. They will surely give underperforming seniors such as Mohammad Amir and Wahab Riaz much to ponder. Batting woes, however, continued for the visiting side. None of the top-order batsmen, including Ahmed Shehzad, Azhar Ali, Baber Azam and Asad Shafique, was able to hold their own against a bowling attack which, barring Shannon Gabriel's performance, lacked teeth. The retirement of Misbah, a tenacious, calm skipper, has

thrown open a debate about his successor, whereas Younis has left a void in batting that is unlikely to be filled for some years. This is a challenge for PCB because there are no immediate replacements in sight.

OBOR connectivity shunned

ALL historic opportunities come with an element of risk. It is, therefore, quite appropriate to ask hard questions about the financing and affordability of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and to which country will accrue the majority of gains in the years and decades ahead.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that CPEC is only one plank, an important one no doubt, of the vast One Belt, One Road project that Chinese President Xi Jinping has made the centrepiece of his rule — a developmental and an infrastructure-building spree on a scale that the world has not seen since the end of the Second World War.

While the US, architect of the current global economic and political order, has fretted that OBOR amounts to China's first attempt to redraw the global order, there is an undeniable opportunity at the heart of the venture.

If engaged with sensibly and pragmatically, OBOR could help all of China's trading partners and regional neighbours, big and small, realise collective gains. That makes India's decision to boycott the OBOR summit all the more puzzling. Even the US and Japan sent delegations to the summit in Beijing.

The Indian foreign ministry's official reasons for declining to participate are contradictory. Citing India's own Act East, Neighbourhood First and Go West policies, the ministry spokesperson has claimed that connectivity is at the heart of Indian foreign policy.

But the spokesperson has rejected that very connectivity through OBOR on the pretext of debt traps and financial responsibility — a bizarre form of diplomacy where India appears to believe that it is better placed to interpret the national interest of third countries and the sovereign decisions they are making than those countries themselves.

Even the objection to CPEC because of the claim that the Gilgit-Baltistan region is integral to the Kashmir issue is self-defeating; CPEC is only a part of OBOR, which has already drawn in virtually all of India's neighbours.

It is as if India believes that by ignoring OBOR, it can thwart its vast effects on the region. In reality, even the most cautious cooperative approach by India could yield significant benefits for both India and the region.

From a Pakistan-centric approach too, the Indian approach makes little sense. As the relationship between China and India itself has shown, trade and economic cooperation can reduce political tensions and create enough incentives for long-term disputes to not turn into open conflict. If OBOR succeeds even to a small extent, it could draw the wider region into a virtuous cycle of trade and prosperity that could cause the spectre of conflict among the region's three major military powers to recede.

Perhaps India sees itself as a global power to rival China eventually, but that does not mean it should spurn sensible opportunities in the interim. India should reconsider its stance on OBOR.

Transporters' strike

THE ongoing strike by goods' transporters has paralysed Karachi's port to the point where the arrival of vessels has been disrupted. Cargo and containers are piling up at the port, and business across the country has been badly affected. Meanwhile, export consignments are getting delayed due to an insufficient number of containers upcountry. Shortages are being created of basic necessities that are imported. The situation is a reminder of how heavily dependent the economy is on the meagre infrastructure of the Karachi port. A way must be found to end the strike as soon as possible, before it begins to have a greater damaging effect on the economy.

At issue is an order of the Sindh High Court banning the movement of heavy vehicles on the city's main arterial roads, so that transporters are forced to take a long detour that goes past Hub. The detour is so lengthy that transporters say it adds 200km to their journey, and business owners are not willing to raise their rates to compensate for the additional cost incurred on the movement of goods. There can be little doubt though that the transporters are defying the writ of the high court by persisting with their strike. But it is also true that the provincial government, which has practically taken over all the powers of the local administration in Karachi, has done nothing to build an alternative route for them. At the moment, there is something of a stalemate as construction on an underpass in one area of the city has blocked the only route that the trucks can take to the industrial areas of Korangi, Landhi and Port Qasim. By some estimates, some 7,000 trucks need to make this journey on a daily basis to feed the industry in these localities. Although the transporters are showing some intransigence in continuing with this mode

of protest, ultimately the blame must rest with the Sindh government that has failed to plan for the larger vehicular loads that the port city needs to accommodate. This is not just a matter of building more roads. It involves intricate planning to allow a diverse traffic flow to keep running smoothly. Unfortunately, planning is one area that the Sindh government is least interested in. This approach must change, because the problem is bound to grow with the passage of time, and more crippling strikes like the current one cannot be afforded.

Qalandar's Urs

THE annual Urs of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar got under way in the small Sindh town of Sehwan on Monday with traditional colour and zeal. What made this year's ceremony all the more poignant was that three months ago, the iconic shrine of the saint was bombed in a savage attack which killed over 80 people. The militant Islamic State group claimed to be behind the atrocity. Keeping the tragedy in mind, the Sindh government made stringent security arrangements for the Urs, as devotees thronged to the golden-domed mausoleum to pay homage to the saint. Fortunately, no untoward incident has been reported so far, although tragedy came in the form of the death of a few devotees due to heatstroke. The police appeared to be on their toes, as a few suspects who were trying to force their way into the shrine without proper body search were apprehended. Security forces should be commended for remaining alert.

In their war on society, extremist militants have struck Sufi shrines with particular ferocity. Along with Sehwan, terrorists have targeted other revered dargahs in Pakistan, including Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, Data Darbar in Lahore, and Bari Imam in Islamabad. In fact, ever since the suicide bombing at Bari Imam in 2005, the saint's annual Urs has not been held officially. While devotees participate in the rituals on an individual level, the passion the Urs was once known for is today subdued. In the greater war against militancy, it is essential that the state provides shrines and places of worship with ample security while ensuring that devotees face minimum hassle and can attend major events in large numbers. Such dargahs and annual celebrations send a message of brotherhood, acceptance and tolerance — words that are anathema to the militant hordes. That is why both state and society must play their due role in keeping alive such rich faith traditions.

A problematic bill

ACCUSED of delaying the implementation of the Fata reforms, the government convened a session of the National Assembly to pass the Riwaj bill and has lobbied for support in the National Assembly Standing Committee on States and Frontier Regions. But the government is now facing parliamentary opposition because of the perception that it is not serious about implementing the cabinet-approved Fata reforms, a five-year plan for mainstreaming the tribal areas. The government has also come under fire for the Riwaj bill itself as the implications of the problematic bill, a part of the overall Fata reforms that have been widely praised, become clear. Some context is important here. At the outset of the Fata reforms debate, even before the reforms committee headed by Sartaj Aziz was formed, there was one unambiguous consensus: the Frontier Crimes Regulation had to go. The infamous law had become the very symbol of Fata's unacceptable constitutional status and the oppression of its people.

The solution was obvious too: repeal the FCR and replace it with the normal criminal and civil justice system that exists in the provinces. After all, while there are vast disparities between, for example, parts of Sindh and Balochistan and the most developed parts of the country, no serious legal observer would suggest that different provinces need different systems of justice. A uniform system of justice is one of the elements that unite a people and a country. But the government did not have the courage to develop one, and, instead, drafted the Riwaj bill, a hybrid entity that retains the jirga system but tries to give it a modern, constitutional gloss. Imperfect as the bill itself was, the overall Fata reforms proposed by the government were sensible — a five-year mainstreaming project leading to Fata's eventual merger with KP.

The problem is the government now appears reluctant to implement the wider reforms and unwilling to commit to the eventual merger of Fata with KP. In this changed scenario, the issue of the Riwaj bill becomes trickier, a potentially permanent change that may be an improvement on the FCR but that falls unacceptably short of the standards of justice and democracy. The controversy in parliament too should not obscure what is at stake: many parliamentarians opposing the Riwaj bill are doing so only because they sense the government is backtracking on a Fata-KP merger, not because they necessarily disagree with the core values that the bill embraces. Whatever the protections in the bill itself, the fear is that a hybrid justice system will quickly be made subservient to conservative dogma and entrenched interests, and will produce results very similar to the current FCR-jirga system. The people of Fata deserve a justice system that is modern and constitutionally the same as the rest of the country.

PIA's descent

THE national flag carrier has suffered another blow to its image with the news that a consignment of heroin has been seized from one of its aircraft at London's Heathrow airport.

Earlier: British authorities say heroin found on Islamabad-London PIA flight

Apparently, the contraband was hidden inside the structure of the aircraft itself, since the authorities allowed all passengers to disembark before searching the plane. It is almost impossible that the contraband could have been placed in the aeroplane without the involvement of some members of the ground handling staff or maintenance personnel.

The Anti-Narcotics Force had cleared the plane before departure. The crew was not under suspicion because they were released after being briefly detained at the airport. All this indicates that the UK authorities had prior intelligence alerting them to the presence of the consignment in the aircraft, and the information was accurate enough to allow them to let all the passengers disembark before starting their search.

The episode illustrates the multiple dysfunctions that the airline has fallen prey to.

First, the strength of the rackets that operate within its abundant workforce is so powerful that it can be a conduit for narcotics smuggling.

Second, where the UK authorities had prior intimation of the presence of drugs in the plane, the Anti-Narcotics Force seemed to have had no idea. It is not clear who was supposed to retrieve the consignment at London Heathrow, but clearly, whoever was behind this attempt, had made arrangements. It is imperative that the matter be investigated thoroughly at Pakistan's end, starting with the drawing up of a list of all those who came into contact with the aircraft before its departure and who could have been in a position to plant the narcotics.

This is about more than just the image of the airline. More such incidents involving PIA could have adverse consequences for all international flights operated by the airline. It will be difficult to investigate much over here without at least some cooperation from the UK authorities.

According to some reports, an inquiry has been launched by the customs department, but given that the concealment of the heroin in the panels and other recesses of the plane suggests the involvement of other airport personnel as well, clearly the investigation needs to be on a broader level. PIA has suffered enormously at the hands

of the powerful rackets that operate within it, and it needs to be rescued from their clutches if it is to survive.

Preserving Moenjodaro

IT is regrettable that successive governments have not considered historical sites as national treasures to be preserved for their archaeological and ethnological value. Such is their blatant disregard that instead of protecting the ruins of Moenjodaro — one of the world's earliest cities dating to the Bronze Age — the Sindh government sanctioned the public use of this ancient site for a cultural festival a few years ago. Even scaffolding was erected for a laser show on the site. It is because Moenjodaro has faced debilitating damage from all quarters — natural and human — that this week international researchers warned it could fade into obscurity if conservation plans were not urgently implemented. To quote Dr Michael Janson, a German researcher spearheading a new conservation effort, the government's modus operandi has to change if Moenjodaro is to be saved from further damage. This is not the first time that the government's apathy has been pointed out by international experts. Further, long-running funding issues have left this 5,000-year-old site in a sorry state. With salinity, humidity and an elevated water table causing damage over the decades, it is imperative to take action now. Also, the Sindh government must provide the allotted funds for conservation as the chief minister pledged earlier this year.

Designated by Unesco as a world heritage site in 1980, Moenjodaro's architectural prowess — an impressive street grid, a sophisticated drainage system and a public bath — is of interest to archaeologists wanting to learn more about the Indus Valley civilisation. However, finding out more about a city said to rival even today's urban centres in Pakistan, if one were to study Moenjodaro's complex water and waste management system, requires undiscovered areas to be excavated. That said, excavations might render this ancient site even more vulnerable to damage without a conservation plan. In fact, some archaeologists say that unexcavated parts of this site are best left untouched. Given the state's lack of pride in our ancient history, many could be forgiven for concurring with this opinion.

Rising external deficit

THE latest data for the country's external account shows that the current account deficit is rising at a rapid pace. In the first 10 months of the fiscal year, the deficit has risen to \$7.2bn, more than triple the figure for the same period last year. Even month on month, between March and April of this year, there was a sharp spike of almost 100pc in the size of the deficit. For many months now, we have been hearing the government's spin on the growing deficit: it argues that this is a temporary state of affairs and is due to machinery imports. Once the machinery is installed and running, it says, the deficit will be reversed. This is the same argument that the Musharraf regime made in its last few years. But, instead of reversing, the deficit took us back to the doorstep of the IMF.

The size of the deficit is shaping up to be the government's biggest challenge now; unfortunately, there are no signs that it sees it that way. It is difficult to accept that the spike in imports is due to machinery imports under the CPEC project, since many CPEC imports are not showing up in State Bank data as the payments appear to be settled in China without passing through the government of Pakistan's accounts. The gap between State Bank data and that of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics points to this, and that gap at \$3.5bn is double what it was last year. The State Bank is conducting a large reconciliation exercise to rectify this gap, and once that is done, we are going to see a jump in the current account deficit. The situation on the external front is deteriorating at an accelerating pace and there is no plan, not even thinking in sight, to acknowledge this reality, let alone tackle it.

The government is increasingly giving the impression of having surrendered its obligations to manage the affairs of the country, and has preferred to put all its eggs in the CPEC basket. To every problem now, the answer we receive is, 'CPEC will fix it'. For the next year, the government wants to step on the accelerator and take growth beyond 6pc, which it might yet accomplish. But that acceleration will come at a high cost, through borrowing and squeezing existing taxpayers even harder, and through bundling all manner of frivolous costs into the power tariff. Without rectifying the external and fiscal deficits, Pakistan cannot afford high growth. Speeding up growth at the expense of the country's fiscal and external accounts is tantamount to taking drugs to experience a temporary high. There is always the inevitable hangover once the 'good times' end. What is more worrying is in this case we are building up these large vulnerabilities precisely as the outflows from the CPEC projects are set to commence.

Pakistanis detained

IT was a shocking decision that either betrays deep divisions inside Afghanistan or suggests that Kabul has all but given up on the path of dialogue with Pakistan. The detention of two Pakistani embassy staffers in Kabul by the Afghan intelligence agency NDS may have been brief, but the action itself and the manner in which it was carried out are disturbing. Simply, no diplomacy is possible if embassy staff are under threat from the host nation's own institutions. For all the ups and downs in Pak-Afghan ties over the decades, acts of naked aggression against one another's diplomats have been rare. Perhaps the NDS acted of its own accord on Wednesday or perhaps it was encouraged to do so by the political government; in either scenario, the damage inflicted on the already strained Pak-Afghan relationship is unwise. In a grim contrast to the shameful shenanigans of the NDS, the militant Islamic State group demonstrated yet again its reach inside Afghanistan with a deadly attack in Jalalabad. Several media workers were among the dead after the IS attacked the state broadcaster, adding to the grim toll on the country's journalists over the past decade and a half.

At this point, both Afghanistan and Pakistan need to urgently re-evaluate the bilateral relationship. There is a trend in recent times, especially on the Afghan side, that while senior government and military officials reiterate the need for dialogue and diplomacy, other elements within the state apparatus often do or say something egregious, quickly undermining any fragile detente that may be emerging. What is especially vexing is that in the rise of IS in the region, Afghanistan and Pakistan have a new and unprecedented interest in cooperating with each other. Moreover, for all of Kabul's complaints against Pakistan, some of which are legitimate, there has been a consistent effort by the latter to explore the possibility of political reconciliation in Afghanistan. From Russia to China to the US, major dialogue initiatives in recent years have been supported by Pakistan. Indeed, if there is a stumbling block, it increasingly appears to be Kabul itself. Unable to militarily hold back the Afghan Taliban and unwilling to engage in serious dialogue with Pakistan, President Ashraf Ghani's government seems to be lapsing into a familiar problem: blaming Pakistan for all Afghanistan's woes, many of which are self-inflicted.

Chickenpox outbreak

FOR months now, reports have been trickling in from Faisalabad, and the surrounding areas, of people dying of chickenpox. Wednesday saw yet another case when a man at the Allied Hospital succumbed to the largely benign but infectious illness. By some accounts, the death toll over the past few weeks alone exceeded 20. Exact figures are difficult to come by, and therein lies the problem: far from the provincial administration immediately coming up with a plan to spread information about the illness and providing training on diagnosing and managing the infection to medical staff at all health centres, including the smaller ones in the rural areas, action has been limited to very few medical facilities. It does not seem perturbed by local reports that the number of cases of chickenpox appears to be in the hundreds. The problems in controlling such an outbreak are manifold — including the citizenry's own lack of awareness in seeking sound medical advice when symptoms begin to manifest themselves and its propensity to seek the help of unqualified 'medics' for fear of long queues at public-sector facilities. But it has also been reported that the condition of patients who approached smaller state-run facilities, including Basic Health Units and Rural Health Centres, was often misdiagnosed.

That in Pakistan's most well-funded province people are dying of an illness that is not considered dangerous, unless there are complications, and for which a vaccine is also available is appalling. The Faisalabad commissioner has said that health department officials have been asked to make isolation beds functional at tehsil headquarters hospitals and BHUs, ensure the provision of equipment and medicines, and gather data from private medical facilities. It is to be hoped that such steps are taken on an urgent footing, with officialdom spurred on by the knowledge that many needless deaths have already occurred. In the long term, the inclusion of the chickenpox vaccine on the Expanded Programme on Immunisation might be worth considering. The goal must be to spread the vaccination net as far as possible.

COAS on extremism

EVEN stating the obvious has value in the right circumstances. That is the case with army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa's remarks on Thursday at a seminar in Rawalpindi titled 'Role of youth in rejecting extremism', organised by the ISPR in collaboration with the Higher Education Commission.

The army chief said that the ultimate objective of all religions is to teach people how to lead a good life, not how to die a destructive death. And, he added, an individual's

social responsibilities extend only as far as to enjoin what is right and avoid what is forbidden. They do not give anyone the licence to impose their beliefs on others.

Ordinarily, it would be somewhat curious for an army chief to address a seminar on extremism. However, in Pakistan's context, it is not only understandable but perhaps even necessary. After all, the military is on the front line of the extended fight against terrorism which in our case is the kinetic manifestation of religiously inspired extremism.

Moreover, it was an army chief, Gen Ziaul Haq, who, in pursuit of strategic regional objectives, patronised the ultra right and thereby set in motion a process of social engineering that has, over time, changed the very character of this nation.

The manipulation of religion for political ends — a policy which was continued after his death — also spawned violent extremist groups that have wreaked havoc in this country. This unfortunate reality makes the present army chief's recent observations particularly significant, for they can be seen as a policy statement, a break from the past. That said, notwithstanding the symbiotic link between terrorism and extremism, the military's limitations mean it is only equipped to deal with the former.

It is for the government, in fact the political class as a whole, to take up the gauntlet of countering extremism. And they must do so without resorting to petty point-scoring. Extremism is far too important an issue to be treated as a footnote and reduced to scattered, reactive statements.

Only a unified front with a clear, uncompromising and consistent message will be effective against what has become a pernicious threat to peaceful coexistence in this country. One way to demonstrate this is to condemn violence against members of any religious community, whether Christian, Hindu, Ahmadi, etc — even against those who profess to be secularists — and ensure that the perpetrators are successfully prosecuted.

There are laws against stoking hatred — from the pulpit or through the pages of school textbooks — and it is time they were implemented. The youth is particularly susceptible, and organisations with a militant bent should be stopped from recruiting students on university campuses. Turning our backs on decades of a ruinous policy and eradicating extremism from the grass roots will be an arduous process, but it can be done — if our elected representatives can rise to the challenge.

Jadhav's case

THE reaction to the preliminary order has been intense, seemingly politicised and, by and large, confused. Pakistan has not lost in the International Court of Justice and India has not won — the convicted Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav's fate continues to hang in the balance. Indeed, given the death sentence that Jadhav has been awarded, it was always likely that the first move of any court hearing any aspect of the case would be to ensure that the convicted individual is not executed. A dead individual cannot receive justice, it should be apparent. For Pakistan, it is important that the preliminary ruling of the ICJ be adhered to. Whatever the emotions and certainties of sections of the state and public, international obligations must be approached with a sense of seriousness and commitment. Yet, between the shameful politicisation of the handling of the ICJ hearing by the government and the latter's seeming uncertainty and confusion, there remains much to be clarified going forward.

First, the civil and military leaderships must jointly and publicly address the matter of the ICJ hearing and clearly state both what is now required of Pakistan and what Pakistan intends to do as a result. While it could be that the state representation before the ICJ is entirely adequate, the matter has been politicised to the extent that the opposition is questioning the PML-N's motives — a disquieting situation that has the potential to escalate into another so-called national security crisis. Second, beyond the task of making a robust defence before the ICJ — the matter does not just involve the fate of a single Indian convict in Pakistani custody, but has important principles of international law at stake — Pakistan must proceed very carefully with a resolution of the Jadhav affair domestically. This paper opposes the death penalty in all instances and does so in this case too. Equally troubling, however, is the opacity with which the case has been handled; an unnecessary secrecy given that it appears fairly obvious that Jadhav was involved in spycraft of some manner. There are also regional and international dimensions to be considered of Pakistan imprisoning or executing a foreigner convicted in secret of espionage and crimes against the state. Perhaps the civilian court route ought to be considered by the state, with suitable accommodations made to shield secret information. The case of Jadhav needs to be handled sensibly and sensitively.

Woman survivor's trauma

THE merciless violence suffered by women in this country is evident in cases of 'honour' crime, premeditated murder and acid attacks — often inflicted by perpetrators known to them. Take the case of Khadija Siddiqui. Last year, the young law student was stabbed 23 times in Lahore by a fellow student. Although she miraculously survived the attack, it left her with wounds that required 200 stitches. This week, Ms Siddiqui learnt that she would be sitting her final exams at the same time as her attacker. Disturbingly, the alleged attacker, the son of an advocate, is on post-arrest bail granted by a sessions court in December 2015. As a victim of a gruesome crime, not only has Ms Siddiqui suffered tremendous physical and psychological trauma but now must relive memories of this assault as she may come face to face with her attacker, who had stabbed her in the presence of her six-year-old sister. Ironically, instead of the justice system punishing the alleged perpetrator, he is about to sit his exams for entry into the legal fraternity that is supposed to uphold the rule of law and work towards the protection of human life. This is a travesty of justice; it also demonstrates a lack of respect for and apathy towards women victims.

Documenting cases of more than 2,500 women victims of violence in 2016, a recent HRCP report has noted no significant decline in violence against women. This calls for strengthening legislative mechanisms and protection systems for women. With incriminating evidence including video footage of the attack, Ms Siddiqui's case must be re-examined so that justice is served and her alleged attacker, known for his violent behaviour, does not walk free — despite reports that powerful quarters are trying to influence the outcome of the case. The practice of silencing women victims and coercing them to withdraw court cases must stop. The state must ensure that legislation such as the Punjab Protection Against Violence Act, 2016 is implemented to protect them.

PIA's search for hope

AS it descends deeper into chaos, PIA's search for hope has yielded few results so far. The understandable frustration of the prime minister's aviation adviser was evident from his recommendations given to the Senate Special Committee on PIA on Thursday. He presented three stark choices: let the status quo stand, shut down the airline altogether, or restructure it. The fact that he did not even mention privatisation, despite the airline being on the early implementation list of the government's privatisation programme since 2013, speaks volumes for the kind of political storms that have obstructed the

efforts of successive governments to find a way forward for the ailing carrier. The Musharraf regime tried to sell the Roosevelt Hotel in New York in order to pay off some of the airline's debts that have weighed down its balance sheet, only to find itself in the middle of a political storm. The PPP government tried to enter into a code-sharing agreement with Turkish Airlines, but became embroiled in a street fight with the unions in the process. Similarly, the current government found itself in a bruising battle with the unions when it tried to hurriedly transform the state-owned airline into a corporation via a presidential ordinance.

In each case, there was fault to be found on all sides. The unions are undoubtedly unruly and a nursing ground for all sorts of rackets. Successive governments, for their part, have moved secretly, and in some cases, in a heavy-handed manner, to advance their proposals, giving rise to suspicions that private interests took precedence over the airline's larger good. The opposition parties have played a destructive role, preferring to be obstructive rather than constructive. They have, at every opportunity, opposed the government's moves even though they themselves had made similar moves when in power. Meanwhile, the accumulated losses of the airline, which made headlines when they touched Rs92bn in 2010, had crossed Rs300bn by January of this year. The result is in the form of the stark choices presented by the adviser, which include shutting the airline down altogether.

But despair is no solution, and the search for hope cannot be abandoned. Given this is an election year, there is little chance that the government can be expected to take any of the bold moves required to reform the national carrier. For the next year, unfortunately, the airline has no option but to hobble along with its clobbered reputation and moth-eaten balance sheet. There is no one cause for PIA's decline. Unruly labour unions, corruption, political interference and the open skies policy have all played their role in a complex mix. But the solution clearly lies beyond the government's control now. The airline must pass out of government hands if it is to survive.

Monetary policy

WITH exports dropping and the current account deficit spiking, the State Bank chose an awkward place to lay its emphasis in the latest monetary policy announcement. It devoted a few sentences to the worsening situation in the external sector, preferring to focus on the growth rate and the "expansion in economic activity". It is true that the overall growth rate of the economy has been trending upwards since last year, and the outlook says this could extend into the next year too. In some sectors of the economy, sentiments are indeed 'upbeat', as the bank describes it. But the bigger cautionary tale

lies in exports and the larger picture coming out of the external sector. The bank seeks some comfort in the assertion that “official inflows are expected to provide support to foreign exchange reserves”, but it should be noted that this is, to put it gently, a second best option. It is true that “a sustained increase in other private inflows — foreign direct investments and export earnings in particular — is required to fully finance the surge in imports”, as the State Bank puts it.

The statement also mentions an uptick in inflation in the days to come, attributing this mostly to an impending pass-through of oil prices, and a surging demand in the economy. Additionally, one wonders how the spending spree that is scheduled for next year in light of the elections is going to impact the monetary aggregates, thereby fuelling inflation further. But there is room for growth in inflation that has sat at almost unhealthy lows for a number of years now. The statement is at its most unconvincing when it says an improvement in global demand and the large share of machinery in the composition of imports “bodes well for future economic activities”. The customary mention of CPEC as a driver of growth is also less than fully convincing. The link between growth and the current account deficit is historically proven in this country. The realities today bring back memories of the Musharraf years, when the current account deficit and inflation eventually swamped the growth process. Today’s growth process is a lot less robust, and certainly less broad based than it was at that time. There are sound reasons to cautiously approach the government’s claim that it has revived growth and turned the corner from the low-growth, low-inflation equilibrium that the economy had settled into.

Polio misconception

THE challenges and, indeed, outright hostility at times, faced by the country’s polio teams can be gauged from an unpleasant incident witnessed at a school in Islamabad recently. A polio vaccination team, having previously informed the institution’s management about its impending visit, was disallowed from administering polio drops to the students. The team was told that permission from the parents was needed. The Islamabad Capital Territory assistant commissioner, Syed Ali Asghar, was called to the scene and eventually, the drops were administered to all but one child, whose father arrived and reportedly tried to intimidate Mr Asghar. Subsequently, on Friday, the official was removed from service and surrendered to the Establishment Division. A clue as to why can be found in the fact that the child’s mother is the director of the Excise and Taxation Department.

That an official be so censured for trying to discharge his duties is beyond the pale, and throws into question the transparency that ought to dominate the workings of the

bureaucracy. However, what this incident also illustrates is a point vital to the country's anti-polio efforts. In many sections of society, particularly amongst the educated and/or financially stable, it is routine practice to have children vaccinated against several illnesses, including polio, at private facilities — or even if not, still outside the purview of polio vaccination drives. Such parents assume that since their child has already received the polio drops, there is no need to ingest more. Playing into this also are the stories that come to light now and again about the vials carrying compromised vaccines due to interruptions in the cold-chain storage procedures, or some other reason. This reluctance needs to be overcome through a targeted awareness-raising campaign. The fact is that to eradicate polio in populations, all children — even those already vaccinated — must be reached near simultaneously so that the virus is suppressed in its entirety. This is not too difficult a misunderstanding to clear up, and deserves the authorities' attention.

Polls vs economics

IF there was any doubt that we are about to see a populist budget at the end of the week, the development programme announced by the government ought to dispel it. The development budget for next year has been hiked by almost 20pc, going beyond Rs1tr. We will know the details after the budget, but for now it seems the government is prioritising discretionary expenditure as far as possible with an eye on the elections. Some of the schemes announced smack clearly of election-year gimmickry. Take, for instance, the programmes titled 'Electricity to All' and 'Clean Drinking Water for All' which have received Rs12.5bn each. It is obvious that providing electricity to underserved areas and clean drinking water to urban areas will cost far more than this amount, and require far-reaching legislative changes as well as reforms to reduce power theft and unregulated groundwater extraction. Yet we are unlikely to see any changes in those areas. Instead, all the government now appears to be aiming for, in the final fiscal year of its term, is quick and cosmetic changes designed more to capture votes than deliver lasting results to the populace.

We are also putting all our eggs in the CPEC basket, which is seeing further allocations of Rs180bn in its portfolio. We will know more about the details in this area when the final Public Sector Development Programme is released closer to the budget date, but it is clear for now that the expenditures focus on more roads than anything else. Again, the priorities of election-year spending shine through clearly. CPEC is a fixed point in the government's agenda, but all else is being dictated by politics. It is unclear where the Rs400bn increase in development spending by bodies like WAPDA and NTDC will come from, and one can only hope that this will not be borne by power consumers.

The biggest question about the development programme is whether the revenues required for its implementation will be available. One will have to follow the budget closely to see if there is a corresponding increase in revenue measures to help carry the cost of this increase in development spending. Thus far, the government has had tremendous difficulty in broadening the tax net to pay for its ambitious and expensive development plans. This has resulted in existing taxpayers being squeezed harder and harder to carry the incremental fiscal burden. Being an election-year budget, and given the development plan already announced, it seems this year will see the same trend.

Rouhani's victory

WITH the results of the Iranian presidential elections confirmed, Hasan Rouhani will have four more years at the helm of affairs. It was a closely watched and closely fought race, with Mr Rouhani staving off a strong challenge from conservative cleric Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi. In a neighbourhood dominated by a variety of hereditary potentates and beset by extremist militancy, Iran's hybrid clerical-democratic system has proven remarkably durable ever since the 1979 revolution, surviving jolts from within and without. On the domestic front, Hasan Rouhani's victory shows that the Iranian people want to give the moderate cleric another chance at realising his vision. He managed to secure nearly 60pc of the vote, with a respectable turnout of around 70pc of the electorate. It seems clear that the Iranian people want a moderate, pragmatic leadership at the helm to address their domestic woes, the top-most of which is an economy plagued by internal problems and external pressures.

It is also true that the Iranian people have endorsed Mr Rouhani's external policies and want continuation of the course of action he has embarked on. Of course, the crowning achievement of the first Rouhani administration was 2015's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 is formally known. That landmark deal was hailed across the international community, with the exception of Israel, the Gulf Arabs and the hard right in America. Interestingly, today the poster boy of the American extreme right, Donald Trump, sits in the White House, and he has sent a message about where his foreign policy priorities lie by visiting Saudi Arabia and Israel in his maiden overseas visit. The establishments in Washington D.C., Riyadh and Tel Aviv have no love lost for Tehran and have made threatening noises with regard to Iran. With Rouhani's re-election, the Iranian people have indicated that they favour the path of dialogue and eschew confrontation. Now it is up to Mr Trump and his regional allies to reply in kind. Rather than ratchet up tension and provoke a radical response from Tehran, the US should realise that Iran is a major regional player and all outstanding issues with the Islamic Republic should be dealt with on the negotiating

table. The 'fighting words' emanating from Washington and Riyadh will do nothing but further fan the flames and add to the Middle East's woes. Mr Rouhani's policy of dialogue should not be dismissed.

Autonomy for NCHR

THE very raison d'être for the existence of a monitoring body is negated when it lacks autonomy. That is why human rights activists are demanding that the government withdraw its notification about bringing the National Commission of Human Rights under the control of the federal ministry of human rights. At a press conference in Karachi on Friday, civil society representatives said that the body was conceived as an independent entity when it was established in May 2015. To deprive it of its autonomy, they added, will be a violation of the NCHR Act 2012 that mandates independent commissions to oversee the state's performance vis-à-vis human rights and present recommendations in the light of their own findings. Speakers also highlighted the government's repeated interference in the NCHR's work. The notification has reportedly been triggered by an incident when an NCHR member "embarrassed" an MNA by contradicting her while she was discussing terrorism-related issues during an official visit to the US.

All governments, particularly those in countries with zero or minimal accountability, like nothing more than monitoring bodies that check their performance in name only. Otherwise they might be confronted with a situation such as that in the US this April when the Pakistani government delegation was left rather red-faced before the UN Committee on Torture. The delegation's report posited that Pakistan was now virtually free of torture and various other indignities — in short, that it had become something of a human rights utopia. As anyone familiar with events in this country knows well, that is far from the truth. The NCHR, as well as a number of Pakistani and international NGOs, presented shadow reports that contradicted the official stance in almost every respect. They dilated upon the ways in which the state complied with neither its own laws nor its international obligations that are meant to protect human rights. The government must realise that independent monitoring bodies are an essential feature of democracy. They are not the problem: the government's performance is.

Trump's bluster

INTERNATIONAL politics can often resemble the theatre of the absurd. Certainly, US President Donald Trump's address to a hall full of leaders from across the Muslim world on Sunday in Riyadh could fit the description. Both during the poll campaign and his presidency thus far, the American leader has demonised Muslims and singled them out for sharp criticism. And yet he was given a red-carpet reception by the kings, potentates and presidents-for-life who lord it over the Muslim world. Mr Trump had at one time toyed with the idea of setting up a 'registry' of Muslims in his country; he also signed an executive order banning the entry of people from seven Muslim-majority states before it was suspended by the American courts. But, bizarrely enough, at the summit he lectured his audience on the virtues of "hope and love".

However, there was very little "hope and love" where Iran was concerned during the Arab-Islamic-American Summit. By excluding it from the event, the organisers and participants sent a pointed message to Iran that it did not belong in the 'Islamic' category. Moreover, Mr Trump did not mince his words; he lambasted Iran and accused it of fuelling the fires of "sectarian conflict and terror", adding that Tehran must be isolated. The Saudi king, the host of the conclave, himself set the tone before Mr Trump's address by referring to Iran as the "spearhead of global terrorism". Since 1979, when the imperial order in Iran was overthrown and replaced with a hybrid clerical-democratic regime, Riyadh and Tehran have had frigid ties. The Saudis accuse Iran of wanting to 'export' its revolution, while the Iranians consider Saudi Arabia an American 'stooge', scheming against their interests. While this cold war has continued for over three decades, today, the Saudis and Iranians have come dangerously close to a full-blown confrontation. This state of affairs calls for regional efforts to reduce tensions between the two countries and to ensure that the focus on fighting terrorism in the Muslim world is not lost. Unfortunately, by not extending an invitation to Tehran to participate in the summit and by giving space to the American leader to criticise Iran, the kingdom has only worsened matters. A summit that features numerous Muslim states can be an excellent forum for discussing differences. At this summit, there was only bluster.

The fallout of the Riyadh conference, which our prime minister attended, raises questions about the Saudi-led military coalition that this country's former army chief leads. Considering the anti-Iran bombast, will the coalition focus on the militant Islamic State group and similar organisations, or will it target Iran and its regional proxies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis? Pakistan's Foreign Office should clarify its position on the summit proceedings and Mr Trump's vow to isolate Iran. Meanwhile, Pakistan would be well advised to stay away from any sectarian adventure.

Free speech in danger

THE state appears to have developed a taste for intimidation that society ought to be deeply concerned about. Initially, when a handful of bloggers went missing, there was great deal of confusion and uncertainty. Soon, however, it became apparent that a new front against lawful free speech had been opened under the guise of cracking down on unlawful conduct. The passage last year of a controversial law regulating online conduct appears to have opened the floodgates, leading to the astonishingly brazen attack by the interior ministry-led Federal Investigation Agency against vocal critics of the military and the government by social-media activists. This much is obvious: the FIA actions amount to a gross abuse of power that must be brought to an end with a clear and categorical commitment by the government that the actions will not be repeated. Closing in on 70 years of independence, the ability of the citizenry to choose its own government and criticise the state have been hard-won gains that cannot be given up. That an elected government is cracking down on legitimate dissent by the public against the state is doubly shameful.

It is clearly time for the courts to step in and defend the rights of the public — a core duty of the judiciary being to uphold the inalienable rights of the individual against any attack, but especially attacks led by the state. The questions are so numerous that it is scarcely believable a robust challenge to the FIA's actions will not be upheld in a court of law. What needs to be established first is who has directed the FIA to launch its crackdown. Is it really some elements within the government or are other institutions using the FIA as a cover? Then there is the question of how the lists of targeted social-media activists have been drawn up. What legally enforceable standards have been applied and has the selection of targets been nakedly political or targeted? Finally, there are the rumours of allegation and intimidation by state officials against social-media activists and other dissidents. Is the state working under the cover of supposedly legal actions by the FIA to clamp down on free and political speech far beyond the parameters of the allegedly narrow lists of suspects? The history of state suppression of free speech is long and tawdry; the history of legitimate defiance is long and noble. New battle lines call for vigorous defences.

Ruckus by lawyers

A SECTION of the legal fraternity in the country is once again demonstrating it has scant respect for the law that is its duty to uphold. On Saturday in Lahore, pandemonium broke out at a convention organised by the Supreme Court Bar Association and the Lahore High Court Bar Association to underscore their demand that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif resign following the Supreme Court verdict in the Panama Papers case. A group of lawyers affiliated with the PML-N barged into the venue and, in an attempt to shut down the event, manhandled the members of their profession already present. They shattered the auditorium's window panes, occupied the stage, and locked up the president and the secretary of the SCBA in the library of the building. After calm was restored by the anti-riot police force, the host bar associations announced a nationwide campaign against the prime minister if he did not step down by May 27.

Such behaviour in and of itself would be considered thuggish. That it is members of the legal fraternity who have acted in such a manner makes it doubly shocking. If lawyers can engage in disorderly conduct that one associates with disreputable louts, what hope is there of other sections of society engaging in civil discourse? As for those who were the target of last week's assault, their actions also demonstrate contempt for the law, albeit in a different way. After all, the Supreme Court majority verdict ordered that a JIT be formed to determine the source of the money trail pertaining to the premier's family as revealed by the Panama Papers; it did not direct the prime minister to resign. The JIT has commenced the task it has been assigned. Why then are certain bar associations insisting on a course of action that the apex court has not ordered? The lawyers may have the right to demand that the prime minister step down, but threatening direction if he does not is unacceptable.

Manchester blast

THE deadliest attack in the UK since 2005 is the most wretched yet. A suicide bomber stood among a crowd of teenagers and young people and deliberately detonated an IED — an act of violence so ghastly that it numbs the mind. Pakistan, which has suffered many terrorist atrocities, none worse than the barbaric targeting of children in the APS attack of December 2014 in Peshawar, can extend its deepest condolences to the UK and must renew its pledge to cooperate with the UK in the fight against terrorism wherever necessary. The militant Islamic State group, which has claimed responsibility for the Manchester attack, is truly the biggest global threat since Al Qaeda, and a

greater, more sustained, more coordinated effort is required by the global community to eliminate it. Confirmed details are necessarily scarce so soon after the attack, but the scope of the IS threat is clear. From so-called lone wolf attacks by self-radicalised individuals absorbing IS propaganda to the direct cultivation of militant cells, networks and armies across the world, IS has established itself as the pre-eminent militant threat to the global order.

Worryingly, while the international community appears to understand the gravity of the IS threat and the need for coordinated action against it, the global fight against militancy appears to be headed in the wrong direction. In a week where the US president is in the Middle East and representatives of many Muslim states are gathered to pledge to fight militancy, there could have been the possibility of a united front against the principal common threat facing the Western and Muslim worlds. Instead, US President Donald Trump's policies threaten to exacerbate the very IS threat he has vowed to eliminate, while the Muslim world appears to once again be dividing itself along sectarian lines. Where IS has deadly clarity in considering every single nation on the earth as its enemy, the international community is unable to recognise that the direction it is taking in the fight against militancy may prolong and extend the threat of terrorism.

For its part, Pakistan needs to recognise that it risks jeopardising the gains it has made in the domestic fight against militancy for two reasons. One, the IS threat inside Pakistan is not being taken seriously enough, particularly with strong counter-extremism measures yet to be implemented. The pernicious effects of IS propaganda are already becoming visible inside Pakistan, with the skilful exploitation by the group of social media and the internet already claiming a number of victims. Just as counter-insurgency and counterterrorism together have been unable to end the Pakistani Taliban threat, the IS threat will not be defeated without robust counter-extremism measures. Two, Pakistan must reconsider its involvement with the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance if it continues down the path of becoming an anti-Iran force. The national interest is paramount and clear: no involvement in regional or sectarian conflicts of any kind.

Kashmir travesty

IT defies all logic that an Indian army officer responsible for using a man in India-held Kashmir as a human shield should now be commended by his chief for making "sustained efforts in counter-insurgency operations". Major Gogoi had caught the eye of the world when a young Kashmiri man was forcibly tied to the bonnet of his military vehicle so that the officer could protect himself as he went about his duties during an election in the occupied region. And yet, no news emerging from IJK shocks any more.

The list of human rights abuses perpetrated on the people of this scenic land is long and full of ugly innovations. Many of those who have been persecuted in full public view were diehard protesters resisting the might of an increasingly aggressive — desperate — India seeking to quell the calls for liberties and freedom for a subjugated lot. Caught in the vicious momentum generated by the security forces are also individuals not present in the swollen rows of those bent upon responding to the Indian actions with stones — such as the young man who was tied to the four-wheeler. He said that he was not a stone-thrower but an embroiderer; he has suddenly been empowered by the brutality of the Indian soldiers to make a most enduring, vivid impression on the minds of the Kashmiri revolutionaries. There are many others among the Kashmiri youth, including young girls, whose protesting images are creating an impact outside the held valley despite the Indian state's clamping down on social media there.

But just as there are those who support the Kashmiris' call for freedom, there are others who defend the soldiers' actions. There is the Indian defence minister who has supported the actions of Major Gogoi, while actor Paresh Rawal has threatened writer Arundhati Roy as she spoke out against the incident. Whereas the rational world has protested both the incident, and the certificate of commendation to the officer involved, the Indian government wants to use the image of the young man tied to the jeep as a statement of its intention: the state of India is determined to crush the Kashmiri uprising. What New Delhi does not realise is that this kind of state brutality will only increase the resentment of the Kashmiris and cause the world to take serious note of their protest.

Documents from 1967 war

THE documents and two-way radio messages that Israel has declassified on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war are a treasure trove for researchers worldwide and will, no doubt, help solve some of the riddles surrounding the shocking Arab defeat despite superiority in men and material, if not in quality. Israel, according to the documents, had 412 aircraft, including 203 bombers and fighters with 235 pilots, as against 826 flying machines and 980 pilots that Egypt, Syria and Jordan had between them. Some documents attribute the destruction of Egyptian air power to the fact that the Egyptian defence minister was airborne and the air force had been ordered not to fire on a flying object. While Israel's own losses were minimal — 46 planes lost and 24 pilots killed, one of them in friendly fire — 250 Egyptian aircraft were destroyed or disabled, with over 100 pilots killed.

Barring Sinai, which Egypt recovered thanks as much to the 1973 war as to the US-brokered Camp David accord, the fruits of that victory are still with Israel. It has annexed

Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, while the West Bank and Gaza continue to remain under its occupation in violation of UN resolutions and several bilateral and multilateral treaties to which America is party. The documents reveal the contradictions in Israeli thinking. Abba Eban, one of Israel's finest diplomats and then foreign minister, opposed from day one any idea of Israel gobbling up the conquered lands. His book, *My People*, shows both his enlightened mind and the warmth with which he speaks of the joint Judeo-Arab glory that Spain was. The documents quote him as opposing the annexation of Arab territories and warning that the world would side with the Palestinian liberation movement. The true Zionist philosophy, however, was articulated brazenly by Levi Eshkol, then prime minister. "If it were up to us," he said, "we would send all the Arabs to Brazil." Since then, it seems, men like Eban have been in short supply in Israel.

More brinkmanship

AMIDST more Pakistan-India jingoism and hyperbole, the Pakistani high commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, has struck a sensible note. Rejecting India's claims of a cross-LoC strike against Pakistani security forces in interviews with the Indian media, Mr Basit has emphasised that all problems between the two countries need to be resolved through dialogue. The high commissioner's measured comments may seem out of step with the near-hysterical commentary in sections of the Indian state and media — hysteria that some in Pakistan are more than willing to indulge in as well — but a dialogue-oriented approach is precisely what is needed as tensions in the region threaten to spiral out of control once again.

The problem with overheated rhetoric ought to be apparent: there is the threat of devastating firepower behind it. Take the letter written by Indian Air Force chief B.S. Dhanoa that the Indian media recently revealed has been sent to every officer under his command and in which the air chief marshal warns that the air force must be prepared to act on "very short notice" because of a "sub-conventional threat" allegedly emanating from Pakistan. As news of the letter spread, the Pakistan Air Force chief Sohail Aman warned that any aggression by India would be met with a response that would be remembered for generations. Both the Pakistani and Indian air chiefs command fleets of aircraft that can deliver nuclear weapons. Surely, while they need to maintain the morale and readiness of the forces at their command, they must do so in a manner that does not stir public anxiety or stoke jingoism. Elsewhere too, among sections of both states and the media, the rush to brinkmanship and one-upmanship is of great concern. It does not matter that Pakistan-India history reflects many such instances of rhetorical

tumult and low-level skirmishes; what matters is that these may lead to wider conflict the next time.

Worrying too is the tendency of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to squeeze the few people-to-people initiatives that still exist. From targeting student delegations to effectively declaring a moratorium on all sporting ties with Pakistan, the Indian government seems to believe that punishing the people here is a justifiable tactic. The Indian pressure may lead to the Pakistani state resorting to similar actions, potentially causing a rupture in the tenuous people-to-people contacts that have been sustained in even tension-ridden times. With the Pakistani and Indian media already virtually shut out of the market in the other's country, the severing of all ties between the two populations would leave just the states to determine bilateral ties. Given the tendency of the two countries to respond to provocations rather than find peaceful solutions through dialogue, the prospect of such a freeze in people-to-people ties should be of deep concern.

Quasi-doctors

WHEN quacks believe they have a 'right' to their quackery, it is an indication of how far the rot has spread. A two-judge bench of the Peshawar High Court was seized of two petitions filed by a number of medical practitioners against the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Care Commission's action of sealing the clinics they were running in Malakand and Swat districts. The petitioners also requested the court to order the provincial health authority to process their applications for registration/licence/permit pending before it. These individuals included 23 paramedics with two-year professional diplomas in dental technology, 12 paramedics with one-year diplomas in dental surgery, and others with one-year diplomas and certificates in various fields of dentistry. Fortunately, the court has not found their credentials sufficient to grant them relief. In a detailed judgement delivered recently, it has held that the petitioners did not possess "the prescribed qualification for running private dental or medical clinics under the existing law". The judges held that a "dental practitioner must possess a bachelor's degree in dental surgery" to be legally entitled to practise.

When a state assigns such shockingly low priority to healthcare as to spend only 0.9pc of its GDP on the sector despite the needs of a growing population, there are bound to be unscrupulous individuals who will take advantage of that gap. The medical profession, because it directly impacts life and limb, requires those aspiring to it to invest considerable time, effort and resources before they can assume such an onerous responsibility. The KP health authorities are to be commended for taking action against

clinics that provide substandard care. It is not only a question of protecting individuals from harm — when people suffer at the hands of unqualified medical professionals, it can increase the government's health burden, at least in the case of those who cannot afford expensive private care. That is because — provided the patient has survived his initial 'treatment' — more costly medical procedures are needed to repair the damage caused by quasi-doctors. Moreover, this is only the tip of the iceberg. It is estimated that there are tens of thousands of quacks all over the country who endanger the lives of people every day. All said and done though, the crux of the issue is a population whose basic human needs are not being met, and a callous state unmindful of its duty.

Drowning deaths

EVERY year, Karachi's beaches are witness to deaths by drowning, the grief of the survivors often being compounded by the fact that tragedy strikes when a family or a group of friends are out on an excursion. On Tuesday, six swimmers drowned in two separate incidents near Hawkesbay beach and the Do Darya area of the city, taking the death toll to about a dozen in just three days. The city administration has reacted by imposing Section 144 — which lays curbs on the assembly of people — to ban swimming in the sea. But if the past is any guide, it will be people's access to the beach that will be curtailed through police pickets. This method has been employed since 2014, when upwards of two dozen people drowned in July during the brief Eidul Fitr break. Even so, reports of deaths continued to trickle in that year and in the years that followed, for people make it to the coast one way or the other.

It needs to be accepted that a ban is no long-term solution, and amounts to punishing the citizenry in times of electricity shortages combined with fierce temperatures. Besides, there is the perennial dearth of recreational facilities. The city must come up with long-term measures, including beefing up the number of lifeguards on duty — a task that is currently largely left to the non-governmental sector. Also vital are public-awareness campaigns because even where lifeguards are present or safety warnings have been put up, people often tend to ignore the advice of those who are aware of the dangers posed by the sea. Further, there is an urgent need to conduct research on how the city's many land-reclamation projects, and recent constructions such as high-rise buildings on the shoreline and the deep-sea port, may have altered the sea currents, perhaps rendering some beaches more dangerous than before. The people of Karachi must have the right of access to the beaches — but in safety.

Economic Survey

NO matter how impassioned his appeals to the nation to look on the bright side of things, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, who presented the Economic Survey yesterday, cannot gloss over the fact that the growth revival he and his government are touting as their achievement is accompanied by an equally rapid and intensifying growth of vulnerabilities. What now remains to be seen is which of these two — revival or vulnerabilities — will eventually win. The revival of the growth process is most visible in the headline GDP figure that was recorded at 5.3pc this year, climbing above the 5pc level for the first time in a decade. The chief vulnerability that is haunting this achievement is the current account deficit, which will climb to \$8.5bn by the end of the year, compared to \$2.5bn last year. We are told to not read too much into this number as it is largely a result of ‘machinery imports’, which once commissioned, will help spur exports and growth, and thereby lead to a reversal of the trend. At the moment, though, all bets are open as to whether or not this prayer will be answered.

Beyond the vulnerabilities, the quality of the growth being touted also needs to be closely examined. Much of the impetus this year has come from agriculture, which has benefited from subsidised fertiliser as part of a package of incentives announced by the government last year, when the sector experienced negative growth. Financial services have also contributed significantly to growth in services, according to the minister, who cited a massive increase in the asset base of banks. How long can the government continue to subsidise fertiliser? How long will the financial system continue to register increases in its asset base considering that the numbers of depositors is not rising and financial inclusion is still a long-haul job? Whereas it is important to acknowledge the growth that has taken place this year, it is equally essential to ask how lasting it will be, particularly in the absence of any large state-led impetus.

The minister made an appeal for a “charter of economy” to help build consensus around key economic policies. This is an old appeal and must receive a positive response. The previous government of the PPP had made this appeal first, and now that it is being echoed by the PML-N, the grounds for a consensus exist. The transition year, leading into the elections, provides the perfect opening to hammer out such a consensus. At a minimum, the charter can revolve around what to do about public-sector enterprises and the future of the regulatory framework. It is high time that this crucial question was addressed, and the political parties showed some maturity towards tackling the enduring problems of the economy. There is still time to make this happen.

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Quetta kidnapping

WHEN a high-profile kidnapping takes place in broad daylight in one of the most heavily policed urban centres in the country, questions are bound to be raised. On Tuesday afternoon in Quetta, two Chinese nationals, a man and a woman who run a language centre in the city's affluent Jinnah Colony, were forced into a car without a number plate by three armed men who then drove away firing their weapons in the air. Another Chinese woman managed to break free and ran back into the centre. When a passer-by, a commendably brave one at that, intervened, he was shot and injured. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the abduction.

The incident underscores the precarious security situation in insurgency-wracked Balochistan as well as the murky transnational interests that complicate matters there. The province has seen a number of acts of terrorism since the Aug 8, 2016, suicide bombing in Quetta that killed scores of lawyers. On Oct 24, militants stormed the police training college in the provincial capital, killing around 60 young cadets. In November, a suicide bombing at the Shah Noorani shrine left at least 50 people dead. On April 13 this year, 10 labourers were shot dead at a construction site, and on May 12, a suicide attack targeted the convoy of the deputy chairman, Senate, Maulana Ghafoor Haideri in Mastung. The cleric sustained injuries, while close to 30 people lost their lives. Those who have claimed responsibility for these attacks include Baloch insurgents, and various Islamist outfits including the militant Islamic State group, Jamaatul Ahrar, etc; there are also a number of shadowy criminal groups in the province with links — sometimes tenuous, at other times not — to extremist organisations. Balochistan today is a confoundingly complex problem, a powder keg of competing interests, the outcome of a decades-long failure of state policy marked by a refusal to honestly address the political grievances — some of them very legitimate — of the Baloch; that omission is being exploited by subversive foreign elements with some success. Arguably, the inception of CPEC has made the situation even more fraught, with security for Chinese nationals acquiring particular urgency. The abduction two days ago is evidence that law-enforcement authorities in the province have yet to get their act together. It is pertinent to ask how, in a city with an overwhelming security footprint, did the perpetrators get away with such a brazen crime?

Women's voting rights

ILLEGAL agreements among certain political parties or candidates have routinely barred women in certain areas from contesting elections and voting in this country. In a long-awaited development, legal protections for women's electoral rights were recently instituted with amendments to sections 78 and 103AAA of the Representation of the People Act, 1976, thereby empowering the Election Commission of Pakistan to disqualify candidates who prevent women from voting. This is a significant step, especially when female disenfranchisement is routine in remote areas of KP and Balochistan. Tabled by Senator Sherry Rehman as the Representation of the People [Amendment Bill, 2017], this law also allows the ECP to declare an election void, calling for a repoll in constituencies where women have been stopped from voting. Under the amended section 103AAA, the ECP can conduct summary inquiries when it gets reports of election irregularities, declaring polls in such constituencies void. Appeals against the ECP's decisions can be filed in the Supreme Court.

Given that these amendments allow the ECP to counter the patriarchal traditions forming the core of such unforgiveable and discriminatory behaviour, the law's implementation is expected. It should have no excuse not to nullify poll results in constituencies that bar women voters. The ECP must start by making inquiries into last week's Shangla by-election where women voters were stopped. Moreover, political parties should be penalised for forcibly keeping women away from the poll process. The belief in many conservative areas that women's duties revolve around their home, and not outside, is indicative of misogyny, and shows up exclusionary and anti-women practices at all levels. Furthermore, in the run-up to the next general election, a bill pending in parliament allowing for repolling at polling stations or even entire constituencies if less than 10pc of registered women voters cast their ballot, must be passed. The state must make it clear that interfering in women's electoral rights will not be tolerated.

A seesaw budget

If ever a federal budget came to us floating on the wings of hope, it is this latest one.

In its last fiscal year, the government has given us a budget that wants to eat its cake and have it too. Current expenditures have been restrained to an almost unrealistic extent, while development expenditures have seen their largest hike thus far.

On the revenue side, almost the entire burden of incremental revenues has been placed on the shoulders of domestic business enterprises, while the presentation of the budget emphasised the relief measures for industry. FBR revenues are being hiked by 14pc, whereas they have struggled to meet far humbler targets in the preceding years. Other revenue heads see modest increases.

Likewise, the current expenditure target for next year sees a modest hike of 2pc from last year's target, whereas development expenditure sees a hike of 25pc.

If current expenditure can stay within the prescribed limits, and the FBR can live up to expectations, this budget might yet pan out. But that is a very big if.

The finance minister went to some lengths to tout the achievements of his government, and he chose to compare today's performance with fiscal year 2012-2013, the year before his government took office.

Amongst the boasts he laid before the parliament was one about "far-reaching structural reforms", especially in the tax machinery, making it "more equitable and efficient". This budget will put that boast to the supreme test.

Even in the area of subsidies, where targets set for last year were overshoot by almost 50pc for the tariff differential subsidy, this year they intend to keep that head at the same target as last year, and cut K-Electric's tariff differential payment by 50pc. This means either passing through large tariff increases during the year to consumers, or working to bring about a miraculous recovery in collections.

The budget wants to expand programmes to give away goodies under vague plans like 'Electricity for All', at the same time pushing through large infrastructure projects including CPEC (which sees an allocation of Rs180bn in the development programme), while avoiding any revenue measures that could upset the masses or broaden the tax base.

The latter priority has largely dropped by the wayside, and many of the measures to penalise non-filers of income tax returns have turned into glorified revenue schemes.

It will be interesting to see how this government walks the tightrope it has set for itself in the year ahead. It is not known for its subtlety in dealings with the opposition, nor for taking an innovative approach to vexing policy problems that plague state finances. Yet the targets of this budget will test their balance to the hilt. A safe bet would be to expect many ad hoc course corrections along the way.

Ramazan reflections

THE fasting month of Ramazan is a time for reflection and spiritual renewal. It is also a time when the faithful are expected to show extra kindness. However, some actions of the state seem to contradict the spirit of compassion. Take, for example, the Ehteram-i-Ramazan (Amendment) Bill, 2017, which was unanimously approved by the Senate some weeks ago. As reported, the law has increased fines and prison sentences for those establishments and individuals that violate the prohibition on smoking, eating and drinking in public during the month. Considering the prevailing hot weather, the state should take a lenient view in this regard. After all, fasting is a personal matter and the government should ideally not be in the business of telling people what they can or cannot do where religious injunctions are concerned. Additionally, the very old, the very young and the infirm who cannot fast must not be prevented from eating and drinking publicly during this period. When religious rulings themselves allow space for those not able to fast, the state should not be forcing people to abstain.

Where the state's intervention is indeed needed during Ramazan is on the roads. Traffic in the country, especially in big cities like Karachi, can be horrendous. During Ramazan, in the rush to get home before iftar, people can be more reckless than usual on the roads. Traffic police along with wardens must be on their toes to ensure the smooth flow of vehicles. Moreover, price-control mechanisms must be effectively enforced to deter traders from fleecing the people during the fasting month in particular. This is also the time when many people choose to donate to charity. Over the past few years, many individuals and organisations have started distributing ration packs to the needy. While this is a welcome act, in a number of incidents due to mismanagement stampedes have occurred during distribution, which is why the state must ensure charity is distributed in a safe manner.

Social indicators

A HOLLOW foundation makes for an unstable edifice. That is the small print behind some of the big, upbeat numbers unveiled in the latest Economic Survey. If one is to believe the finance minister, Pakistan is powering ahead to a spot among the top 20 economies by 2030. However, its people, to whom the state has moral, ethical and constitutional obligations, is on a very different trajectory. The survey reveals that health and education, the cornerstones of a dynamic human resource, remain grossly neglected. The government spent well under 1pc of GDP — 0.46pc to be precise — on health during this fiscal year. Appallingly, even war-torn Afghanistan that has not had a

stable government for decades, spends more per capita on health. Education presents another bleak picture: in the 70th year after independence, Pakistan's literacy rate stands at only 58pc, stagnant since the last fiscal year. In fact, it has seen a drop of 2pc since 2014-2015 when it had climbed to 60pc.

These are damning figures. Progress measured by world-class highways, power plants or metro projects alone is stunted, incomplete and unjust. True progress is a multidimensional concept that takes people's fundamental rights and legitimate aspirations into account. It does not leave them mired in ignorance, superstition and disease. The PML-N government has a penchant for glitzy infrastructure projects that can be showcased during election campaigns, but as the survey indicates, it has done little to improve social indicators in the country — in what is only the latest manifestation of callous indifference by the political elite. The education budget, despite an increase last year, has not been able to keep pace with the rate of population growth. Lack of planning means that a significant portion of the meagre allocation lapses because the funds are not utilised within the prescribed period. Then there is quality of education in public schools, with an emphasis on rote learning rather than the development of cognitive skills so essential for children to become productive adults. Meanwhile, chronic shortage of health infrastructure in the hinterland compels patients and their families to travel long distances to comparatively better-resourced urban areas. Even here though, overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of awareness, contaminated drinking water, etc trigger outbreaks of preventable diseases that unnecessarily claim lives. Only if the ruling elite prioritises the intangible markers of progress can Pakistan take its place among the developed nations of the world.

ICC Champions Trophy

AS the world's top eight cricketing nations prepare to lock horns in England from June 1 in the eighth edition of the ICC Champions Trophy, Pakistan will be hoping to measure up in order to boost its poor ODI ranking by at least making it to the semi-finals of the mega event. Beginning their campaign with a marquee match at Edgbaston against arch-rival India, the green shirts will be looking to repeat their 2009 victory over the neighbouring nation, scored in the sixth edition of this tournament, to silence their detractors. However, that would require something truly extraordinary from a team that lacks depth in all departments of the game.

A mere glance at Pakistan's recent performance in 50-over cricket matches shows that the bowling lacks sting, the fielding is atrocious and the batting brittle. This is why the Champions Trophy will be skipper Sarfraz Ahmed's biggest challenge to date. The

wicket-keeper batsman will not only have to perform well, he will also have to inspire his main players including Azhar Ali, Ahmed Shehzad, Baber Azam, Haris Sohail, Shoaib Malik and Emaad Wasim to play an attacking form of the game. Sarfraz will be mindful of head coach Mickey Arthur's blunt assessment of the team last month when he accused it of being stuck in the 1990s brand of cricket, rarely posting a score of 300-plus in times when 350 is a norm. Fortunately, Pakistan has the easier of the two pools to grapple with. The tough opening game against India is followed by matches with South Africa and Sri Lanka. Here the team will have greater confidence in its abilities given the mercurial traits of the latter two opponents. Though hosts England start as favourites in the 18-day extravaganza, the hype has been significantly dented by the Manchester attack. The authorities have beefed up security and the teams will be hoping for a smooth staging of an event that is eagerly followed by millions around the world.

DNA database

IT is to be welcomed that two important laboratory facilities have finally been created in Sindh — a DNA forensic and molecular lab at the Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences in Jamshoro and a forensic microbiological lab at the Chandka Medical College in Larkana. For years, investigations into crimes such as rape, which can involve DNA tests, have suffered inordinate delays because samples have had to be sent to decently equipped facilities elsewhere in the country. Now, the Sindh police have ready recourse to the required technical expertise. But beyond crimes such as rape or murder, where DNA evidence can be pivotal, there are other issues where these laboratories can make a difference. It is in this context that the Counter-Terrorism Department of the Sindh police has proposed that the provincial government start putting together a DNA database in order to facilitate the identification of unclaimed bodies and the tracing of missing persons. According to documents reviewed by Dawn, it has been suggested to the home department that such a database be initiated. The proposal has also been submitted to the Sindh High Court registrar, given that earlier the bench dealing with the missing persons issue had directed the provincial government to chalk out a strategy in this regard.

This is entirely in the fitness of things. There can be no doubt that the issue pointed out by the CTD is of significant proportions. Between 2005 and 2012, Edhi Foundation reports having buried over 58,000 unclaimed bodies; the charity buries around 100 such poor souls in Karachi alone every month. Meanwhile, the number of people that have disappeared under mysterious circumstances in Sindh, some as far back as in 2010, is moving towards the 300-figure mark. The plight of the families of persons in both these

categories is pitiful, and a DNA database could go a long way towards addressing the issue. To be sure, there does exist the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee initiative Shanakht, and morgues do use Nadra's biometric data. Even so, identification through Nadra's fingerprint-based records can pose a problem in certain situations, bombings and fires being two of them. A record ought to be maintained of unidentified bodies so that relatives can find closure even after burials have taken place. The bureaucratic and police machinery in Pakistan do generally come under criticism for being Luddite, often for good reason. This can and should change.

Economic consensus

ONE more time, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has repeated his appeal for some sort of a broad agreement around economic issues among the various political parties in the country. One could call this a 'charter of economy', although it can go by any name. Whatever the nomenclature, the proposal is a sound one and deserves to be followed up on. Cynics might feel that the minister is not sincere, and the opposition parties are not serious about the economy, and they may or may not be right. If the ruling party is not in earnest, then its bluff deserves to be called. And if the proposal is, indeed, a genuine one, then the opposition parties should see it as an opportunity to create a mechanism that allows them to have a grip on the levers of power as well in the run-up to the general elections. In either case, taking up the minister's invitation is a winning proposition for the opposition, and they will only be demonstrating their own lack of seriousness of purpose by ignoring or spurning such an offer.

The minister in his latest appeal, which was made during yesterday's post-budget news conference, went a step further than he had gone on Thursday, when he had mentioned the charter of economy. This time he actually asked the opposition parties to come to the table and play a role in drafting the next budget, which will have to be announced in early May next year if parliament is to have sufficient time to debate and pass the bill before handing over powers to an interim government in early June. The offer should be taken up immediately. Each of the three major parties could nominate one senior leader to a committee that will hammer out a few areas on which they all agree. They could, for starters, forge a consensus on what to do with public-sector enterprises and how to reform the regulators and the tax machinery.

Once a course of action on each of these fronts has been determined by these representatives, they could take the agreement to their respective party leaderships for endorsement. Perhaps eventually, this could provide the senior leadership of the three major parties a chance to meet for a photo op and signing ceremony. All this can be

achieved before major campaigning kicks in. Once agreed upon, each party should give an undertaking that regardless of who wins the election, they will not oppose the ruling party if it adheres to the guidelines evolved through consensus, thereby paving the way for tackling some of the most entrenched and politically sensitive issues that have bedevilled economic policy for decades. It is up to the opposition parties to show some vision, and put the country ahead of petty politics.

Muslim world's challenge

A MAIDEN trip to the Middle East by US President Donald Trump has underlined several dangerous contradictions at the heart of the global fight against militancy. If there is some unity left in the world today, it is about the understanding that virtually every country faces a militant threat. And in the militant Islamic State group, virtually every country faces a common threat. But global coordination against IS and other militant threats is being undermined by national, regional and international approaches to fighting militancy that are contradictory and self-defeating. Indeed, the placing of Mr Trump's avowed goal of crushing IS at the centre of his administration's foreign policy may unwittingly be helping the militants' narrative of a war between Western and Islamic values. The war against militancy must be led and coordinated by the Muslim world. Militancy is first and foremost an existential threat to Muslim countries and any strategy against it that relies fundamentally on Western leadership and coordination will not succeed and can be counterproductive.

To be sure, Western nations face a dangerous problem of home-grown militancy and have intelligence and counterterrorism apparatuses that are vital to the global fight against militancy. No nation, not least the open, democratic societies in the West, can meekly surrender before millenarian terrorists who seek to destroy the very fabric of society. The serial devastation wrought across many European countries in recent times and the memory of 9/11 in the US loom large in any international conversation about militancy. Within the law and constitution of those countries, and in a way that aids the overall fight against militancy, the steps Western countries take in this battle can have desirable long-term effects. But the security of Western nations cannot be re-established in the long term without a global understanding that the fight against Islamist militancy must be led by Muslim countries and the fight to protect the minds of Muslims from violent ideologies must be led by Muslim societies.

Unhappily, the eagerness of Mr Trump to cast himself as his country's protector against a militant threat he clearly has little understanding of is allowing Muslim-majority countries to once again escape responsibility for crafting a workable strategy to jointly

defeat terrorism and militancy. While Saudi Arabia is rallying Sunni-majority countries to its side under the umbrella of the Islamic Military Alliance, Iran is continuing with its strategy of extending its influence across the Middle East via proxies. Meanwhile, the militant groups that all Muslim nations purport to fight are deepening their ideological influences in those very societies. Mr Trump will likely be on the world stage for four or eight years; militant ideology has a shelf life far greater. Long after Mr Trump and his bombast are gone, the Muslim world will still have to contend with the evil that lies within.

Excess power capacity

THERE is a growing risk that the government is now on a buying spree for more power-generation capacity than the country can handle. Sometime in the middle of last year, the government placed a cap on contracting further power-generation projects that rely on imported fuel. This was in line with projections of the burden these would place on foreign exchange reserves, which would be beyond what the economy could manage. There was also a cap on further power projects that have capacity payment charges built into their terms, since the additional power capacity that is currently in the pipeline is already going to leave the government with a massive bill. A vigorous conversation has been taking place within the water and power ministry ever since, focusing on these caps. This has not been without its casualties. Powerful vested interests wanting to be part of the rackets now brewing in the power sector have wielded their clout to get their way and have the caps adjusted or removed.

Only last week, we heard of a warning from the chief of the National Transmission and Despatch Company that runaway commitments to contract more and more power are being given to various parties. The latest is a commitment to the Sindh government to buy power from bagasse, the waste by-product from sugar mills, that the NTDC and the ministry have been resisting. For some reason, the Sindh chief minister is mounting an unusually strong representation on behalf of the sugar mill interests of his province. There are numerous other examples of projects being brought into the fold that had previously been scrapped. The government is in a mood to accommodate the chief minister's request, more likely on political grounds than having anything to do with forecasts of power demand. One result of these runaway commitments is that the bill for capacity payments will be beyond the government's ability to handle by 2020 when most of these plants have been commissioned, causing large-scale damage to the country's fiscal framework without yielding any significant dividends in return. The country may be in the midst of an acute power shortage at the moment, but that does not mean that these plants be commissioned with reckless speed. The government

should heed the warnings of overcapacity, and tread carefully when tampering with the caps of last year.

Data protection

THERE has been no official word on the extent to which Pakistan was affected by the massive, global cyber-attack earlier this month. However, it has emerged that the Punjab Land Records Authority, with a database of over 55m holdings, was hacked one week after the initial outbreak — after the spread of the virus had already been halted to a large extent by the swift actions of governments and companies. The scale and frequency of cyber-attacks on databases have intensified in recent years, compromising the most private, sensitive information — including biometric data, which cannot be changed like a password — of millions of individuals across the world. Given how easily it could have been avoided or at least mitigated with updated systems and anti-virus software, the attack on PLRA does not inspire confidence in how our government is addressing this emergent threat.

In this age of increasing connectivity, when just one corrupted system can impact an entire network, instead of a concerted effort to improve cyber literacy at every level there appears to be an ad hoc policy of leaving everyone to fend for themselves. While several state institutions are purportedly implementing new safeguards, it seems there are no across-the-board measures in the public sector, or directives to the private sector, or awareness campaigns. Perhaps the closest this government has come to addressing data protection — how data is collected, used and secured — is in a recommendation to develop legislation to that effect in the IT ministry's Digital Pakistan Policy 2017. With over 30m internet users in the country, e-commerce and e-governance is rapidly expanding — a trend that has the potential to revolutionise the economy, optimise the efficiency and distribution of public services, and improve development indicators overall. But the stability of this growth remains threatened so long as the state is more preoccupied with the arbitrary surveillance of social media activity than the truly critical national security issue of safeguarding its citizens' personal data.

Supplementary budgets

TO get an idea of where the most recently announced budget is likely to end up, one should take note of the request for supplementary grants that the government has tabled before parliament. The request asks for an additional Rs310.5bn to meet expenditure overruns under various heads, which is 19pc higher than what was requested last year. Given the tighter controls on current expenditures that the latest budget is attempting, it is likely that next year's request will be higher still. Supplementary budget requests are designed "to provide for expenditure for purposes that were not foreseen at the time of finalisation", according to budget documents, and the larger the amount, the greater the margin by which the government failed to foresee actual expenses. In some cases, the request is fulfilled through what is known as 'reappropriation' in the parlance of public finance, meaning it is money taken away from one head and given to another, so its overall impact on the budget is neutral. But in the latest instance, at the close of the current fiscal year, the government is asking parliament to essentially rubber-stamp additional expenditures of Rs125bn that go beyond simple reappropriations, and that have an actual fiscal impact.

Supplementary budgets, known previously as 'mini budgets' were a normal part of fiscal management in Pakistan until the IMF put an end to the practice — to some extent in any case. Now they show up mostly towards the end of the fiscal year, and the size of the supplemental request is a proxy indicator of how sound fiscal management has been. In this case, we can see an upward trajectory in the amount being asked for year after year. For the next fiscal year, all indications point towards an even bigger spike. This shows that budgets are now being made on increasingly optimistic assumptions, and the government is struggling to keep pace.

What adds to the irony is the fact that many of the heads that recorded expenditure overruns sound frivolous. The Press Information Department, tasked with dealing with the media, spent 900pc more than it was allocated. One wonders where all that money is going. Likewise, purchases of luxury vehicles and glittering new office space, complete with conference rooms, for Prime Minister House also recorded extra-budgetary expenses. It is time to bring these expenditures under control, or at least make it incumbent on the government to ask for additional resources once a department has overshot its allocation, as opposed to the current practice where the rulers undertake the expenditure and parliament is left to rubber-stamp its approval. Executive power indeed belongs to those in power, but it is important that it be exercised with due oversight by parliament.

Power breakdown

THE government's promise to prevent power outages during sehri and iftar fell flat on its face on the very first day of the holy month. Half of Sindh plunged into darkness around 2:45am, and power did not return for many until the afternoon due to a 'technical fault' in the high-tension transmission line coming out of the grid station at Jamshoro. The outage cannot be said to have been caused by high humidity or soaring temperatures, since it occurred at night when humidity levels were not very high. Nor can it be blamed on K-Electric, since the line is owned and operated by Pepco, under the water and power ministry. This means the two favourite whipping boys of the ministry — weather and K-Electric — cannot be invoked as an excuse. Such high-profile 'tripping' of transmission lines have occurred in the past too, also in Sindh, on the junction around the Guddu thermal power station, in some cases plunging the entire country into darkness for prolonged periods. Following those episodes, the ministry successfully installed technology that prevented a fault in one section of the transmission line from cascading through the entire system and causing outages all over the country.

In this case, we are told that an event of some sort originated in the power plant operated by Hubco that travelled to the grid station at Jamshoro, triggering the outage. Only a detailed investigation will tell us what the exact reason was, but the point to note is how a single event can still cause such a massive area, including 76 grid stations of the Hyderabad Electric Supply Company, to fall at the same time. Also, the prolonged period of the outage points to technical incompetence. Is it too much to expect from the managers of our transmission system to ensure that technical faults have only a localised impact, and that re-energising the system not be such a Herculean feat taking nine hours or more to accomplish? To every technical problem there is a technical solution, and just as they were able to prevent transmission line events around the Guddu junction from cascading through the system by employing the correct technology, perhaps they can identify other junctions in the transmission system that pose similar hazards, and instal the required technology to prevent large swathes of the country from plunging into prolonged darkness. Surely this is not rocket science.

Fighting child stunting

ALTHOUGH over 44pc of children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition in the country, the government has persistently failed to address poverty and food insecurity. With the global sustainable development agenda having endorsed malnutrition and stunting as the new health threat, the onus is now on international donor agencies to take humanitarian action in poor communities. This weekend, the World Bank pledged assistance to the tune of \$61m to fight stunting in Sindh where the growth of 48pc of children under five is compromised. Supporting nutrition projects in 23 districts with stunting rates of more than 40pc, the objective is to reduce the rate by one percentage point annually — from 48pc in 2017 to 43pc in 2021. That thousands of children are stunted and many hundreds die of hunger in a province where a quarter of the country's population resides is the shameful consequence of government neglect. It demonstrates political unwillingness to adopt nutrition as a political priority.

Because malnutrition is associated with the socioeconomic determinants of maternal health, education, child marriage and gender empowerment, government-driven strategies are required to mitigate the impact of inequality and poverty. Focusing on hygiene, healthcare and household food insecurity, as well as inadequate feeding practices for women and children, is imperative for healthcare units. Furthermore, health and education plans must incorporate social protection programmes aimed at women. Providing pregnant women with cash transfers, educating them to mentally stimulate their young children and improving access to sanitation in areas where there is open defecation are some remedial measures. Only sustained reform of and investment in the health sector will bridge the gap between urban and rural areas, so that the most marginalised can access improved maternal nutrition and antenatal care. To this end, the Lady Health Workers programme is an asset. It is only when our policymakers recognise that improved child health is critical for economic development that stunting rates will decrease.

Banned groups on Facebook

The merchants of hate may in some respects have been muzzled, but they continue to thrive in the echo chamber that is the social media.

An in-depth investigation by this paper has uncovered the extent to which banned organisations — including Sunni and Shia sectarian groups, global terrorism outfits

operating in Pakistan, as well as Sindhi and Baloch separatists — and their supporters, maintain interconnected and public networks on Facebook.

Out of 64 organisations banned by the government, 41 have a presence on the platform, disseminating their ideologies through more than 700 pages and groups, aside from individual user profiles. In terms of size, the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat with 200 pages and groups is by far the largest, and that is not counting the 148 that belong or indicate allegiance to the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan, an earlier iteration of the ASWJ which was banned in 2002.

These findings, particularly when seen in the context of recent developments in Pakistan, are disturbing evidence of the confusion that prevails in the state apparatus about what constitutes the real threat to this country. Given the scale of religious violence that has eviscerated Pakistani society in the past decades, such a lack of clarity is astounding.

Witness how official authorities are hounding individuals for expressing views on social media that are critical of the establishment, and how they have demonised those professing ‘secular’ opinions on such platforms. How many such individuals or progressive civil society groups have stoked hatred against other communities, murdered people on allegations of blasphemy, or pitted Pakistani against Pakistani along the lines of faith?

The state’s pursuit of red herrings and its muddled priorities leave it unable to construct a focused and consistent counter narrative that is so desperately needed to consolidate the gains made in kinetic operations. NAP was clear in its objective: there is to be no compromise on religious extremism in all its forms.

Granted, Facebook itself has admitted to the difficulty in removing offensive material from its network, but the government should be more proactive with the company on this score. The fact that the Parliamentary Committee on National Security yesterday asked for a briefing on the activities of banned groups on Facebook inspires hope that this issue may be addressed with the attention it deserves.

Aside from implementing the ban in its entirety, the state must ensure that the leaders of these groups are placed under the restrictive Fourth Schedule and their actions closely monitored. Furthermore, the rationale behind banning these 64 organisations should be explained to the people. For instance, some of these groups are not directly involved in violence, but they do advocate the overthrow of the democratic system.

The public must be trusted to understand what constitutes extremism and the seemingly innocuous paths that can lead to it.

THERE is simply no excuse for lawmakers to take the law into their own hands. With an election on the horizon and the government vulnerable to attack, several opposition lawmakers have turned to populist stunts to try and ingratiate themselves with the electorate. The attacks led by two PTI legislators, one an MNA, the other an MPA in the KP Assembly, over the weekend against a Peshawar Electric Supply Company office in Batkhela, Malakand, was the more serious affair. Seemingly emboldened by politicians leading a mob ransacking the offices of state-run entities, PTI activists in the Dargai tehsil of Malakand also turned violent in their protests, resulting in the death of two party activists, injuries to several others and the army being called in to quell the violence. Meanwhile, in Muzaffargarh, the controversial MNA Jamshed Dasti led a mob to a local irrigation office and forcibly opened a water channel that, according to officials, had been closed because of a legal dispute. An intense heatwave across much of the country, the start of the month of fasting and a federal government that appears to be hiding the true extent of load-shedding nationally, all seem to be playing a role in tempers fraying and public agitation.

Yet, under no circumstances is it acceptable for the elected representatives of the people to take the law into their own hands. There are alternatives for MNAs and MPAs to urgently take up matters affecting the public. Organised protests inside the assemblies, leading peaceful rallies to the offices of the organisations that are underperforming, holding news conferences, demonstrating outside press clubs, turning to the media — many possibilities exist, short of the option of violence, threats and intimidation. Part of the problem, of course, is that elected representatives, particularly opposition figures, know that the system is broken and are tempted to try and provoke a disproportionate response by the government or law enforcement to draw attention to the protests. With an election on the horizon, the temptation to resort to gimmickry is greater, and the incidents over the last few days call for an urgent response by political and parliamentary leaders. Political violence must be firmly discouraged by all parties and where it does break out, the culprits must be held accountable. It is possible the next general election will be held in a hot summer month; norms against violence must be reinforced now.

Jirga ‘justice’

IT is unfortunate that illegal jirgas have usurped judicial functions and deliver edicts based on ignorance and prejudice. The state rarely takes note when these councils of elders pronounce verdicts that are often archaic and misogynistic. However, in an unprecedented development over the weekend, Sardar Taj Mohammad Domki, a landowner from Kandhkot, Sindh, was arrested for convening a jirga that ‘settled’ a rape case. The case involved a 12-year-old girl who was allegedly gang-raped in Karachi. As punishment, the jirga imposed a fine of Rs1.8m on the “real accused”, as Mr Domki stated at a news conference at his residence. Had he not intervened, he declared, the victim would have failed to get justice. In other words, he justified holding an illegal jirga. Arresting Mr Domki has set a long-overdue precedent that flouting the law by holding jirgas will not be tolerated. Despite a 2004 Sindh High Court ban on jirgas, the latter continue to rule on ‘honour’ killing cases, other murders and land disputes — many of the meetings being convened on private premises and at government venues, often with politicians and police as participants. One may argue that this case attracted media interest because it drew Chief Justice Saqib Nisar’s attention, ensuring the police were compelled to act. Even otherwise, the state must clamp down on jirgas, if only to safeguard victims who should be able to approach the state’s justice system for redress.

We know that shifts in traditional thinking are not common in patriarchal communities, and that victims seek jirga arbitration because the state justice system is weak. This is where local media can educate its audience on illegal and flawed jirga justice and the advantages of formal justice. Local Sindhi media is adept at discussing social tensions, for example. Violence makes for everyday content, with stories of couples punished by jirgas regularly published in Sindhi dailies. For the suffering and violence perpetuated through jirga decisions to stop, the rule of law must urgently be applied.