

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of January 2018

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Compiled & Edited By Abdullah Memon (Online Content Manager)

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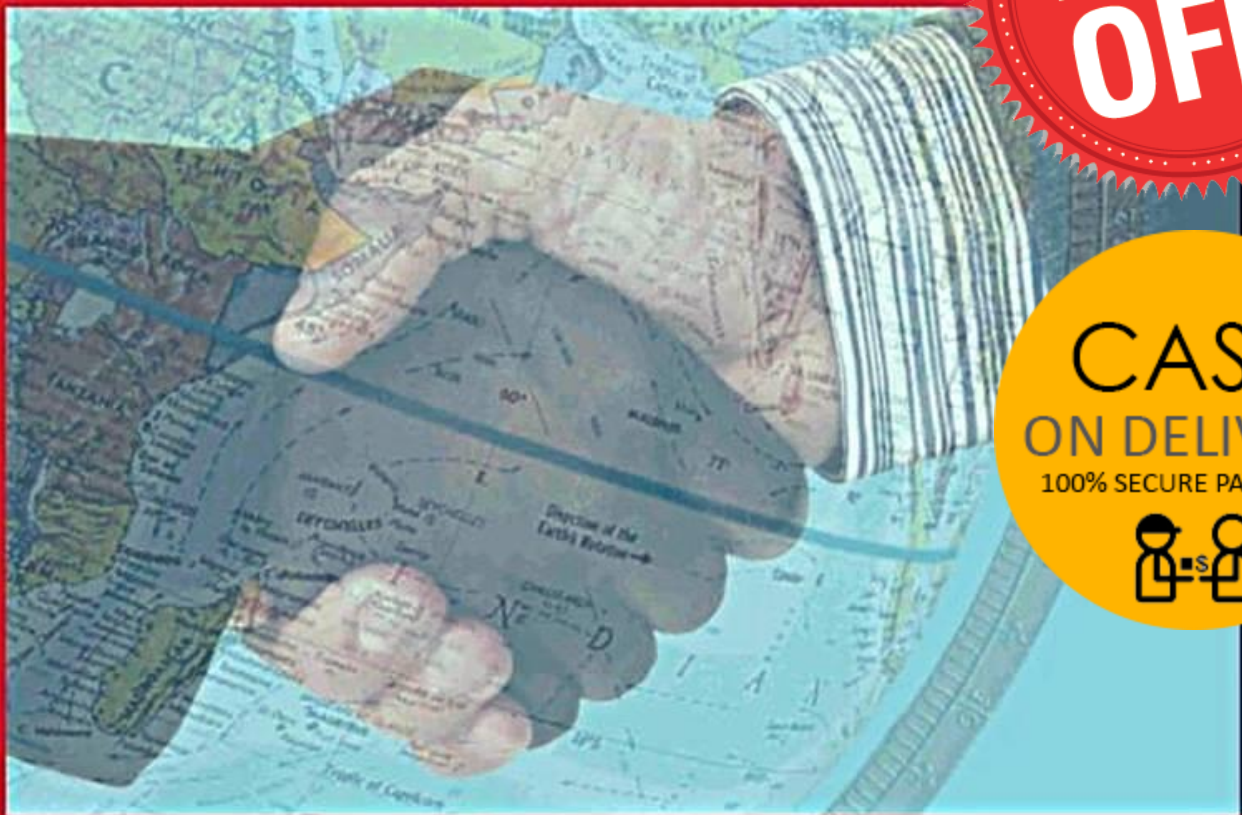
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Pak-India hope?

A GRIM year in Pakistan-India relations appears to have ended on a somewhat positive note with a meeting in Bangkok between Pakistan National Security Adviser retired Gen Nasser Janjua and Indian NSA Ajit Doval. While it is not clear how much influence the Pakistani NSA has on Pakistan's India policy or national security policy generally, Mr Doval is a powerful figure in the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and is perhaps Mr Modi's foremost adviser on Pakistan. So the meeting in Bangkok was not insignificant.

However, with the meeting conducted in secrecy, and neither country having made an official comment as yet, it is difficult to discern whether any kind of breakthrough on any issue was achieved.

Presumably, the meeting had a specific agenda that was decided in advance, and Kashmir is likely to have featured heavily in the talks. If the violence along the Line of Control can be quelled and Pakistan and India take up unexpected confidence-building measures on the Kashmir issue, a window of opportunity for a wider dialogue may again open.

Yet, the inconsistency of India's policy towards Pakistan is striking. The Modi government has veered from aggressively maligning Pakistan and deploying anti-Pakistan rhetoric for domestic political purposes to occasionally permitting unexpected and somewhat positive gestures.

The Christmas Day stopover in Pakistan two years ago by Mr Modi was an example of the positive risks a powerful Indian prime minister could take, but it is unlikely to be repeated. Indeed, a meeting on the sidelines of a multilateral summit between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan is probably the most that can be expected at the prime ministerial level of direct engagement anytime soon.

Perhaps Mr Modi and his national security and foreign policy teams should reflect on why even they have found it necessary to keep a door to dialogue open with Pakistan. There is simply no alternative; geographical and security realities mean that India and Pakistan will always have a number of reasons to speak to one another, no matter how hawkish a government there is in New Delhi. Foreign policy and national security cannot be totally subjugated to domestic politics.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: managing what is likely to remain a hostile relationship with India while reassessing a national security strategy for the long-term benefit of Pakistan itself.

The dangerous outcome for Pakistan would be if it allowed hostility emanating from India to distort the fight against militancy and extremism domestically. While nationalist impulses are always likely to be stoked by Indian belligerence, the Pakistani state should not allow itself to become distracted from what ought to be the top-most national priority — continuing the long fight against militancy and extremism.

Where India seeks to engage Pakistan, Pakistan should engage with India, and forthrightly express its concerns about India's actions and posturing.

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Petrol price increase

THE politics being played around the recent hike in petrol prices is probably one of the oldest games in this country.

Blaming the government for increasing the price of imported fuel is a little like cursing the wind.

A breakdown of the price hike shows that three quarters of the increase is due to the PSO cost of supply, which has gone from Rs46.84 to Rs49.91 as per the notification. The remaining one-rupee increase is due to a 40-paisa hike in the Inland Freight Equalisation Margin, that little gimmick whereby the government ensures uniform prices at pumps across the country, and a 60-paisa hike in the sales tax.

If the [political parties that are protesting against the price increase] have any ideas on how the cost of supply can be reduced, they should share them. The forthcoming session of parliament, where the issue is to be discussed, provides a good opportunity to do this.

International oil prices have been rising since last July. At the end of the year, the price increase from the lowest point in July was almost 50pc, according to Bloomberg data.

The price build-up for petrol also went up. In July, the PSO cost of supply for petrol was given by Ogra as Rs40.65, which rose to Rs46.84 by November, and prices at the pump had gone up from Rs71 to Rs77 in the same period.

Almost the entire hike owed itself to the increasing cost of supply.

Building one's politics around the idea that the government should ensure that prices of petrol and diesel are kept low at the pumps regardless of what is happening in the international market not only makes for old-fashioned populism, it also represents regressive thinking.

The protesting political parties would make better use of their energy if they shared their ideas on how to reform our economy in a way that could reduce our growing dependence on imported fuels. But none of them have brought forward any vision along these lines.

It is true that an increase in the price of petrol leads to inflation, but subsidising fuels is not the solution.

It is high time the attention and energies of the large political parties were focused on an agenda for progressive economic reform, rather than simply rallying around prices.

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Celebrations in Karachi

THE promising signs came early in the day when news bulletins on Dec 31 quoted Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah as saying that the sea front was

open to the public for New Year Eve festivities. Mr Shah said there would be no barriers stopping the citizens from approaching their favourite recreational spot, and the people reciprocated his confidence in them by ensuring one of the most peaceful yet fun nights Karachi has witnessed in recent times. This is a partnership that needs to continue for the sake of Karachi and its people who have suffered on account of violence and strife for so many years. Many reasons have been listed as to why Karachi has repeatedly failed to prove itself as a responsible city, aware of its rights and duties. The suspicion with which the administration viewed various activities involving large numbers of people was one reason that fuelled contempt of authority. This invariably led to rebellious streaks demonstrated by restless youngsters wanting an outlet. The routine New Year stand-off between the administration and revellers was a manifestation of that basic conflict born out of mutual distrust. One night's free outing has not dispelled those ugly memories. The apprehensions will be there until a tradition is firmly established whereby a balance between responsibility and entertainment is maintained. Now a first confident step towards achieving this harmony has been taken with the welcoming of the year 2018 by the sea.

This needs to be built upon quickly. A government which is willing to trust the people as they celebrate, and a people who are careful to use the freedom they have in a responsible manner, must be encouraged and nurtured in other areas too. Karachi must lead as the big brother inspiring other parts of the country into evolving civilised modes of entertainment. Common sense must replace physical barriers. The celebratory fire and antics that encroach upon the space and safety of others must give way to true fun and bonhomie that comes naturally to people everywhere.

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A measured response

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's freewheeling Twitter habit has caused a fresh eruption in Pak-US ties in the new year.

Mr Trump's rough and undiplomatic language has sparked outrage in Pakistan, but it is not clear if the US president was presaging renewed pressure on Pakistan or simply indulging in rhetorical threats that appeal to his isolationist political base at home.

Yet, a hostile, threatening comment by a US president cannot simply be ignored, and Pakistan's political and military leaderships did the right thing by meeting to discuss a joint civil-military response.

At the very least, Mr Trump's Twitter salvo aimed at Pakistan suggests that he does not mind further undermining Pak-US ties — a situation that ought to be of concern for all Pakistanis, regardless of whether they view the US with suspicion or relative warmth.

What is also clear is that Mr Trump, like his predecessors since the US-led war in Afghanistan began more than 16 years ago, views Pakistan through the prism of Afghanistan.

With nearly 16,000 US troops in that country, several thousand of whom Mr Trump himself has sent, the course of the war could have a bearing on the American leader's presidency. It is on that reality that the Pakistani leadership should focus.

Helping find a path to a political deal between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban would help end the war there and obviate the need for the US administration to lean heavily on Pakistan.

Clearly, what has not been achieved in 16 years will not be achieved soon, but Pakistan should not be distracted from creating the conditions, with the US or perhaps without its initial support, for an eventual peace deal in Afghanistan.

There is no scenario in which crumbling ties between the US and Pakistan, because of intemperate remarks by the US president, are good for Afghanistan, Pakistan or the region.

Admirably, the National Security Committee has struck the right note in its response to Mr Trump's provocation.

Underscoring Pakistan's contributory role to the regional fight against militancy and avoiding a slanging match with the US, it has emphasised that Pakistan will continue to seek cooperative solutions to regional problems.

In the past, Pakistan has to its own disadvantage stoked anti-US sentiment as a bulwark against US demands. But anti-Americanism, loudest in the extremist fringe, is difficult to contain once an episode between the US and Pakistan is resolved, and creates further problems inside Pakistan while limiting the room for the state to manoeuvre in the complicated relationship with the US.

Perhaps, as other countries are discovering, the Pakistani leadership has recognised a Trump tweet for what it could be: an outburst that may not event

It's more a testament of the trouble the US is in that a presidential tweet can be regarded as incoherent ramblings.

Sharifs' flying visit

IT has been a strange diversion with Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif suddenly boarding a plane especially sent for him by his hosts and flying off to Saudi Arabia. With former prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif following him, and the presence of a couple of Pakistani ministers in the holy land at the same time, rumours inevitably circulated. There has been speculation that the Sharifs were asked to explain their business connections to the crown prince who is supposedly cracking down on corruption in Saudi Arabia. Others have said that Saudi royalty was trying to restore cordial relations between the once inseparable brothers. Most vociferous has been the talk that the Saudis were trying to help the Sharifs strike a deal with the establishment here. All these opinions were persistent enough for the pundits to foretell a flight undertaken by Nawaz Sharif to get away from his troubles in Pakistan and seek asylum abroad. Meanwhile, political opponents, such as Imran Khan and Asif Zardari, have warned against a new deal that could save the former prime minister's household from ruin. While all these guesses and predictions have continued, not too much noise has been generated by the Sharifs themselves.

Initially, the Sharifs appeared to give the impression that they favoured the chatter which suggested they might be about to benefit from yet another rescue operation by the Saudis. But as time passed, and a more nuanced analysis of their secret mission abroad ensued, it was felt that it would be in the interest of the Sharif brothers and their party to give some kind of justification for their endeavour, whatever the real purpose of their visit. For instance, they could insist that it was a private visit, a pilgrimage. If there has been any such explanation though, it has not been strong enough, and the rumour-mongers have had far too much room in which to exercise their imagination. Whatever the case, without more clarity, the events might hurt the protagonists in the long run. They would be well advised to make a fresh assessment and ask themselves whether the feeling that Pakistan's affairs are at the mercy of another country — however dear and friendly — would resonate positively with the people here. In fact there may be no dispute over it being a bad, unwanted development. It is time, therefore, that matters were made more transparent about their visit to Saudi Arabia.

Israel's land grab

COMING on the heels of President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and to shift the embassy later to the holy city, the resolution by Israel's ruling party on illegal Jewish settlements on the West Bank shouldn't surprise the world. On Sunday, the central committee of the hard-line Likud party demanded that the settlements should be annexed by extending Israeli sovereignty to the colonies, built over the last 50 years in violation of UN resolutions and international treaties. Not only that: Likud demanded that settlement activity should continue. Though Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a Likud member, was himself not present at the meeting, the fact that the party in power should go public with its land grab greed so brazenly betrays the Zionist state's designs to exploit to the maximum Mr Trump's stay in the White House. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's denunciation of the Likud move was understandably harsh, and he hit the nail on the head when he said Likud couldn't have acted without "the full support of the US administration".

The late and lamented two-state solution had always been a theory. The only time a Palestinian state appeared a distinct possibility was in September 1993 when Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin signed the Declaration of Principles on the lawns of the White House, which laid down a programme for ending Israeli occupation. However, Rabin was murdered, and successive Israeli governments sabotaged the DoP with full American backing. The truth is that since European Jewish settlers began occupying Palestinian lands in the wake of the Balfour Declaration more than a century ago, they have pursued the Zionist version of lebensraum ruthlessly. Congress is in the Zionist pocket, and Israeli leaders have made no attempt to hide their contempt for America's chief executives. The insult which Ehud Olmert heaped on George Bush Jr is a matter of record. As President Abbas said, the Israeli aim "is the consolidation of an apartheid regime in all of historic Palestine".

Discontent in Iran

THE protests in Iran may not have reached critical proportions as yet, but they are an alarming indication of the gap that exists between the priorities of the state and the demands of the people, especially the young. While much of the outside world views Iran through a prism of security and geopolitical challenges, the people of Iran themselves are demonstrating for a second time in less than a decade that their interests are similar to people everywhere: jobs, inflation and social freedoms. The brave protesters are putting the Iranian state on notice that the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Iranian people must come first. Whether the state has the capacity to address the protesters' grievances and pivot away from an increasingly damaging regional competition with Saudi Arabia remains to be seen. But if it does not respond adequately to the demands of its citizens, the discontent and disillusionment apparent among the people can only grow.

Unhappily, though perhaps predictably, the initial response of the Iranian state has been to dismiss the protests as foreign sponsored and an attempt to weaken the country. Certainly, regional rivals and perhaps particularly the current US and

Israeli administrations have an incentive to interfere in Iran and sustain or widen the protests if they can, but that is hardly the point. It is an old trick of authoritarian regimes to dismiss legitimate protest and dissent as externally influenced in order to justify a crackdown. The protesting Iranian people should not be regarded as saboteurs against their own state and society. Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US may well try and foment trouble inside Iran, but it is the legitimate grievances of the Iranian people that creates the space for outside interference. Food inflation, a rollback of subsidies, stubbornly high unemployment, corruption and spending overseas are problems for Iran to address and have not solely been created by the outside world.

Nevertheless, if the protests continue and the state crackdown intensifies, the repercussions for the region could be severe. The inter-generational transfer of power that is being attempted in Saudi Arabia has consolidated power in the hands of a seemingly impulsive crown prince drawn to military action. Israel is ruled by a right-wing government that is obsessive about perceived threats from Iran. The Trump administration has been drawn deeper into Afghanistan while seemingly determined to return to an overtly hostile relationship with Iran. The militant Islamic State group is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is struggling with an extremism problem and a stubborn militancy challenge. Surely, the sensible thing for the Iranian state to do is address the legitimate demands of the protesters and bring a peaceful end to the protests. Iran's population, like much of the region, is young. They must be treated fairly and with understanding or Iran risks its youth becoming ungovernable.

Reining in JuD?

NO one in government seems to quite know how to deal with the Jamaatud Dawa, or even its charity wing, the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation — despite knowing they must be reined in, given prevailing international currents. The government's inability to build a prosecutable case against JuD chief Hafiz Saeed, and its unsuccessful attempts to have his detention extended, has made the task more difficult. However, perhaps another attempt is now being made through the SECP. Following a high-level meeting chaired by the prime minister, the corporate sector regulator has announced that registered companies are prohibited from donating cash to entities and individuals included in the consolidated list issued by the UN Security Council's sanctions committee. The announcement is not novel in itself: the government had already prescribed a penalty of up to Rs10 million for those violating the sanctions regime. However, while the UNSC's relevant resolutions are primarily concerned with the militant Islamic State group, Al Qaeda etc, the SECP's latest measure is reportedly specific to the FIF, which — like the JuD — is listed as an affiliate of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba. Whether it will achieve anything at all is a moot point.

The genesis of the FIF — or JuD for that matter — has long been an open secret. Faced with the conundrum of how to accommodate this large body of militants, especially given the official policy of cracking down against extremism in all its manifestations, the state — or certain elements of it — has adopted the path of mainstreaming them. Certainly there are examples globally of former militant outfits laying down arms and even evolving into political entities: the decommissioning of the Irish Republican Army is one such instance. However, for the sake of credibility such groups must expressly abjure violence, as did the IRA. Whether we like it or not, international perceptions do matter, and the world is not convinced that FIF's charitable activities do not mask a more sinister agenda. The kid glove treatment meted out to them has not helped Pakistan's case. Predictably enough, the JuD in its response to the SECP announcement has dredged up the bogey of this country kowtowing to Western powers. The government should not allow JuD to obfuscate the matter; instead, it must clearly explain why it has taken this step and what has necessitated this action now. Measures against militancy may coincide with Western expectations, but they are ultimately in Pakistan's own interest.

Gujrat's honour crimes

IT is a truism that violence against women by men is designed to control and exercise power over women's lives. With increasing numbers of women killed by close relatives on the pretext of defending family 'honour', it is shameful that the government continues to neglect addressing the legislative and social factors that allow perpetrators to act with impunity. Data collected from the district police office in Gujrat in Punjab, and reported in this newspaper, revealed an increase in so-called honour killings last year: 41 women were murdered on the pretext of honour and in domestic disputes in 2017 in this district alone compared to 35 the previous year. Given that most honour killings go unreported, the real number is likely to be much higher: this heinous crime is endemic in parts of Punjab. Conviction rates are abysmal, even though according to police sources arrests are made more frequently. That is because victims' families pardon the killers — almost always other family members. It is condemnable that the state, in its latest effort at tackling this scourge, failed to remove the 'forgiveness' loophole from the anti-honour killing law, thereby allowing law-enforcement to take a backseat while the heinous crime continues unchecked. The apparent disinterest in instituting effective legislation has resulted in many more women losing their lives.

Regressive traditions that support murder in the name of honour are reason enough for removing punishment waivers and compoundability provisions from the law. In cases where the state becomes the prosecutor in crimes against women, perpetrators have been penalised. As a longer-term measure, changing mindsets and men's attitudes towards women's right to make decisions about their lives is critical for a just and equitable society. When existing legislation fails to stop the murders of young girls and women because it allows space for archaic interpretations of justice, it is the state's duty to intervene. Instead of pandering to the conservative right, it must urgently institutionalise the protection of women on both the legal and social fronts.

Nawaz's confusion

IF there is a strategy, it is not evident. PML-N supremo and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is back in Pakistan, but his statement to the media on Wednesday has raised more questions than it has answered. Reading from a prepared statement and avoiding questions from the media, Mr Sharif delivered yet another broadside against the military-led establishment — arguably his boldest yet. The uproar over intemperate remarks against Pakistan by US President Donald Trump had obscured legitimate questions about this country's security policies and choices in the past, and Mr Sharif was right to highlight some of the more uncomfortable aspects of the Pakistani narrative and past security choices. But the full comments by Mr Sharif were a hodgepodge of personal grievances, political boasts and evasive statements. Most evidently, Mr Sharif did nothing to clarify the purpose of the Sharif brothers' visit to Saudi Arabia — a sudden, days-long trip that sparked frenzied speculation in Pakistan.

Even on the issue of national security and why much of the outside world is so sceptical of Pakistani claims about the country's commitment to the fight against militancy, Mr Sharif simply overlooked his own government's numerous failures. The counter-insurgency campaign in North Waziristan Agency was initially resisted by Mr Sharif, who spent much of his first year in office arguing for peace talks with the banned TTP. The National Action Plan was created on Mr Sharif's watch as prime minister, but his government made little attempt to implement it or invigorate the National Counter Terrorism Authority. The lack of interest in judicial reforms created the space for the military to argue for the necessity of military court trials for civilian terrorism suspects. In Punjab, the Sharif brothers have failed to create an effective civilian counterterrorism force while resisting a broader role for the military-led Punjab Rangers in the province. The fight against extremism is non-existent; and in some cases, undermined by the PML-N's own actions and politics.

Certainly, the failures are widespread and not of the PML-N's alone. But Mr Sharif is failing to even provide clarity on the political front. He speaks mostly in riddles and euphemisms familiar to civilian politicians, but that is only adding to the confusion at the moment. Does Mr Sharif intend to lead the PML-N into the next general election or not? If the PML-N wins enough seats in the next election, does Mr Sharif intend to try and force his way back into elected office? Furthermore, the perception that Mr Sharif and the PML-N are seeking outside

help to secure their place in domestic politics is unhelpful to the democratic order in the country. Caught between a party that seems to be hoping for political restraint from him and seemingly his own political instinct to fight, Mr Sharif is creating unnecessary confusion. A coherent, plausible political strategy is urgently needed.

Delayed funds

AFTER several years of military operations against insurgents in Fata — and KP — the task of reconstructing the country's war-torn conflict-ridden agencies calls for sustained political intervention and transparent financial allocation. Indeed, the Fata Secretariat had come up with the Sustainable Return and Rehabilitation Strategy in 2015 with the aim of rehabilitating displaced families. Unfortunately, it has made little progress on this front because of lack of funds. According to a report published in this newspaper on Thursday, despite a federal government allocation of Rs45bn for the period 2016-2017, the secretariat received only Rs3bn for reconstruction projects. The money was earmarked for property compensation, projects in health and education and for the provision of drinking water. Evidently, the shortage of funds explains the hiatus in reconstruction work and the abysmal state of facilities for returnees. Moreover, it lends reason to the rising tide of grievances among tribal communities; for instance, only 34,000 returnees received compensation for destroyed homes. While one-time cash grants and livelihood support aid for returnees are short-term incentives, many families understandably refuse to return to wrecked homes and a ruined economy. Considering the blow to infrastructure and livelihood, the government must begin by compensating families for properties wrecked by conflict (Rs400,000 for a totally damaged house; Rs 160,000 for partial damage) and then work on socioeconomic reforms.

Given the displacement of more than 5m people from Fata and KP, only a radical programme under the aegis of all stakeholders will guarantee security and reignite investment and economic development. Though the military has reconstructed bombed-out markets, roads and schools in the North and South Waziristan and Khyber agencies, the provision of basic rights and administration

is a pivotal function of civilian governments. Equitable distribution and oversight of donor assistance (the additional World Bank grant of \$114m in 2017 included) is essential, especially so when reforms are a pivotal component of Fata's merger with KP. Also, assistance with improving agricultural production will mark a turning point for one of the darkest chapters in Fata's history. The government must demonstrate its commitment because what appears to be a serious political paralysis could undermine reform, and thwart donor investment from entering the tribal areas. Without jobs and services, a return of militancy to the area cannot be ruled out. It is a scenario which is detrimental to the future of the tribal agencies and KP.

Scared of cricket?

IMAGINE if a Pakistan-India cricket match were to be played in complete secrecy in Bangkok. Obviously, this is an outrageous thought since clandestine meetings are best suited to senior officials such as the national security advisers of the two countries. The game has to be played in full public gaze, bringing to the fore the immense possibilities of coexistence that sporting engagements are famous for.

It is a shame that some politicians appear to be afraid that cricket played by Pakistan and India can put paid to their own agenda of keeping people in the two nations hostage to a hostile past.

Cricketer Virat Kohli's unqualified praise for Muhammad Amir, and vice versa, may have been a heartening moment. But on leaving the sports field, where bonhomie and mutual admiration are in evidence, one is likely to be confronted by politicians such as India's foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj, who are prepared to take no chances with the game.

What if the people of the subcontinent were to discover the true merits of the sportsman spirit in the conduct of all their affairs — personal, bilateral, etc? What if they were to realise the true potential of doing things together, with respect for each other's requirements and skills? For politicians, cricket is far too dangerous an indulgence since it gives people all kind of ideas.

Ms Swaraj has ruled out a bilateral cricket series between India and Pakistan, even on a neutral venue, “unless Pakistan stops cross-border terrorism and firing”. The minister, like other Indian officials who have taken a similar position, must be mindful of India’s status as a country with a top-notch cricket team.

Add to this the old ‘rivalry’ factor and we have a fair idea of just how much cricket enthusiasts crave a bilateral series between the two countries.

One wishes that governments were ready to keep the sporting door open and limit the adversarial tone to other serious matters. They have no business playing politics here.

Faltering Pak-US ties

IS a collapse of Pak-US ties imminent or can a modicum of stability be salvaged? The signals from the US are far from promising.

Step by step, US assistance to Pakistan is being withdrawn, the latest being an announcement on Thursday that all security aid to Pakistan has been suspended. While the suspension can be reversed and civilian aid has not yet been frozen, the trajectory becoming apparent is of progressively increasing US pressure on Pakistan.

The publicly known demands of the US centre on further action by Pakistan against the Haqqani network and Afghan Taliban elements that may have found sanctuary in Pakistan. In return, the US has promised unspecified greater cooperation with and assistance for Pakistan.

It ought to be clear why such a deal is unappealing for Pakistan: the already troublesome ‘do more’ mantra has been replaced with a ‘do more or else’ warning.

Even from a transactional perspective that Pak-US ties have slipped towards, a bullying US approach is unnecessary, unwelcome and threatens to achieve the opposite of what the Trump administration claims it is seeking.

A more welcome surprise has been the Pakistani state's measured response to the US provocations. In the past, anti-American sentiment has been stoked among the public as a buffer against US demands. But that has mostly had the effect of reducing the room for the state to manoeuvre in the necessary but complicated relationship with the US.

Arguably, the withholding of financial assistance for military purposes to Pakistan may eventually prove to be a boon.

Since Pakistan began to cooperate with the US in the fight against Al Qaeda and indirectly assist the US-led war in Afghanistan, the money that Pakistan has received for vital military operations inside Pakistan has been attacked by extremists and militants as a symbol of a vassal state.

The US assistance has also made it more difficult for the state to convince the public that the domestic fight against militancy is Pakistan's fight for its own interests.

With the financial assistance already having been throttled in recent years, a temporary halt may help the Pakistani state persuade sceptical sections of the public about the necessity of the fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism.

Pakistan's deeply unfair taxation system can be improved to make up for unexpected budgetary shortfalls.

Yet, as both the political government and the military leadership appear to have recognised, Pakistan must continue to seek ways to cooperate with the US in areas where the two countries' interests converge and manage tensions in areas where interests diverge.

The US may be undergoing political turmoil and there may be other regional and global centres that Pakistan can seek better relations with, but in an interconnected world built on a post-World War II US-led architecture, the US has the capacity to significantly hurt other countries.

Pakistan must proceed carefully.

A police state?

TACTICS found in some of the world's most repressive states continue without check in an ostensibly democratic Pakistan. This time it is two young men originally hailing from Khuzdar who were abducted from their home in Karachi on Thursday. One of them, Mumtaz Sajidi, is a final-year student of the Karachi University and the other his younger brother, Kamran Sajidi. The raid, according to another brother of the two, was conducted by men in plainclothes and in police uniform, who refused to identify themselves or give any motive for taking them away. Despite the presence of witnesses to the crime, police would not register an FIR, a disinterest typical in cases of enforced disappearance. The family insisted that the young men were not associated with any political party or ethnic or religious group. The only link that could in any way hint at a possible motive for what had befallen them was that Mumtaz had taken part in meetings organised to press for the release of another missing student, Sagheer Ahmed Baloch, who was 'picked up' last November from the university premises. It seems a public campaign is about the only option those seeking a safe return of the missing persons are left with. This latest incident could well be a message for those who still have it in them to demand a halt to this illegal practice. They are exposed to great dangers themselves.

The police state that activists and others had been complaining existed in parts of the country is expanding. From the remote, neglected regions, it is spreading with purpose and intensity to places more visible. A Pakistani does not have to entertain any rebellious thoughts, let alone challenge any old and oppressive plank in the system to qualify for an early morning knock on their door by men in plainclothes who believe they lie outside the ambit of the law. What else can one conclude from the relentless pursuit of Pakistani citizens for reasons that no one seems obliged to explain? Who will answer for their families' agony while their loved ones are missing? This is the darkest area in a Pakistan that claims to be striving to establish an order based on fairness and transparency. And it must be exposed by a judiciary which comprises men who, over and above being beholden to the legal text, claim to act as sincere, protective elders of the people of this country

Lost in time

IN the treacherous political world of modern-day Pakistan, it is easy to forget that there is a history that is to be preserved as much as the future must be catered to. Sadly enough, this point often gets left by the wayside in contemporary debate. Of all the many cultural debacles over which the country is presiding, the latest to reach the headlines is the Ranikot Fort, located some 30km from Sann in Jamshoro district in Sindh. As reported this week, a 1,000-foot-long portion of the edifice's rampart has collapsed, while broad cracks have appeared in the walls close to one of the fort's gates. Villagers that have been living in the area for decades say that the state of neglect has been a long-standing issue, one that threatens the very integrity of the premises.

The origins of Ranikot Fort are, to a large extent, lost in time, with some estimates putting the age of its construction at as far back as 2,000 years. That figure pales in comparison, however, to the context of Pakistan's continuing lack of care towards the history and the heritage that it has been fortunate enough to inherit. Where efforts have been made towards preserving such legacies, they have tended to be spearheaded by either private efforts, or bodies such as Unesco. Rarely do the country's own bodies, particularly the various departments set up specifically for the preservation of culture and heritage, take the front seat on this count. Be it the Rohtas Fort or the Derawar Fort in Punjab, or even Mohenjodaro in Sindh — which the country loves boasting of as the jewel in the crown — the state of care is nothing less than abysmal. Lost in all this is the realisation that the future — if there is to be one — must include a context of history, barring which it must necessarily be shorn of meaning. True, Pakistan has enough realpolitik on its plate; but other concerns deserve not to be given a backseat.

Machiavellian moves?

WORSE than to render it irrelevant, is to undermine the democratic process. Successive provincial assemblies in Balochistan have demonstrated that behind a veneer of democracy, anti-democratic forces in the province, both inside the assembly and outside, are more interested in political machinations than governance. Now, several MPAs in Balochistan have turned against Chief Minister Sanuallah Zehri and may be seeking to not just oust him in a no-confidence vote, but to dissolve the assembly — a move that could have national repercussions for the upcoming Senate elections followed by a general election later this year. Mr Zehri is by no stretch a champion of democracy. Having forced his way into the chief minister's office mid term, Mr Zehri has been a democratic disappointment as Balochistan's chief executive. But the push to remove Mr Zehri appears to have little to do with his poor governance record and a great deal to do with the chronic behind-the-scenes power plays that have blighted democracy in the province.

Perhaps most troubling is the allegation by some outspoken members of the political class that the rebellious MPAs are being encouraged and advised by anti-democratic forces that are dominant in the province. The fear, which does not appear to be completely unfounded, is that a constitutional crisis created in Balochistan could spread through the system and infect other provinces and perhaps the government in Islamabad too. The cast of characters involved in the drama in the Balochistan Assembly lends credence to allegations of extra-constitutional and anti-democratic interference. If that is true, the security establishment needs to publicly distance itself from whatever is being attempted in Balochistan. The province and its people have suffered for nearly a decade and a half because of a misguided security policy that treats Balochistan largely as a problem that needs to be contained and a polity that needs to be controlled. When economic opportunity is touted, it is done so largely within the same misguided security paradigm.

Certainly, the political class generally and the political leadership of Balochistan specifically are responsible for some of the problems in the province. Moderate political forces, after a boycott of the 2008 election, have proved to be a disappointment. While Mr Zehri's government suffers from low expectations, the previous government led by Abdul Malik of the National Party failed to meet most of the expectations of it. But the buck in Balochistan does not stop with civilians.

Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa went to parliament recently and pledged his support for the democratic process in the country. Here, then, is an early opportunity to demonstrate commitment to the democratic process. Publicly distance the security establishment from the machinations in Balochistan and allow democratic forces to address legitimate grievances of the assembly rebels. The Senate elections must not be disrupted, and a smooth path to a general election must be created.

Sugar crisis

IT has been a number of years now that the same game rolls out this time of year. The sugarcane crop is harvested and the provincial government of Sindh in particular delays the notification of a procurement price. Growers protest, sometimes disruptively, and then the provincial government starts to drag its feet forward. The mill owners make their own demands, usually that they cannot function at the procurement price notified by the government, even though their counterparts in Punjab get going on that same price. The matter lands up in the courts with little consequence since the court's orders are to be implemented by the provincial government, which is controlled by the PPP, which always sides with the mill owners in these disputes. This year too, the matter of notifying a sugarcane procurement price has turned messy, with protests sweeping towns across Sindh before landing up on the streets of Karachi, with growers converging on the residence of the PPP leadership as well as the CM house. They were joined by activists and leadership of the PTI, which has sought to make political capital out of the dispute, only to be met with a violent response from the city's law-enforcement agencies.

It was not always like this. There was a time when the PPP was the party of the farmers and workers, not the mill owners and land speculators. Today however, the provincial government controlled by the party inevitably ends up on the side of the mill owners and facilitates their agenda of delaying the start of the crushing season by any means, so that the growers' position weakens over time and they can be bullied into accepting a lower price. This year we have the added element of a centre-province spat to add to this story that has been playing on repeat for too many years now. The chief minister of Sindh has accused the centre of delaying the disbursement of subsidy payments for sugar exports, which he

claims has adversely impacted the liquidity position of the mills, rendering them unable to make the payments at the notified price to the growers. The chief minister's time and energy would be better spent ensuring the relevant departments under his control are focused on generating a notified price on schedule, and ensuring that mill owners are complying with the law, rather than becoming a voice for the grievances of these privileged individuals.

Dengvaxia controversy

IN a recent press conference, the Pakistan Young Pharmacists Association and the Pakistan Drug Lawyers Forum alleged that the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has approved the registration of a new dengue vaccine (sold by Sanofi Pasteur under the brand name Dengvaxia) despite a ban imposed by WHO. Drap immediately fired back that it was not banned and had, in fact, been registered in a number of countries, including Australia. Considering the high level of mistrust among our populace regarding vaccinations, spreading misleading information is potentially disastrous. The truth is that Dengvaxia — currently available in several Latin American and Southeast Asian countries — was recently banned and recalled by the Philippines government after adverse effects were reported. Its use in Australia is restricted to a special access scheme for unapproved drugs on a case-by-case basis. WHO maintains that its policy is still one of prevention, and that the vaccine should only be administered in highly endemic areas and only to people who have previously contracted the virus.

Dengvaxia is no silver bullet — it has some efficacy in reducing the severity of symptoms if dengue is contracted a second time, but is dangerous for those who haven't been infected before. Given Dengvaxia's controversial status, it is therefore baffling that, despite assurances of strict medical supervision, Drap has stated its intent to grant it market access — in what would appear to be an attempt to delegate the responsibility of disease prevention to consumers. Since Drap has often been accused of inertia, its initiative in registering this vaccine is all the more troubling considering PYPA's accusation that it was given Rs500m to do so. Unless it is administered only through a highly selective government

immunisation programme, Dengvaxia can cause grave bodily harm and further erode confidence in immunisation. Rising global temperatures and burgeoning urban sprawl are increasing Pakistan's susceptibility to vector-borne diseases, and it is essential that the implementation of well-established prevention and control interventions is not derailed by peddling the false promise of a quick fix.

Threat to ethical organ donation

IT is yet another example of our tendency to take one step forward only to take two steps back. On Friday in Islamabad, the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues (Amendment) Bill, 2016, was brought to the attention of a parliamentary committee. The changes that the bill, if passed, would bring to the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act 2010 are generally of a procedural nature and, on the whole, perhaps well-meaning. However, it contains one potentially deeply damaging clause that could reverse years' worth of effort expended in cracking down on the illegal trade in human organs and the inevitable exploitation of the poorest of the poor that it entails. This proposed amendment stipulates that an organ donor unrelated to the patient will be paid a compensation of Rs600,000 as "reward money" to "cover the expenses of his family", with his family members having to submit an affidavit that they shall be responsible for the lifetime treatment of the donor.

For a country that has spent nearly two decades trying to tamp down on the sale of human organs, overwhelmingly by men and women that perceive themselves as having no other 'property' to call their own, this is nothing less than shocking. It is particularly so given that of late Pakistan has made some progress in reversing the country's unsavoury reputation as a fairly robust black market for organs purchased by local patients as well as wealthy 'transplant tourists' from overseas. Raids by the FIA in Punjab and KP have succeeded in apprehending a number of individuals suspected of being part of organ trafficking rings. The idea of a monetary "reward" being paid to organ donors is an invitation for the trade in human organs to resume under the guise of 'fair' compensation. Whether the middleman promising the cash is a private individual or the state, the end result

remains the same. Is it possible that some of our worthy lawmakers are not aware of the very real ethical issues that underlie the sale of human organs?

There is a clear way forward, and the law on legal and ethical human organ donation that is the result of years of lobbying by concerned individuals and institutions in the face of rabid opposition from vested interests is a good place to start. The one useful aspect of the 2016 amendment bill is that it provides for a national registry of donors to be set up, which will match those in need with those that leave a legacy to donate. As in much of the world, the practice of cadaveric donations, and the idea that signing up to be an donor is a service to society, needs to be promoted through the media. That will not happen if the desperately poor are lining up to offer their organs for sale.

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Reckless approach

CONFUSING, bizarre and reckless — the different approaches by different governments and centres of power to militant groups and affiliated networks that have been outrightly banned or placed on watch lists by the Pakistani state and the United Nations surely undermines the country's credibility. A week in which the federal government moved to block financing and assistance to militant groups and ostensibly non-violent, charitable wings of those groups, ended with the chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa sharing a stage with the leadership of the Difa-i-Pakistan Council, an umbrella organisation that has several banned militant groups as its constituent units. Incredibly, after the Punjab government reportedly prevented Hafiz Saeed from leaving the province to attend the DPC rally in Peshawar, participants in the rally chanted slogans against the Punjab government and Mr Saeed was allowed to make a telephonic address. What is going on?

To be sure, the federal government and the PML-N are also contributing to the national confusion. The suspicion is that the latest move to block financing and assistance to proscribed groups and those on watch lists is largely for external, international consumption rather than a serious effort to curb the activities of groups associated with militancy and extremism. Moreover, with a general election scheduled for later this year, it is likely the PML-N will seek electoral adjustments with extremist elements in constituencies where such elements are influential — just like the PML-N has done before and other mainstream political parties have continued to do. The so-called mainstreaming policy of the security establishment is also a significant destabilising factor. While theoretically mainstreaming may be possible, the secrecy in which the policy has been conceived and the absence seemingly of any preconditions for groups seeking to become part of the political mainstream is deeply unsettling. Indeed, it is possible that mainstream politics may be infused with extremism as a result of mainstreaming rather than the other way round.

A confused, contradictory approach to dealing with militancy and extremism could also unravel many of the gains made in the fight against militancy so far. More than a decade of counter-insurgency campaigns and counterterrorism operations have produced a hard-won semblance of stability and security in the country. But before the state decided on a zero-tolerance policy towards anti-Pakistan militants, a confusion similar to what is apparent today allowed militants and extremists to run amok. The state's legal responsibilities, both domestic and international, ought to be taken more seriously. Clear criteria need to be drawn up for inclusion of groups in banned lists or to be put on a watch list. Once a group is listed, the specific actions that all tiers of the state have to take should be made public and enforced. Fairness demands listed groups have a right to appeal. But sanity demands that double standards, double games and dual standards be abandoned.

Musharraf & MQM

EVEN by the standards of Pakistani politics, the call by Pervez Musharraf for the MQM to “shun the politics of ethnicity” is rich.

One might resort to words of a single syllable to explain to the former military dictator that it was his own regime that brought the MQM in from the cold and stood by as it rearmed itself throughout the period of his rule. No doubt there are people in the country with short memories, but many of those who lived through the events of May 12, 2007 can hardly forget the image of Musharraf brashly celebrating his triumph at the end of that sad day, claiming it a victory for his regime that the ousted chief justice of the Supreme Court was prevented from leaving Karachi airport through a widespread exercise of violence that left nearly 50 dead and scores injured, the metropolis paralysed and memories of the 1980s revived.

Perhaps someone should ask him what exactly he was celebrating at that moment.

The politics of ethnicity by definition has a narrow appeal. Certainly, nationalist/ethnic parties can have legitimate demands, and forming a political party is one way of giving these demands a higher profile. But such parties are usually, at best, little more than pressure groups and they tend not to become controversial if they do not practise a negative politics.

The MQM, however, is different because of its use of violence, tactics that its very party infrastructure was designed to facilitate.

In the mid 2000s, it made a brief, abortive attempt to grow out of the confines of ethnic politics when it tried to establish a presence in Punjab and rename itself the Muttahida Qaumi Movement. However, it was Musharraf who dragged it back into the quagmire of a violent, ethnically articulated politics when he struck a deal with it for the 2002 elections. The best way to keep ethnicity or any other form of particularist politics out of the democratic space is to leave it up to the voters to decide their leadership.

Musharraf has been making a name for himself lately with shoot-from-the-hip statements that have little or no thought behind them. But he should spare the

citizens of Karachi his lectures on how to conduct their affairs or who to vote for, because in this city at least, memories are not that short

A shocking agreement

EVEN before The New York Times published the inside story about the Arab leaders' talks on the Jerusalem issue, the world had noted with disappointment most Arab governments' muted response to the American decision to formally recognise the holy city as Israel's capital. The NYT tapes reveal a tacit but shocking agreement among Arab leaders to accept America's policy while adopting a stance that condemned it. Publicly, Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi denounced Washington's renunciation of its half-century old policy on Jerusalem, with the Egyptian leader making a phone call to President Donald Trump to register his opposition to an announcement that was music to Israeli ears. However, as the tapes reveal, phone calls from the Egyptian intelligence chief asked hosts of several TV talk shows not to condemn the American decision and instead persuade the viewers to accept it. In contrast, for public consumption, Egyptian religious leaders close to the government refused to meet American Vice President Mike Pence, and it was Egypt that moved the Security Council resolution which Washington vetoed. The Saudi attitude was no less slimy, for as revealed by Arab and European sources, a few days before the Trump announcement, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman tried to persuade Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas to accept a watered-down version of a Palestinian state without east Jerusalem as its capital.

The fact is that intra-Arab and other disputes shape the policy of some Arab capitals, which see Iran, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, rather than Israel, as the principal threats. Egypt feels a third intifada could revive Hamas, which along with the Muslim Brotherhood is anathema to Cairo, while Riyadh like Tel Aviv considers Tehran as the foe. The Muslim world noted with regret that neither King Salman nor the crown prince bothered to attend the OIC's Istanbul summit. No wonder it is left to non-Arab Muslim countries like Turkey and Iran to articulate the Palestinian point of view.

Too dangerous to drink

AS if the health problems of this country's vast majority weren't bad enough, research continues to provide us with endless proof of how the challenge is growing. Take the issue of contaminated drinking water. True, some reports have noted that access to potable water has improved in the country — thanks largely to the targets set by the MDGs, and now the SDGs. However, the effort has clearly not been enough. Contaminated drinking water is responsible for a range of gastrointestinal illnesses — from diarrhoea and dysentery to hepatitis. Shockingly, even the more easily treated of ailments ie diarrhoea, leads to over 50,000 preventable deaths among children every year, as estimated by Unicef some time ago. Some two-thirds of Pakistani households drink bacterially contaminated or otherwise compromised water, no surprise when we consider that far too many of our natural waterways are choked with filth. Besides, largely unregulated factories and industrial units across the country allow untreated effluent to enter the water courses.

Thinking through the issue requires untangling various strands that successive governments have hardly given priority to. First, there is the pressing problem of just how rampant water contamination is and the numerous forms it takes. Besides bacteria, drinking water may also contain poisons like arsenic. Then little has been done to revamp the water supply infrastructure; old and defective pipes cause sewage and garbage to mix with what is supposed to be potable water. The fecal and other contaminants being consumed are potentially lethal. It is only natural then, that those who can afford it prefer to buy bottled water — even here the testing of samples has shown that some brands are selling water of uncertain quality.

Any exercise in revamping the water sector will have to go hand in hand with educating the public on environmental cleanliness and personal hygiene that can help reduce the number of gastrointestinal deaths and drastically cut medical bills. For example, open defecation — often in waterways — is common and the importance of handwashing is still not recognised. Reversing this trend requires a major effort but it is not impossible to achieve. A good example is neighbouring India where progress towards this goal has been made thanks to a sustained campaign against open defecation — a problem that is closely related to stunting in children. For a cleaner Pakistan, and a population that is less prone to falling ill, the state will have to actively step in. Indeed, the fact that it has practically

abdicated its responsibility on this front was noted by the Supreme Court recently when it pulled up the Sindh chief minister for his administration's failure to provide unpolluted water to the denizens. This is a stunning badge of shame, particularly for a country that lets few opportunities pass to boast of its nuclear status

Qadri's agenda

THE Pakistan Awami Tehreek and its leader Tahirul Qadri undeniably have legitimate questions and demands of the PML-N.

The killing of 14 members of Mr Qadri's organisation in June 2014 left a scar on the democratic project in Pakistan that the PML-N governments in Punjab and at the centre have done nothing to atone for. The families of the victims of the Model Town massacre have yet to be given justice.

But Mr Qadri's quixotic politics has often drifted away from a principled demand for justice and towards political machinations for decidedly less salutary reasons.

The announcement on Monday by Mr Qadri that his organisation and allied political parties will seek not just the ouster of the PML-N's governments in Punjab and at the centre but also the end of the PML-N as a political party is perhaps the clearest indication yet that Mr Qadri's motives are undemocratic

Surviving the story

IN the backdrop of the oft highlighted occupational hazards of being a journalist in Pakistan, is a story that receives little attention. Now a documentary and field study report under the joint title *Surviving the Story*, which was launched at the National Press Club in Islamabad on Monday, has shined that much-needed light. The film and report focus on 10 cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata: five of them involve journalists who were killed in the line of duty — their families received little or no compensation — and five others who were displaced from

the tribal areas because of the extreme threat to their security. The report and the documentary urge various stakeholders, including media owners, government, press clubs, journalists' unions and civil society to devise a system of providing financial security for journalists.

There are in this country multiple centres of power and influence with vested, and usually conflicting, interests in preventing the dissemination of information, or twisting it to suit their ends. In such a perilous environment for media practitioners, KP, Fata and Balochistan are the most dangerous — a fact borne out by statistics over several years. Sometimes the death of journalists due to work-related causes elicits an outpouring of public sympathy that can result in at least short-term financial assistance for their families, but the travails of displaced journalists go entirely under the radar. Certainly, awareness of the importance of training in physical safety has increased and some media outlets have assumed more responsibility for the security of their journalists, which is as it should be. However, the financial repercussions if journalists are killed or displaced, remains an issue that has not been adequately addressed by the media industry. It is only reasonable and humane that those who risk their lives to carry out a task that comprises a fundamental right for citizens — the right to information — should know that were a misfortune to befall them, their families will not be left in dire financial straits.

Exchange rate theatre

THE recent flip-flop by the State Bank on an important decision impacting the quantity of dollars available for sale in the open market shows that our management of the exchange rate has become a game of hide-and-seek. What exactly happened is a little technical, but important to understand. Money changers regularly collect large amounts of foreign currency in cash from a range of countries, and send it to Dubai where it is converted into dollars and brought back to Pakistan, either as cash again or remitted through the banking system. On Jan 1, the State Bank imposed a new regulatory measure mandating that only 35pc of the cash sent abroad could be returned in cash form; the rest would have to come through the banking channel. Perhaps the move was intended to increase the availability of dollars in the interbank market. In any case, from that day onward, the open market, where dollars are purchased in cash, experienced

shortages and the rate began to climb, hitting a peak of Rs113 on Monday. Following an emergency meeting with exchange company representatives on Tuesday morning, the State Bank hurriedly reversed the ceiling and the rate began to stabilise again.

On its own, this would not be a significant story, but coming as it does in the midst of widespread anticipation of an overvalued exchange rate and dwindling reserves, it gains in significance. The most obvious question to ask is why the State Bank imposed the measure in the first place if it was going to lead to dollar shortages in the open market that would necessitate a quick withdrawal. Was there a lack of foresight, or an inability to manage the consequences, or both? Next question to ask is why the move was necessary. What alternative does the State Bank have in mind, considering that whatever purpose the decision was supposed to serve now stands nullified in the wake of the withdrawal?

Ideally, the rupee is supposed to find its own value in the market. But the restraints that have been artificially applied to this process during the years when Ishaq Dar ruled the markets as finance minister made it impossible to discover the true value of the rupee against the dollar. In the meantime, reserves were built up on the back of rampant foreign borrowing while the exchange rate was kept artificially stable. The situation became increasingly untenable as demand for the dollar outstripped its supply for a prolonged period of time, forcing banks to resort to short-term foreign borrowing to shore up supplies. Today, that trajectory has brought us to a cul-de-sac, and finding a way forward has turned into a game of hide-and-seek in which the real value of the rupee lies at the end of a thorny path of tough decisions that nobody is willing to own

Balochistan politics

THE awfulness of the political shenanigans in Balochistan was bloodily underlined by yet another suicide attack in Quetta on Tuesday.

The jarring contrast between politicians arguing obscenely among themselves while militants are able to penetrate a so-called high-security zone and kill security personnel ought to give all sensible and right-thinking Pakistanis pause.

The newly resigned chief minister of Balochistan, Sanaullah Zehri, was no great democrat or governance maestro. Having forced his way into the chief minister's office mid-term, Mr Zehri alienated many of his party and coalition colleagues.

Indeed, were it not for personal resentment towards him, PML-N MPAs and coalition allies may not have succeeded in creating an environment in which Mr Zehri's resignation became inevitable.

Yet, it does appear that anti-democratic forces may have had a role to play in the latest political tumult in Balochistan.

Speculation that a no-confidence motion against the Balochistan chief minister would have been a first step towards a cascading crisis across the provinces and at the centre has refused to die down.

The PML-N's national and provincial leaderships need to urgently work together to stabilise the political landscape in Balochistan and pave the way for Senate elections followed by a general election later this year.

With only months left until the end of the assemblies' terms, it is unlikely that what two successive parliaments and Balochistan assemblies have failed to do can be engineered at this moment.

Yet, the security challenges in Balochistan have to be urgently reviewed.

Why have militants found it possible to strike inside 'high-security' zones repeatedly?

What has been learned from the attacks and what steps have been taken to prevent further incidents?

Has any official been held accountable for security lapses that have been identified?

Can Balochistan really be stabilised if war rages across the border in southern Afghanistan?

Some of the questions are old and ought to have been answered many years ago.

But political turmoil, especially of a kind that allegedly involves a role for the security establishment, renders any meaningful policy debate impossible.

It is remarkable that on the very day of a brutal suicide attack in Quetta, politicians were focused on their own, largely self-created political troubles.

Mr Zehri has failed and before him Abdul Malik Baloch of the National Party largely failed to live up to expectations.

Is there anyone in Balochistan who can bring political stability now?

H1N1 flu concerns

SEASONAL influenza, triggered mostly in the winter months, is once more upon us. There are increasing reports of individuals contracting a flu virus subtype known as A (H1N1). It is the same viral strain that caused the 2009 global influenza epidemic, and that continues to circulate in many parts of the world. Although the illness can be successfully managed in most cases, what is of concern to health authorities in Punjab is that the province has logged over 20 influenza-related deaths among a total of almost 70 cases diagnosed since August last year; just last week, four patients died in government hospitals. It is evident that they were either not diagnosed as seriously ill or referred to the hospital too late. All this has a bearing on the efficacy of the health authorities tasked with protecting vulnerable swathes of the population against flu outbreak. Surely the authorities must know that severe winters and poor socioeconomic conditions are contributing to flu prevalence. In the case of Sindh where almost 40 patients contracted this particular strain over the last two months, infectious disease experts say that there is no need to panic — as yet. Instead, they advise exercising precautionary measures, and supportive treatment for those who fall ill.

Though this viral strain has come to be regarded as nothing more than a manifestation of the seasonal flu, it can adversely impact those with low immunity — for instance, pregnant women, children and the elderly — who are advised by doctors to get the flu shot to lower their chances of falling sick. As with other illnesses, it is important that patients not turn to quacks. Hospitals should monitor those most at risk and be better prepared with free flu vaccines and antibacterial

drugs to treat secondary infections such as bacterial pneumonia to prevent influenza-related deaths. Lastly, even if precautionary measures are rather basic and obvious — washing hands, staying away from sick persons, drinking plenty of fluids and eating nutritious foods — public media campaigns must disseminate this information.

Monsters amongst us

KASUR is once again the scene of a depraved crime against a child. The rape and murder of seven-year-old Zainab is a grotesque illustration of the state's increasing disconnect with the people.

The little girl went missing last Thursday, abducted while on her way to a religious tuition centre; her brutalised body was found on Wednesday, discarded on a heap of garbage.

In 2015, horrific details emerged of a child pornography ring that had been preying for years on several minors in Kasur district, making videos in which the victims were coerced into performing sex acts.

Despite the outrage triggered by that case, the criminal justice system remains as dysfunctional as ever. For Zainab's abduction and rape is reportedly preceded by no less than 12 similar cases — still unsolved — within a two-kilometre radius in Kasur city during the past two years.

But this time, public anger spilled over on the streets of Punjab with riots continuing into the second day. Police firing into the crowd of protesters left two people dead.

No matter which society, crimes against children evoke an especially acute horror. In Pakistan, that initial revulsion comes up against a state callously indifferent to its duty to protect citizens, even the younger segment of the population.

Criminal investigations are not of a standard that can lead to prosecutions; traumatised child victims are not handled with sensitivity by the police, nor does the latter liaise with organisations trained in rape counselling who can help these minors deal with their ordeal.

Law enforcement's lackadaisical attitude, which is of course generally applicable to crimes across the board — is born out of the knowledge that there will be absolutely no repercussions for their failure to properly compile and analyse evidence, an approach that takes time and discipline.

After the child porn ring was unearthed in Kasur, years after it had claimed its first victims, one would have imagined that the police would have expended every effort to track down the individuals responsible for the rape and abduction, and in some cases murder, of so many other girls in the same area.

Meanwhile, as seen time and again, brute force is often the tactic of choice to deal with public protests.

Again, it is the easy way out. Endemic abuse of power and lack of justice have left society seething with pent-up frustration, an impotent rage that spills over into mob violence as witnessed over the last two days.

While such mayhem cannot be condoned, it arises from very legitimate, yet unmet, expectations.

The criminal justice system must be overhauled and reformed to serve the people. Underscoring the scale of the problem, the bodies of two more child rape victims surfaced yesterday in parts of Punjab other than Kasur.

The paedophiles that live amongst us should no longer be able to freely walk the streets.

Dangerous Hormones

LAST week, the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan directed the provincial health authorities to immediately remove recombinant bovine somatotropin, or rBST, a synthetic growth hormone injected by dairy farmers into cows and buffaloes to spur milk production, from the shelves. The action came on the heels of an order by the chief justice of Pakistan, who also vacated a stay by the Sindh High Court against a ban imposed by Drap two years ago on rBST, also known as recombinant bovine growth hormone, or rBGH. Drap had prohibited the import and local manufacture of the hormone — and deregistered injections containing this substance — because of complaints of serious health risks to rBGH-treated animals and those consuming their milk. The Drap decision, of course, had not gone down well with the importing firms because it would directly hit their profits, and they chose to stall its implementation by moving the Sindh High Court. It is still a mystery as to how the country's drug registration authority had approved a growth hormone, without any therapeutic indication, in 1998 — almost at the same time Europe, Canada, Australia and several other nations were prohibiting the substance's use in dairy animals because of concerns of risks to animal and human health. Globally, less than 20 nations, including the US, allow its use, and in several countries, products from hormone-treated animals have to be labelled.

Studies show that the use of genetically modified synthetic hormones causes severe pain and suffering associated with foot and mouth disorders and reproductive problems in cows and buffaloes. The substance can also cause lameness in rBGH-treated animals, infect them with mastitis, a potentially fatal mammary gland infection, and increase the mortality rate. Such things happen when we deviate from nature. The residue of this hormone as well as antibiotics injected into the animals to treat mastitis carried in milk that is consumed by people is suspected to be linked to heightened risks of breast, prostate and other cancers, hair loss, early puberty, flu, obesity and so on. Though dairy farmers in Karachi are warning of milk shortage in the city because of reduced production on account of the prohibition on the use of rBST, the court and Drap should ignore their demand to delay action against the drug's usage. Nobody should be allowed to make profits at the expense of animal and human health.

Journalist attacked

THE security climate for media and rights activists in Pakistan is rapidly deteriorating — and the state appears unable or unwilling to do anything about it. The attack and allegedly failed abduction attempt on Taha Siddiqui, an independent, Islamabad-based journalist, on Wednesday was appalling in its brazenness. According to Mr Siddiqui, he was stopped en route to the airport by unidentified armed men, beaten and threatened to be shot. Mr Siddiqui was fortunate to escape and his version of events has not been refuted with evidence by the authorities or witnesses. The attack is only the latest in a string of deeply troubling events that suggest anti-free speech and anti-democratic forces in the country are growing bolder in their attempts to muzzle media and rights activists. Unless the media forges a united front against such attacks, there are likely to be more incidents — and there can be no guarantee that the level of violence will not escalate. Previous unexplained deaths of journalists and activists are a grim reminder that restraint by murky but powerful forces cannot be expected.

The media itself needs to urgently reconsider its approach to the safety of journalists in the country. Partisan rancour in the media is at a historic high but that does not necessarily pose an existential threat to journalism. In a fiercely divided polity and the age of social media, there are many factors that are contributing to a decline in the quality of independent, fair and truthful journalism by professional media organisations. But when it comes to safety, there should be complete unity. Trite as it may sound, an attack against one journalist is an attack against all journalists. At various points in the country's history, all forms of independent journalism have been attacked as anti-national, unpatriotic or against the interests of the state. Both media owners and professional journalists of every stripe ought to be concerned by the trajectory of events. A free media is a public good that deserves the strongest protections.

Property market revisions

WHEN the government announced in 2016 that rackets involving the misdeclaration of values in property transactions would be ended, there were howls of protest from the stakeholders. For the longest time, property prices flattened out, and in some cases shrank, as a mechanism was put in place to generate valuation tables for each locality in urban areas across the country. Adding to the tumult, the government had also committed to increasing the prices listed in the valuation tables each year, in the hope that ultimately these rates could either match or come close to those at which property transactions are conducted. The exercise was an attempt to tackle the giant black hole that the real estate sector has become, sucking in the largest quantities of black money in the country from every other sector. All manner of illicit and tax-evaded wealth can easily be parked in real estate assets, evidence of which was provided by the June 2016 amnesty scheme for real estate investments that generated the largest response of any amnesty scheme ever when an amount of Rs290bn was declared under it in only three months.

In July came the first signal that the government's resolve could be losing steam, when the upward revision was indefinitely postponed. Now there is the news that the FBR issued six regulatory orders on Friday setting down the localities that would be allowed a downward revision in their listed prices. How were these localities chosen, and how was the downward revision in their recognised prices calculated? Here is where consultation with stakeholders needs to be avoided, and if property dealers are themselves involved in selecting the areas for downward revision as well as the quantum of this revision, then it is tantamount to government collusion in tax evasion and the concealment of ill-gotten gains.

The days to come will afford us an opportunity to see where exactly these revisions have been applied, and a clue might be discerned as to whether or not the orders are designed to serve a limited set of vested interests. As that process of scrutiny gets under way, the government should release an explanation as to why this step was necessary, and explain the process by which the decision was made to identify the localities and set the quantum of the revision. Where the state is concerned, there is undoubtedly a revenue loss involved in this exercise, but beyond that, the harm done to the overall objective of documenting the economy and closing off the dark spaces where all manner of wealth is hidden away should not be underestimated. The downward revisions fly in the face of

the earlier commitment announced by the government to increase the documented price of property transactions. The reversal of that commitment needs to be examined

Undemocratic poll

The winning percentage was overwhelming and seemingly impressive. In the 2013 Balochistan Assembly election, Abdul Qudoos Bizenjo won more than 80pc of the vote.

But that electoral victory, which has put Mr Bizenjo on the path to becoming the third chief minister of Balochistan in the current assembly, was a profoundly undemocratic exercise.

The total votes cast on May 11, 2013, in PB-41 were 683 or 1.18pc of the eligible voters in the constituency. Mr Bizenjo won the Awaran provincial seat with a total of 544 votes.

Those numbers are not mistakes. And the nomination of Mr Bizenjo by PML-N dissidents and their allies in the Balochistan Assembly is not a joke.

If it were at all possible for the political machinations in Balochistan to become any more tawdry, the move to install an MPA who was elected with merely 544 votes as chief minister may have achieved just that.

Perhaps in a fractious assembly with many different interests to be catered to, the weakest candidate is the 'best' candidate for chief minister.

The nomination of Mr Bizenjo may have an unlikely side effect: it could briefly cast a spotlight on one of the most troubled districts in the country.

A hotbed of the continuing low-level separatist insurgency, Awaran is an area in which virtually no independent reporting or gathering of information is possible.

A geographically large, sparsely populated district with some of the worst socioeconomic indicators in the country, Awaran has been failed by the state at every level.

Is Mr Bizenjo in any way interested in addressing the complex, multilayered and security-driven challenges in his home district if he does succeed in becoming chief minister?

More generally, with the ouster of the unpopular Sanaullah Zehri and the political equation in the assembly having been turned on its head, is there any interest in the new majority to go beyond dividing the spoils and perhaps try and help stabilise a grim security situation in Balochistan?

The truly dispiriting aspect of the political turmoil in Balochistan is how easily the people's elected representatives are willing to align themselves with anti-democratic forces trying to reshape the political landscape ahead of national elections.

Mr Zehri was no saint and his predecessor, Abdul Malik Baloch, was a disappointment, but the political class in Balochistan appears determined to drag the democratic process through the mud for myopic, short-term and ultimately self-defeating gains.

Resurrecting the Ravi

THE Asian Development Bank has pledged technical assistance for developing a plan to clean the Ravi river in response to a call by the Punjab government. A report in this paper which confirms the ADB's approval recalls that some 50m people live in this river basin in Pakistan, including 24m urban dwellers in Punjab's major cities of Lahore and Faisalabad. The cleaning up of the Ravi was in focus while the river was shrivelling up because India had the rights to its water under the Indus Waters Treaty. The ADB notes that the basin is heavily polluted; it is suffering on account of discharges from uncontrolled industrial as well as agricultural growth. How the ADB help is going to manifest itself in practical terms is not yet clear. The news about the offer of assistance is a bit surprising though, as the Ravi had been slipping from memory.

The earlier debate generated when the river was turning into a sewage nullah had seen government after government, right through the 1990s and later, come up with plans to rescue it from its rotten condition. Indeed, some of the most flowery schemes involved beautifying the old riverbed. These turned out to be

more sloganeering than anything substantial. Then, slowly, the flood of ideas subsided. Neither officialdom nor the general public showed any interest. It was as if all those plans of resurrecting the dead river were unable to get any outside backing — which was considered vital as the government did not have the means to salvage the Ravi on its own. In fact, there were periods of total silence on the issue as urban development projects were initiated with zeal. Even the laments about the great stream which once saw many a king flow out of the picture were no longer heard. The ADB's promise of help could revive hope and renew interest, leading to new ideas on what can be done. The river may still have a lot to offer, if anyone cares to look deep enough.

Aggressive remarks from India

INDIAN army chief Gen Bipin Rawat has once again stirred controversy with hawkish and arguably reckless comments against Pakistan. The very idea of calling a “nuclear bluff”, as Gen Rawat has said of Pakistan, ought to give all right-thinking and sensible people in South Asia pause.

With the army chief appearing to suggest that the Cold Start doctrine has become a core part of Indian military strategy against Pakistan, the danger of a general conflict between Pakistan and India is growing. Crossing the international border is an act of war, and Pakistan would simply have no option but to respond.

There is no scenario in which Pakistan can treat an Indian incursion on its soil as a temporary or acceptable move that does not merit a forceful and immediate response.

From the very beginning, the logic of Cold Start threatened to elevate the risk of nuclear conflict between Pakistan and India, and yet India has pursued it while denying its existence for many years.

Gen Rawat's disturbing comments have also underlined the dire state of Pakistan-India relations.

From the Kulbhushan Jadhav controversy to frequent incidents of violence along the Line of Control, the difficulties are increasing and the opportunities for positive change are decreasing. Deep political divisions inside Pakistan ahead of a general election scheduled for later this year suggest that major initiatives in the relationship with India are unlikely until at least the end of the year.

By then, India will be preparing for its own general election in 2019. If the last Indian general election is any indication of what the next campaign season could bring, BJP hardliners and sundry other politicians may explicitly base their election campaigns on anti-Pakistan rhetoric.

The political climate in both countries suggests that the bilateral relationship may at best stay frozen or could further deteriorate. These are certainly not hopeful times for those desiring the normalisation of ties between Pakistan and India ultimately.

Yet, hawkish comments against Pakistan by the Indian army chief and an unpromising political climate in both countries cannot erase the core truth of Pakistan-India relations: the two countries simply cannot afford to not engage each other in dialogue.

The recent meeting in Bangkok between the national security advisers of Pakistan and India suggests that the two countries are aware that a total breakdown in communications is not desirable.

But if hawks on both sides are to be prevented from dictating the tone and content of bilateral engagements, meetings held away from the media spotlight need to produce tangible results. Meanwhile, India ought to consider why its military leadership is growing more important at the policymaking level.

Reforming justice

JUSTICE delayed is justice denied. This maxim encapsulates all that is amiss with Pakistan's dysfunctional criminal justice system viewed as archaic and desperately in need of restructuring. However, failure to resolve flaws within our justice system has not only undermined state authority, it has also deprived citizens of their right to protection. In discharging its responsibilities under the National Action Plan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has taken an exemplary lead by drawing up plans aimed at police and prison reform, as well as stronger investigations, prosecution and judiciary services. In a 77-page document, the authorities concede that delays, costs and corruption have allowed illegal parallel 'justice' mechanisms to thrive unchecked — in particular those administered by militant groups that flout basic human rights tenets and perpetuate extremist ideologies. The challenge is expensive, and delayed justice is seen in the backlog of court cases, especially those in district courts countrywide. For instance, 193,467 criminal cases are pending before KP's district judiciary since June 2017 denoting more than a three-fold increase over the past two years. The inability of the justice system to keep up with litigation demands makes the case for reforming district-level judiciaries, eliminating corruption from the bench and improving the competency of judges more urgent. And because most litigants deal with the lower courts, pending cases at this level should be disposed swiftly. The KP reforms report suggests changes to the Criminal Procedure Code and KP Police Act, 2017. Recommendations include increasing case investigation time frames to 30 days and the establishment of safety commissions and complaint resolution authorities to check police excesses. Measures such as witness-protection programmes and an amendment to the Evidence Act requiring investigators to incorporate scientific methods and data must also be considered by the other provinces.

When the innocent are punished and jailed instead of the guilty; and when the police as an institution have a reputation for incompetence and highhandedness, legal reform is the only way to strengthen political rights and civil liberties. Experts estimate it takes between 20 to 30 years to resolve a moderately complex civil suit through litigation, implying that judges are overburdened and prefer to adjourn cases instead of conducting lengthy hearings. Indeed, reforming court functions is essential, but unless other actors in the judicial system — lawyers, state counsels and prosecutors, and police — are simultaneously

transformed and their performance improved, the overall impact will be negligible.

Rabies-free Karachi

ONE of the more distressing practices that has become the norm in Pakistan is to carry out culls of packs of stray dogs that roam many of our towns and cities. Their population in urban areas tends only to grow, especially in places where ample food is available in open garbage dumps. This means that particularly in low-income and congested areas, citizens walking the pathways are menaced by this peril; dogs in packs often attack vulnerable individuals, with children being most at risk, resulting not just in grievous injuries but also exposure to rabies — a disease that is fatal once the symptoms set in. Municipal administrations' solution has traditionally been to lay down poisoned meat, the consumption of which causes the animal to die an agonising death. But, as large-scale studies focusing on countries from India to South Africa have shown, the practice of killing off pye-dogs has proved to be quite ineffective since the reduction in the numbers of competitors only leads to higher rates of breeding. The answer lies in sterilising as many animals as possible, thus bringing the numbers down in a humane fashion.

It is encouraging, then, that on Friday, the country's most populated city, which witnesses an estimated 150 dog-bite cases daily, announced the Rabies-Free Karachi pilot project. This initiative, centred in Ibrahim Hyderi — one of the areas worst affected by cases of dog bite — aims to vaccinate and sterilise stray dogs on a large scale, while also creating public awareness of dog behaviour and rabies. At a ceremony in this regard held at Karachi's Indus Hospital, which is collaborating with WHO and KMC on the project, health professionals talked about the scale of the problem and the promising fact that vaccinating 70pc of the dog population had successfully eliminated rabies in areas where the threat was endemic. It is to be hoped that the project meets with success so that it can be replicated in other areas.

Holding back Fata reforms

THE initial praise heaped on a part of the Fata reforms — extending the jurisdiction of the Peshawar High Court and the Supreme Court — that the PML-N government allowed the National Assembly to approve, has given way to concern that the government may be seeking to delay and dilute the change. The bill that the National Assembly has authorised allows the president to delay signing it into law if the Senate also approves of it; can be selectively and in stages applied to the different agencies of Fata; and does nothing to repeal the FCR provisions, effectively keeping in place the political-agent-dominated lower tiers of the justice system in Fata, a system that has long been used to oppress the citizens of the tribal areas. Taken together, it appears that the PML-N is still contemplating thwarting meaningful reforms in Fata and is being less than truthful or responsible in its dealings with the region. Why?

The only reasonable explanation that has been identified so far, in the long process of the PML-N recommending and then stalling its own reforms in Fata, is Nawaz Sharif's political alliance with Mahmood Achakzai of PkMAP and Fazlur Rehman of JUI-F. The latter two political leaders have come on record with their objection to the PML-N's Fata reforms, but their official explanations are scarcely credible. Indeed, the cynical opposition of both politicians have fuelled conspiracy theories that have added to the general air of mistrust. But blame ultimately rests with the PML-N and Mr Sharif. The political and legal troubles of the ousted prime minister appear to be dominating the PML-N's governance and legislative agendas. The fresh questions about the Fata bill have also underlined a near-universal perception of the federal government as being held hostage to the political calculations and personal demands of Mr Sharif. The situation is thoroughly disappointing and is likely causing further damage to the democratic project in the country.

Fata deserves better. Reasonable, mainstream political forces in the country ought to combine to make improvements to the administrative, judicial and political systems of Fata. Purely on the grounds of protecting the significant gains made through a series of counter-insurgency operations in Fata, the full range of reforms must be urgently implemented there. But the state's responsibilities to the people of Fata are much greater. Used, abused and ignored at different points in its history according to the whims of the state, the region is a testament to the vast failures of the state. On every conceivable socioeconomic, political

and judicial benchmark, Fata trails behind most of the rest of the country. Repealing the FCR is a core and necessary part of any reform agenda in Fata. It is remarkable that in a time of great difficulties of his own with the judicial process in Pakistan, Mr Sharif is willing to deny justice to the people of the tribal areas.

Privatising PIA

IT is difficult to take seriously the claim made by Privatisation Minister Daniyal Aziz that the government intends to sell off the national airline before its term ends.

The timeline is very tight, and the legislative changes required, as well as the restructuring of the airline prior to the sale of its 'core business', will be next to impossible to accomplish on such a hurried schedule.

One is hard-pressed to understand why the minister made the remarks in an interview to Reuters, a global news agency. If the government is serious about the proposal, it should consider the timeline first and make a solemn commitment that the matter is not going to be rushed through.

The minister said in the interview that the proposal has been developed in detail, and will now move to the cabinet committee on privatisation, as early as "maybe even next week". The committee should carefully consider the timeline before it comes to any conclusion.

There is no doubt that PIA, as well as other state-owned enterprises such as the Pakistan Steel Mills, also mentioned by the minister, need dramatic change of some sort in order to stem their mounting losses, which are putting an unbearable burden on the national exchequer.

A way needs to be found to harness private-sector energies to revitalise these units, whether it is through outright privatisation or some other arrangement. But in the limited time left to this government, it will be far too difficult to effect such a change.

Since the government failed to take this step in the five years of its rule that began in 2013, and even bungled matters massively the one time it tried to move

PIA towards privatisation, it might be a better idea to leave the task to the next government to handle.

Repeated attempts to move privatisation along that end up in failure do more damage than good. In the meantime, the accumulated losses to the national carrier now stand at Rs319bn; the amount is approaching levels almost equal to that of the circular debt in the power sector.

PSM is also asking for another Rs3bn to be able to run its payroll, something that has become almost routine.

Clearly, the situation is unsustainable in both enterprises, and the possibility of a disruptive credit event, especially in the case of PIA, is rising. Drastic steps are required, but haste should not be the force behind them.

Cold-blooded killing

IN the landscape of present-day Pakistan, there is no dearth of gut-wrenching tragedies, many of them totally preventable. And some of these incidents stand out for their utter senselessness and brutality as a recent case in Karachi testifies.

On Saturday evening, in one of the city's upmarket areas, a young man driving a car was flagged down by personnel of the Anti-Car Lifting Cell Unit. Police sources confirm that not only were the men in plain clothes, even their vehicles (two motorbikes and a car) had been privately registered.

It is no surprise that in this crime-ridden city, the driver did not stop; indeed, most citizens in a similar situation would not have guessed that their pursuers belonged to law enforcement; it is more likely that they would have believed them to be criminals attempting a hold-up. It is simply shocking that the ACLU personnel, who proceeded to chase the car, opened fire on the vehicle, shooting the driver — the barely adult Intizar Ahmed, an expatriate student who was in the city to spend his vacations with his family — in the head, killing him.

An astonishing 16 spent bullet casings fired from 9mm pistols were found on the scene; subsequently, some ACLU officials were detained, while others went missing.

Expressing his condolences to the bereaved family, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah offered to hold a judicial inquiry into the killing. While this can only be seen as a sop to the matter, the larger questions remain unanswered. When, according to the law, can law-enforcement personnel go under cover, and under what circumstances? And when is government-regulated security allowed to carry — and deploy — arms?

In developed countries, where the rule of law is strong, it is the norm for officers to identify themselves as such before expecting compliance from the citizens. In our case, SOPs are constantly being violated. This is unacceptable. Oversight is needed before further tragic incidents occur.

Qadri's protest and democracy

A NEW chapter is set to open in the politics of protests and sit-ins today and it may be the most confusing yet.

Tahirul Qadri's quixotic quest for justice in the Model Town massacre of 2014 will bring him and his supporters onto the streets of Lahore today — barring a last-minute intervention by the superior judiciary in the name of protecting the citizenry from the massive disruptions that the Qadri-led protest are likely to create.

Indeed, Mr Qadri has already gone beyond his long-stated intention of seeking justice for the killing of his supporters in Model Town three and a half years ago and has explicitly called for the destruction of the PML-N as a political party in the country.

To the extent that Mr Qadri's protests are confined to seeking justice for the Model Town killings, they are arguably justified; the right to assemble and protest against injustice is a right that all Pakistanis have enshrined in the law.

Yet, the explicitly political agenda of Mr Qadri demands that his protest adheres to political norms, which have been repeatedly violated in recent years.

The very location of the sit-in selected by Mr Qadri — The Mall in Lahore, a principal artery in the provincial capital where even partial closure is guaranteed to cause great public inconvenience — suggests that protesters are refining their tactics in the wake of the national debacle in Faizabad, Islamabad.

An appeal by the Punjab government to Mr Qadri to select a less-disruptive site for his protest is likely to be ignored, in part because of the utter lack of credibility of the Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif-led PML-N government. Select a non-disruptive site and the PML-N is likely to ignore even the justified demands of Mr Qadri; pick a site such as The Mall and it will attract media attention nationally and heap greater political pressure on the PML-N.

For all the shameful tactics of the PML-N in delaying and denying justice to the victims of the Model Town massacre, there are also democratic principles at stake.

There is no proof as yet of the involvement of anti-democratic forces in Mr Qadri's protest. On the eve of the protest, it is still unclear if other mainstream political parties will throw their weight behind the protest, but their eventual involvement would be another significant blow to the democratic project in the country.

It is possible to interpret Mr Qadri's protest as the opening round of a fierce campaign season in which there are no clear favourites and power may be contested more than at any other point in the modern history of Pakistan.

But that possibility also requires anti-democratic forces and mainstream political parties tempted to align themselves with Mr Qadri at the moment to remain peaceful and not threaten actions that could bring the democratic edifice crashing down.

ATM fraud

THE rising number of arrests being made in the ATM-skimming fraud points to a serious flaw in the country's security architecture: it seems that criminals are being issued visas to enter the country without any checks. Reports of a growing number of ATM-skimming frauds have been rising since 2016, and only last week, the arrest of five Chinese nationals raised fears that under the garb of CPEC and a lax visa policy for visitors from China, large numbers of lawbreakers were starting to enter the country and engage in fraud. Police who interrogated the arrested nationals claim that a large ring may now be operating in the country, centred in Karachi for the moment, using crude technology to steal personal information from ATM machines, including pin codes, to gain unauthorised access to accounts and withdraw funds from them. The scam is rudimentary, and can be easily stopped if staff at the branches maintains vigilance and banks ensure that their CCTV systems are functional. But in due course, the sophistication of scams such as these is going to rise, and the online systems of the banks could also come under similar attack.

The situation must not be taken lightly. In the days to come, the numbers of Chinese nationals entering the country to live and work is going to rise very sharply, and though most will be welcome additions to the productive workforce of the country, the chances of some among them slipping past the net to take advantage of the basic protections of our digital and technological architecture will rise. It is crucial at this stage to develop the systems to ensure that the credentials of those entering the country for business or tourism are thoroughly vetted. In the present case, for example, it is important to ascertain if there are any local partners that these individuals were in touch with so matters can be followed up and action taken against them. Our police, and other security systems, are woefully unprepared for the new kinds of sophisticated technology-driven frauds that can emerge in the future, and if the matter is not taken seriously, it could leave the country vulnerable to a spike in such cases. Banks have an additional duty to upgrade their protection systems, and the capacity building of police and FIA authorities is badly needed. Let this be a wake-up call.

Solving Zainab's murder

THE horrific rape-murder of little Zainab continues to be front and centre in the public consciousness.

Following days of protests in several parts of the country triggered by the discovery of her brutalised body, the demand for her killer to be identified and brought to justice quickly remains as strong as ever.

The evidence so far, according to the police, indicates that Zainab is the latest victim of a serial killer. Another piece of important evidence is CCTV footage, of which three clips have been aired in the media.

The first and second videos, both released by police, show the little girl in the company of the apparent killer, in one of them being led by the hand, and another in which she is walking alongside him.

The third video, which surfaced on social media on Saturday, showed a lone man, the purported murderer, strolling by himself down a street.

This last video, which has evidently been leaked to the media could, according to area people, create confusion because the individual in it looks different from the earlier clips; moreover, the location is far from Zainab's home.

The widespread anguish over the as yet unsolved murder is very understandable.

However, it seems the police, in response to the justified furore over its failure to investigate earlier similar cases in the same area, has gone into overdrive in an effort to appear proactive.

Such a diametrically opposite approach to its earlier, inexcusable apathy is not necessarily desirable. To carry out a sound investigation that builds a prosecutable case, a methodical, dispassionate modus operandi — rather than one propelled by public sentiment — is essential.

Various political parties and pressure groups are also playing their role in stoking the vigilante-like atmosphere by co-opting the 'justice for Zainab' rallying cry and exploiting the tragedy for political gain.

The child's murder was heinous; the killer must be apprehended; and police protocols reformed — not because the public demands it but because that is the right and just thing to do.

Paigham-i-Pakistan

At long last, it seems there is some movement towards laying the groundwork for a counter-narrative to extremism.

On Tuesday, the government launched the Paigham-i-Pakistan, a document signed by 1,829 religious scholars — belonging to nearly all mainstream sects in the country — that declares several actions un-Islamic. These, among others, include suicide attacks against the state, spreading sectarianism and anarchy in the name of religion and issuing a call to jihad without the consent of the state.

Compiled through the efforts of the International Islamic University Islamabad, the document denounces the use of force on the pretext of imposing Sharia, waging an armed struggle against the state, or employing violence and terrorist tactics to settle ethnic, geographical, religious and sectarian conflicts.

The Paigham-i-Pakistan also includes decrees issued by various schools of thought pertaining to suicide attacks, calls to jihad by individuals and sectarian killings.

To bring all shades of religious opinion together to commit to a unified stance against extremism in Pakistan is a much-needed and symbolically significant first step.

Religious differences have for too long been exploited by various groups to acquire influence over society and in the political arena. Violence stoked by bigotry and prejudice has pitted Muslim against Muslim, sect against sect — aside from being the driving force for depredations against the minorities.

There have been attempts earlier to forge a consensus to counter religious violence: in 2015, some 200 ulema issued a decree against suicide bombings; in May last year, 31 prominent religious scholars signed a similar fatwa.

The latest document, however, not only encapsulates a wider range of crimes committed in the name of faith but is also a far more comprehensive representation of the diverse strains of religious thought in the country.

At the same time, let us not deceive ourselves: Paigham-i-Pakistan will remain a declaration of intent alone unless followed by substantive steps.

Those brainwashed into committing acts of faith-based violence will not be dissuaded by a fatwa, even one collectively issued by nearly 2,000 clerics.

The state's pandering to purveyors of extremist ideologies for its political ends has played a major role in seeding faith-based violence throughout the land.

To put the counter-narrative into effect, it must therefore abjure this ruinous strategy, revive the moribund National Action Plan and follow its stipulations to the letter — without any exceptions.

Ultra-right groups must no longer have a licence to indulge in divisive, incendiary rhetoric or force the government into making concessions by brandishing the threat of violence.

Admittedly, action has been taken against some networks of violent extremists but it has been inconsistent, and there remain troubling instances of what can only be described as unimpeded glorification of terrorism.

Until the state adopts a resolute, unequivocal approach, this country will continue its drift towards the right, and suffer the mayhem that comes with it.

Rohingya repatriation

IN the aftermath of the violent attacks on the Rohingya population in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state by security forces last year, the country's military has denied access to independent investigators and restricted aid operations. More than 650,000 Rohingya fled, undertaking perilous journeys to neighbouring Bangladesh. Most were escaping what the UN human rights chief has described as "a textbook case of ethnic cleansing". Now these traumatised Rohingya cramped in refugee camps find their lives in peril yet again with the majority fearful of returning to what they perceive as a climate of ongoing persecution in Rakhine. Apprehensions have worsened because of last year's repatriation deal between Myanmar and Bangladesh that is due to be implemented from next week. Moreover, international observers are concerned that this agreement falls short of protecting the Rohingya population. The Myanmar military is involved in the repatriation process, implying the need for increased clarity on long-term plans — otherwise there would be every reason to believe that such atrocities will continue with impunity. Because of the high civilian death toll in Rakhine (the UN estimates more than 1,000 civilians were killed last year), all repatriations must be entirely voluntary. Also, it is imperative that this agreement is not taken forward without assistance from the UNHCR.

Under this repatriation deal, Bangladesh may want all refugees to leave within two years but it is difficult to envisage how this might happen. It may not be surprising that Bangladesh is desperate to send refugees home due to economic challenges. However, the international community must stress that upholding rights under basic humanitarian protocols is of primary concern. Worse, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are still living in internment camps in Rakhine with restrictions on their movement after having returned in 2012 from Bangladesh. The international community must demand that Myanmar hold accountable those responsible for atrocities termed as genocide by rights observers. The Myanmar military must also release two local Reuters journalists who had been investigating this crisis. When marginalised populations are persecuted relentlessly, it is the responsibility of power-wielding bodies such as the UN and its member states to step in. To end, the real problem is the Myanmar military's unwillingness to support the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Commission that include legal citizenship and political inclusion for the

Rohingya community — and this should be an obvious part of any repatriation agreement.

Best for baby

WHILE politicians squabble among themselves over matters of power, a PTI MNA has helped shine a spotlight on a significant problem for current and future generations of Pakistanis. Nafeesa Inayatullah has tabled an amendment to the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan Act, 2010, to restrict the sale of baby formula in the country by making it conditional on a prescription by a doctor in cases where it is deemed necessary. Behind that seemingly simple idea lies a distressing reality: while the World Health Organisation recommends that babies should be only given breast milk for the first six months, in Pakistan only 40pc or so of babies six months and younger are exclusively breastfed. Unscrupulous business practices by companies selling baby formula, social norms that downplay the immense nutritional and health value of breast milk, and time constraints for working mothers, both in terms of homemaking and jobs outside the home, have helped sustain the sale of baby formula at undesirably high levels. Intervention is clearly needed.

Ms Inayatullah's suggested intervention by amending the Drug Act, however, is unlikely to deliver adequate results on its own. Restricting the supply of baby formula by curbing official sales may well create a black market for the product, where quality concerns would be magnified. A long-term solution will have to rely on educating mothers and families to progressively reduce the demand for baby formula. From reducing stunting and child mortality to increasing cognitive benefits and a range of undisputed health benefits for mother and child, breast milk is a superior option compared to any commercially available substitute. Mothers who do use baby formula should not be stigmatised, but through awareness campaigns made aware of the relative benefits of breast milk, particularly in the first six months of a baby's life. That will take time, but it will need a great deal of determination. A national conversation about the prevalence of child sexual assault should be supplemented with other aspects of a child's well-being.

Uncouth attack on parliament

IMRAN Khan may be unapologetic and defiant, but it was a thoroughly distasteful and shameful remark made by him in Lahore.

Parliament has rightly censured Mr Khan and a political sidekick for their remarks during the opposition protest on Wednesday, and it is hoped that allies of Mr Khan and friends of the PTI will urge him to reconsider his tone and rhetoric ahead of what is expected to be a fierce campaign season.

Certainly, ugly sentiments and verbal attacks are not new in the political arena, and Mr Khan is not the only transgressor when it comes to the use of unparliamentary language.

But what is dismaying about Mr Khan and some of the PTI's politics is the disdain for parliament in general.

It is one thing to excoriate political opponents and denounce them as corrupt, it is quite another to dismiss the very institution of parliament because the people have chosen elected representatives other than yourself and your party.

Indeed, contempt for parliament and the people's will has been an uncomfortable underlying theme of PTI politics. Having preached an anti-status quo politics for many years, Mr Khan has in recent years vigorously embraced status quo politicians in a bid to finally win power at the federal level.

That, of course, is Mr Khan and the PTI's choice and they are entitled to make it. But it does suggest an undemocratic mindset. What is now intolerable because another party has a majority in parliament would become tolerable if the same faces lined up behind Mr Khan.

The PTI supremo appears to believe in a 'democracy' that best suits him and that hands him the prime ministership. Anything less, and parliament, parliamentarians and all other political leaders are seen as evidence of a rotten system that has failed to recognise and reward Mr Khan for his political greatness.

It is a sad reflection on a politician who has built up a genuine and credible political base in over two decades of tireless effort.

Mr Khan's latest outburst has also raised the question of what kind of political and governance structure he would like to see in Pakistan.

If the PTI goes on to lose the next general election, will Mr Khan be willing to accept the results?

Or will he launch another campaign to dislodge a legitimately elected government, the next time perhaps bringing the democratic edifice itself crashing down?

It costs Mr Khan nothing to be respectful of democratic institutions and distinguish between the temporary members of those institutions and the institutions themselves.

But it could cost the country a great deal if a contender for political power does not believe in the legitimacy and sanctity of democratic institutions. Yesterday, Mr Khan pointedly refused to apologise for his remarks. Perhaps some more time may help him realise his error.

Amnesties don't work

IN announcing a tax amnesty at the tail end of its term, the PML-N government is walking in the footsteps of its predecessor. If matters proceed in accordance with the ruling party's plans, it will be the fourth amnesty scheme launched by the government since it came to power. Out of all these, only one has yielded any appreciable results. This was the real estate amnesty of December 2016, although even in that case, the volume of funds — just under Rs300bn — declared under it, was dwarfed by the sheer quantity of black money that was invested in property over the decades. If there is one thing that the history of amnesty schemes teaches us, it is that they do not work, except to make honest taxpayers feel like fools for following the law as they are supposed to do. It is a bit of a puzzle, therefore, as to why the government has sought repeated recourse to amnesty schemes, even when it was under an IMF programme and committed to broadening the tax base.

This time as well, the rhetoric accompanying the announcement of the scheme was about broadening the tax base in the country, an exercise that has seen little

success over the years. The prime minister chose the occasion of his appearance at the Pakistan Economic Forum, hosted by a grouping of the country's largest business and industrial concerns that are in the formal sector and that file their returns every year, to make the announcement. At the event, a piece of advice offered to the prime minister was to follow the example of Indonesia, which, it was stated, had realised around \$30bn from an amnesty scheme. Such suggestions are not helpful as the history of Pakistan's own amnesty schemes leaves little room for optimism. For decades now, successive governments here have been avoiding the difficult question of tax reform within the country; most recently, the PML-N government completely abandoned the idea of value-added tax. Instead, we see growing recourse to gimmickry such as a bank transaction tax or amnesties. With the latest announcement, the PML-N has sadly sealed its legacy as yet another helpless government bowing to the galaxy of vested interests that prefer to ply their trade beyond the reach of the state which protects their racket, and gives them a home.

Murder or 'encounter'?

WAS young Naqeebullah Mehsud really the internal migrant he appeared to be, trying to eke out a living far from home?

Those who knew him insist that this was the case — indeed, his Facebook page features photographs that bear out their claim that he had aspirations of becoming a model. Or was he, as the police claim, a militant involved in major acts of terrorism, with links to the TTP and other banned groups?

Only an investigation can confirm his credentials — we only know that he was among the four men killed by the police in an 'encounter' on the outskirts of Karachi last week.

So far, however, no evidence has emerged about any crime being committed — notwithstanding police allegations, specifically those made by SSP Rao Anwar who headed the team involved in the 'encounter' killing.

Tragically, there was no adherence to due process and the fundamental right of the accused to defend himself. With Naqeebullah's body being handed over to his family on Wednesday, one of his relatives claimed that earlier this month, the deceased had been whisked away from his garments shop in Sohrab Goth by men in plain clothes.

On Thursday, the Sindh home minister took notice of Naqeebullah's death and ordered the DIG police South to personally conduct an inquiry. But the clean-up needs to go much further.

The phenomenon of 'encounters' is a euphemism for extra-judicial killings a consequence of the failing of the justice system and the rot within police departments.

In Karachi, this travesty of justice has become so frequent that SSP Anwar has been given the moniker of 'encounter specialist' — all under the very nose of both superiors in the police department and the provincial government. The practice has to be brought to an end.

Now that the Supreme Court has saved the job of Sindh police chief A.D. Khowaja, this is a pressing challenge that he must take up at the earliest.

Police cooperation

A SPATE of shocking and high-profile crimes has turned the spotlight once again on the uneven performance of the police forces across the country. From horrifying murder and sexual abuse to excessive use of force against protesters, there are enormous differences in the crimes and the responses of the relevant police forces, but in no case can the performance of law enforcement be deemed entirely satisfactory. Perhaps now is the time for the federal and provincial governments to convene the heads of the various police forces in the country and discuss what steps can be taken in the short term to improve the performance of the police nationally and which reforms ought to be undertaken for long-term progress. It will not be easy. Two of the provinces, Sindh and Balochistan, have reverted to the 1861 Police Order, Punjab is still using the Police Order, 2002, a Musharrafian concoction with surprisingly progressive elements, while KP has to implement a commendable set of reforms introduced

by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police Order, 2016. There are also the roles of other institutions to consider, such as the superior judiciary's interventions in Sindh and the military establishment's dominance in Balochistan.

Yet, surely when it comes to keeping young children safe and addressing the menace of extrajudicial killings, there is a level of cooperation that can be found among professional police cadres across the country. Encourage the leaderships to meet, discuss the different experiences in the provinces and seek to identify ways in which the police can better serve their communities — an agenda that transcends myopic political differences ought to be possible to draw up and implement. The failures and lessons of Kasur, for example, could be used to inform other police forces that almost certainly have recorded similar crimes in their jurisdictions. The KP reform process and the on-ground experience with those reforms in the first few months could be used to inform and educate police leaderships in the other provinces. In an already fraught national political climate that looks set to worsen ahead of the general election, the very idea of cooperation across the provinces and discussing reforms and changes at this late stage in terms of the assemblies may strike some as naïve. But anger across the provinces is an opportunity for the state to try and overcome political hurdles and improve the low quality of policing that the public has come to expect.

Indeed, one of the factors that may be preventing the democratic project from growing in strength is a sense that mainstream political parties are not interested in reforms that could improve the daily life of the citizenry. The justice system, the police and the bureaucracy are the points of contact with the state for most citizens. Address the problems in those areas and the quality of democracy will necessarily improve.

Polio tragedy

THE killing of two polio vaccinators in Quetta on Thursday, while horrific, does not come as a surprise, considering the numerous attacks on this vulnerable community of workers over the years. In this case, the tragedy was compounded by the fact that the victims, who were shot dead, were mother and daughter — doing their hazardous work apparently without any protection as claimed by their relatives. This was a security lapse, and those minding the campaign in

Balochistan's capital should be held accountable for it. Having said that, so grave and complicated is the situation with respect to the anti-polio drive in the country that newer questions arise with the passage of time. For instance, many wonder whether being accompanied by a couple of security men is enough protection for the workers administering the crucial vaccine to children. On the other hand, some say that the campaign is best carried out in secrecy or with minimum visibility as guards, by their very presence, make the polio workers administering the vaccine all the more conspicuous, thus inviting the wrath of those who denounce the drops as part of a Western conspiracy to harm young Pakistanis. With many parents convinced by this blatantly false propaganda, and reluctant to let polio vaccinators into their homes, the drive against the crippling disease becomes that much more difficult to carry out. Even so, there has been some success over the years, with the number of cases falling. These gains must not be lost — and security for polio vaccinators must be enhanced.

Simultaneously, the drive must enlist greater public support from various important segments of society. True, many prominent figures have publicly supported the call for vaccinating Pakistan's children, but this must be an ongoing process. Increasing support from clerics and others — eg local councillors, social and political activists, MNAs and MPAs — who have clout with local communities should be actively pursued to boost the anti-polio drive. Finally, a word about the venue of Thursday's attack ie the outskirts of Quetta. The latter city boasts a heavy security presence. Ironically, just hours before the killing of the polio workers, two policemen were also gunned down in the city, showing the level of penetration that militants in the province have achieved. With Balochistan's capital city so vulnerable, we can only imagine the extent to which the rest of the province remains a target.

ODI drubbing

NEW ZEALAND'S 5-0 whitewash of Pakistan in the ODI series has dismayed fans whose expectations of the national team had considerably arisen after the Champions Trophy win in England last June.

The series, despite the participation of many talented youngsters, proved disastrous with the Pakistanis hardly putting up a fight, barring perhaps the fourth game that was taken away from them by de Grandhomme's onslaught.

Also read: Champions Trophy winners reduced to schoolboys

In the final analysis, none of the factors that won Pakistan that grand ICC event last year — ie skipper Sarfraz Ahmed's swagger and lead-from-the-front style, the top order's batting consistency, match-winning bowling spells from Hasan Ali and Mohammad Aamir — were on display against New Zealand.

Improved fielding standards, perhaps, were the only uplifting aspect. Though there were some good individual performances, especially from all-rounder Shadab Khan, the team lacked the winning edge.

International tours have always been a daunting prospect for the subcontinent's teams, primarily owing to the bouncy pitches and strong weather conditions they face abroad, as opposed to the featherbeds in their own cricket grounds.

Passion for the game and a population skewed towards the young that gives the sport enough players earn them occasional success on foreign tours but hardly ever a clean sweep.

Inexplicably, not enough has been invested in infrastructure, player academies, sports medicine, coaching and a stable administration which could guarantee a robust domestic framework and produce quality players.

Pakistan's case has been made worse by the lingering threat of terrorism, which means that there have been no home series for several years.

There is also the spectre of match-fixing that often rears its ugly head and deprives the country of exceptional talent such as Salman Butt, Mohammad Asif, and more recently Sharjeel Khan. Measures to remedy this imbalance would be more useful than making hasty changes in the squad.

Players like Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Baber Azam, Ruman Raees and Haris Sohail are future stars and must be groomed well to serve the country for a decade and more.

Another attack in Kabul

ANOTHER shocking, devastating attack in Kabul has bloodily underlined a troubling security situation in Afghanistan.

And a verbal spat in the UN has suggested that the Pakistan-US relationship is set for a prolonged period of uncertainty.

Each time extreme violence and psychologically shocking events occur, there are attempts to move past them as aberrations or incidents that can be absorbed as part of a greater violent struggle.

But the attack on a landmark hotel in Kabul while there are attempts by the US to ramp up military action in Afghanistan and the Afghan government is attempting to prove it has continuing political legitimacy suggests that militant networks in the country continue to dominate the security landscape.

Ultimately, whatever the role that the US security presence, Kabul and other outside security forces have inside Afghanistan, there will have to be an intra-Afghan political settlement.

There are two aspects to a change in strategy: Pakistan and Afghanistan. The US may be a fundamental outside power, but the 17th year of a US-led war in Afghanistan has not changed the ability of the superpower to determine the ultimate political outcome in that country.

There are attempts by the US in recent days to put greater military pressure on the Afghan Taliban and such moves could possibly change political calculations in the US, but there are obvious questions about what a fraction of the US military can succeed at, even with loose rules of engagement, when a military force up to 10 times as large was unable to achieve its objective.

Whatever the configuration of military power, and whatever the US may claim, it is essential that a political solution be found inside Afghanistan that is acceptable, primarily, to the Afghan government and Pakistan.

Worryingly, neither the Afghan government nor the Pakistani state appears willing to acknowledge the obvious. The killing of the Afghan consul general in Karachi in the Kabul attack could sharpen tensions and cause fresh disagreements.

A possible solution has been apparent for a reasonable amount of time: Pakistan and the Afghan government step up intelligence cooperation to allow both states to target and capture or eliminate militant enemies. In truth, at this point in a seemingly never-ending war, both sides need to acknowledge that they may be attempting dangerous games.

There are no militants, on either side of the border, who ought to have a future in the region. It is absurd for Pakistan to allegedly seek an outcome in Afghanistan that causes swathes of the Afghan population to recoil in horror. It is similarly absurd for the Afghan and Indian states to seek outcomes that destabilise the Pakistani state. Let peace prevail in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India.

KP's legal reforms

FOLLOWING commendable police reforms introduced last year, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has achieved another important milestone with a raft of amendments to the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, approved by the provincial cabinet last week. The reforms are intended to rationalise and streamline the litigation process, reduce unnecessary and wasteful delays and complete the trial process with minimal disruptions. Drawn up in consultation with the Peshawar High Court and the legal community, the reforms could go a long way towards improving the experience of the citizenry when it approaches the courts for justice. Indeed, one of the most consistent complaints about the Pakistani judicial system is that legal manoeuvring by parties intent on avoiding justice prevents the substance of the dispute from being adjudicated on for many years. Procedural delays may be a defendant's best friend, but they can be the enemy of justice. In addition, the barriers to frivolous litigation have historically been low, miring the judicial process in excessive litigation that prevents genuine disputes

from being heard in a timely manner. The reforms also aim to reduce the possibility of frivolous litigation and in doing so will help the judiciary better utilise its time.

The Code of Civil Procedure was devolved to the provinces under the 18th Amendment and it is welcome that the KP government is leading the way on necessary reforms. Studying the impact of the reforms once they are implemented will be important too because unintended effects and new problems can reveal themselves when archaic processes are overhauled and prepared for use in the 21st century. It is important to remember that reforms alone will not thoroughly overhaul a broken judicial system. The quantum of resources, especially the number of judges, will have to be increased manifold if an acceptable quality of justice is to be delivered in a timely manner to the public. Moreover, the Code of Civil Procedure is only one side of the judicial process; the other is the Code of Criminal Procedure, a federal subject. Imran Khan has publicly stated that the KP government has forwarded a number of recommendations to the federal government to reform the CrPC and urged reforms to be taken up quickly as mandated by the National Action Plan. Political pressure of the kind being exerted by Mr Khan on this particular matter ought to be applauded. The federation will only improve if its constituent units urge positive change.

Healthcare challenge

IT is well known that the healthcare sector in the country is in a shambles, and has been so for decades. State-subsidised facilities are grossly overloaded and insufficient, leading to burgeoning private-sector set-ups that provide succour to those who can afford it. So what does the average Pakistani — among the millions of citizens who do not have pockets deep enough to pay for reliable treatment — do? The answer is provided by an unquantified and entirely unregulated industry that flourishes on the abuse of trust and the disregard of the ethics underpinning the Hippocratic oath. Quacks, as they are called, are individuals with little to no medical training; they masquerade as qualified practitioners, and not only dupe the public but also provide medical ‘treatment’ that is either pointless or complicates a health condition. It is welcome then that the Punjab Healthcare Commission has appealed to the public to approach only

licensed medical practitioners and to use a PHC helpline to report fakes without fear of the caller's name being revealed. On Friday, its spokesperson also claimed the shutting down of 34 centres run by quacks, including purported general practitioners, dentists and bone-setters. Even so, the extent of the problem means that such a move must necessarily remain a drop in the ocean.

There is no argument that centres of fake medical practice must be closed down and their principals brought to book. But also vital is the need to educate citizens about the ease with which such facilities can be set up and the perils of the healthcare fraud perpetrated. Too many people simply lack the awareness to distinguish between qualified medics and quacks, and fall prey to the temptation of shorter queues and easier access. Beyond that, it is time for the state to drastically improve and expand its regulated healthcare facilities. The needs of a steadily increasing population will not decrease; in taking a back seat, the state leaves the door open to all sorts of wrongdoing.

Murder by police

A TRAGIC death in Karachi has shone a much-needed spotlight on a dark practice of elements within the state.

The euphemism of 'encounters' and clinical terms such as 'extrajudicial killings' hide the true horror of what it is: premeditated murder by men in uniform, the very people tasked with protecting the public.

Naqeebullah Mehsud, taken into custody by the police in Karachi and almost certainly killed by elements within the force, has become the wrenchingly human face of a grotesque practice against the citizenry.

It is hoped that Naqeebullah's killers will be identified and punished under the law while all elements in the chain of command who condone such practices are identified, expelled from the police and other parts of the state, and punished appropriately.

There can be no room in the 21st century and more than seven decades of this country's existence for barbaric, antediluvian practices.

What is truly needed is an honest reckoning with such practices across the country.

Police practices in Karachi may be under intense scrutiny at the moment, but the problem is undeniably national. Indeed, over the decades, some policemen have forged a defiant, tough-guy image by becoming known for illegal practices. In Punjab, a crime wave, be it so-called dacoits, kidnappers or sex criminals, has been routinely dealt with by sending in policemen willing to do the unconscionable.

In Balochistan, the security apparatus has near total impunity.

In Sindh, the systemic politicisation of the police force has left both rural and urban denizens mostly terrified of contact with it. In KP, commendable new police reforms could usher in an era of significant, positive change, but the militant threat has almost certainly helped gloss over regular abuses.

Across the country, instead of respecting the police, the public almost always fears the law enforcers.

Equally true is that the police forces themselves have been demoralised by political interference, a lack of necessary investment and poor training.

Arguably, no one sets out to be a monster in uniform and there are honest, professional and humane policemen across the country.

But there does appear to be a new impunity rising under the garb of counterterrorism operations. The terror threat and the public's legitimate fears appear to have created the space for a new generation of policemen who are willing to align with elements within the state to both enrich themselves and terrorise the public.

Naqeebullah's death in Karachi has triggered an avalanche of anecdotal evidence and personal accounts of police excesses in the name of fighting terrorism.

Long term, the corrosive effects on the security apparatus itself could be catastrophic.

In the near term, it is vital that the citizens be protected from corrupt elements within the state willing to inflict violence on the vulnerable. Naqeebullah Mehsud's tragic, vile killing could be the right moment to effect systemic change.

Modi's comments

WHILE speaking to a media outlet on Sunday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent a number of mixed messages where relations with Pakistan are concerned.

The Indian leader said that his country's foreign policy does not revolve around Pakistan and that New Delhi was not working to isolate any nation.

He added that both South Asian nations should join hands to fight poverty and disease, stating that "if we fight together, we will win faster".

Mr Modi's call for joining forces in a seemingly worthy effort to improve the lives of over a billion people who live in the subcontinent is a welcome change in tone compared to the bellicose statements that have been emanating from New Delhi of late.

For example, the Indian army chief's recent hawkish comments with regard to calling Pakistan's "nuclear bluff" were uncalled for and vitiated the already tense atmosphere in the region.

Additionally, India's actions under Mr Modi's watch — such as torpedoing the 2016 Saarc summit in Islamabad — have not exactly aided the smooth conduct of bilateral relations.

And despite the Indian leader's denial, it very much appears that New Delhi is making efforts to isolate Pakistan, especially considering the increased bonhomie between India and the US.

Indeed, the way forward could well be through 'soft' issues such as poverty alleviation and common healthcare initiatives.

Theoretically, cooperation in these areas could lead to bridging the trust deficit between Pakistan and India and pave the way for resolution of the seemingly intractable 'hard' issues such as Kashmir, militancy etc. But Mr Modi must realise that 'hoping' for better relations with Pakistan yet doing nothing practical to improve ties will not lead to positive results.

For example, as mentioned in these columns, India issued a little over 34,000 visas to Pakistanis last year, 18,000 fewer than it issued in 2016.

Clearly, people-to-people contact is essential for improved ties between both states, but if the powers that be across the border are being so miserly in issuing visas to Pakistanis, it is difficult to see how contacts between common citizens in the two countries can flourish. Additionally, the visa application process has been made incredibly difficult, dissuading many from applying.

If Mr Modi is earnest in his desire to work with Pakistan, he must back up his rhetoric with practical steps. There are major obstacles that stand in the way of normalisation, and these can only be removed through dialogue and confidence-building measures.

A child beaten to death

DESPITE the prevailing notion that the imposition of strict, disciplinary action keeps students in line, it is the use of corporal punishment in education that raises serious concerns about child protection. On Sunday, at a madressah-cum-tuition centre in Karachi, an eight-year-old student was beaten to death allegedly by a cleric. Having endured regular beatings — the police say the child's body showed signs of torture — the boy had refused to return to the seminary knowing the cleric in question would strike him again. When his parents forced him to return to the madressah, the man allegedly beat him to death using a stick and other implements. Instead of filing a case with the police, the family has 'forgiven' the accused. Though a cowardly and shameful decision, the family involved is economically deprived, indicating, perhaps, their powerlessness to engage in lengthy and costly court proceedings. Victims' families reach compromises by settling for blood money — a practice especially prevalent in 'honour' crimes — for similar reasons. Contrary to general expectations, in this case it is the police that filed an FIR with the state as a complainant, taking the suspect into custody.

When a child is repeatedly beaten and eventually brutally bludgeoned to death, it is a crime tantamount to murder. Though many of the laws forbidding corporal punishment do require amendment or repealing for impact at the implementation stage, last year, Sindh passed legislation prohibiting corporal punishment inflicted on children under 18 in workplaces, schools and educational institutions including seminaries. Regrettably, under this statute, corporal punishment is a compoundable offence implying the accused can be forgiven. Given the rise in violent crime against children, it is imperative the state take legislative action while putting into motion public-awareness measures to protect child rights. Moreover, a code of teaching conduct should be devised for clerics; and repeat offenders who resort to violence against children disguised as disciplinary action should be unreservedly punished under the law.

Fighting extremism

IT is a long-overdue step that the state must take. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has confirmed in an interview that so-called charities administered by the Laskhar-e-Taiba militant network will be taken over by the state. Mr Abbasi offered no details other than a firm commitment that groups affiliated with banned militant networks will not be allowed to continue operations under their current management. The obstacle here is that while the LeT, its avatar the Jamaatud Dawa and its charity wing the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation are on the UNSC sanctions list, Pakistan has banned only the LeT. This action must also be applied to the other two entities, currently under watch, in order to comply with UN stipulations. Despite attempts to create legally tenuous separations between banned militant networks and their various wings, there is little doubt that the FIF, JuD and LeT are closely connected. Additionally, the attempts — thus far being resisted by the centre — to register the Milli Muslim League as a bona fide political party appear to be a tactic to find new legal avenues for the overall LeT network to continue to have a public face. This should be resisted.

The fight against extremism cannot begin to be fought if militant networks are allowed to operate under the guise of social work or legitimate political activity. But the fight against extremism is fundamental to the security of Pakistan and its

people. Extremism helps sustain an environment in which militant groups can recruit impressionable young men and women, and also helps normalise the role of non-state actors in society. It is absurd to suggest that groups that are ideologically opposed to the existence and constitutional foundations of the state and that endorse violence in circumstances of their own choosing should have a place in a modern Pakistan. To be sure, the many failures of the state have made it necessary for robust private social welfare groups to exist, and Pakistani society must be opened to greater and more diverse schools of political thought. But that must not come at the expense of stability and progress. The state appears to have little trouble drawing up and enforcing draconian new terms of operation for the many legitimate international aid organisations and NGOs that operate in the country; why should local groups with known and easily verified militant connections be allowed to operate under much laxer standards?

There is also a problem of Pakistan's global credibility, including in organisations that Pakistan has legally binding obligations to. A monitoring team of the UNSC 1267 sanctions committee is to visit Pakistan and is likely to take a hard look at how globally sanctioned terrorists continue to operate in the country. That is not a question of a narrative war but of hard, legal facts. Further delay could create significant problems for Pakistan internationally.

Turkish incursion

TURKEY'S recent incursion into Syrian territory is likely to further complicate matters in the Arab country even if Ankara has legitimate security concerns about Kurdish militias active across its southern border. Turkey launched the military offensive on Saturday, targeting the predominantly Kurdish YPG militia present in northern Syria; the incursion has involved air strikes as well as ground troops. Ankara is wary of armed Kurdish groups gaining ground in regions close to its own Kurdish population, fearing that such groups may lend support to separatist Kurds within Turkey. It has in fact accused the YPG of having links with the PKK, the Kurdish guerilla group with which the Turkish state has fought a nearly four-decade war. The incursion may have been sparked by recent comments from American officials (the US backs the YPG) of the creation of a 'border security force' made up of Syrian Kurdish fighters to keep a check on the militant Islamic State group. Turkey is naturally loath to see Kurdish fighters across the border

gain permanent territory. However, Ankara's own plans of creating a buffer zone several kilometres within Syria is also questionable, primarily because it violates the territory of a sovereign country. The Syrian government has criticised the Turkish incursion, mainly because a large number of Syrian rebels are reportedly part of the Turkish force.

Whether it is the American plan of creating a 'border force', or Turkey's buffer zone idea, any venture that further muddies the already turbid waters of Syria should be avoided. Extremist groups such as IS are on the back foot in Syria, thanks to the Russian-Iranian support lent to Damascus, as well as US-led coalition efforts, of which the Syrian Kurds have been a major component. Considering that levels of violence are down, it would be folly to open up more fronts in the Syrian theatre. Instead, all stakeholders must focus their efforts on making negotiations succeed, whether it is the UN-led effort in Geneva, or the combined Russian, Iranian and Turkish effort in Astana. Any move that could further disturb the fragile situation within Syria must be eschewed. Moreover, the territorial integrity of Syria must be respected. All stakeholders — whether it is the rulers in Damascus or the Syrian opposition, or their external backers — must work towards a united Syria where the rights of all ethnic groups, religious communities and sects are respected and guaranteed.

Unbecoming remarks

SEXISM runs through the very veins of this society: it hobbles women's potential and thwarts their aspirations.

In short, it perpetrates injustice, which is why it is reasonable to expect that at least those heading the institution that dispenses justice would not perpetuate sexism. Sadly, however, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar on Saturday proved otherwise during a recent speech in which he quoted a tasteless remark by Winston Churchill alluding to women's attire as a benchmark for the length of a good speech.

WAF and the Women Lawyers Association have pushed back with statements denouncing the chief justice's words for the manner in which they objectify women and repeat tired — yet still potent — references to women's appearance.

Women have a constitutional right to equality. Yet the hidebound patriarchy in this country ensures that their intelligence and capabilities are constantly undermined and belittled.

Instead, the purpose of their existence is, in the eyes of many, to provide sexual gratification to men, bear their offspring (preferably male) or function as repositories of male honour.

In fact, the public space itself is perceived as a male domain, with women merely interlopers whose 'modesty' of attire determines men's behaviour towards them.

It is these attitudes, which are based on sexism and its close cousin misogyny, that allow for gender discrimination in professional environments, keep the glass ceiling firmly in place and — in their worst manifestation — act as 'justification' for domestic violence, sexual harassment and even rape and murder.

The chief justice himself is undoubtedly well aware of the abysmal percentage of women in the legal profession — the boys' club atmosphere in many professional environments, where casual sexism is a norm, discourages women from taking up careers or assignments that require a public profile.

Female victims of gender-based crime are also reluctant to come forward for similar reasons — invasive questions in court and moral judgements predicated on their appearance and behaviour.

The women of Pakistan expect and deserve better from the highest judicial official in the land.

Action after Kasur

A SUSPECT has been apprehended, now it is time for justice to take its course.

The Kasur tragedy has shocked the nation, opened a necessary national dialogue on the terrible scourge of child sexual assault and perhaps helped pave a path to social and state reform.

The authorities in Punjab, including Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif in a rather distasteful, triumphant news conference on Tuesday, have announced the arrest of a suspect in the case of sexual assault and murder of young Zainab Amin.

The suspect, Imran Ali, is also believed to be responsible for the assault and murder of other young children, and yesterday he was presented in an anti-terrorism court.

Investigators have an initial 14 days to assemble the evidence against the suspected killer.

DNA test results could be the irrefutable proof that connects him to the horrific crimes he is accused of having committed, but it is necessary that all aspects of the investigation be conducted professionally and with scrupulous adherence to the rules and laid-down procedure.

While the intense national scrutiny on the case is unlikely to fade entirely, too often poorly conducted investigations have allowed defendants to escape conviction, have a conviction overturned on appeal or the sentence reduced.

If Imran Ali is guilty of the grotesque crimes he is accused of, the law must take its course.

This newspaper has on principle opposed the death penalty in all instances and there is no rational reason to deviate from principles in this case.

Assaulting children and murdering them is a particularly shocking crime and there has rightly been a national uproar over what appears to be a serial killer who has destroyed a number of families.

Such threats to society do not deserve to be allowed their freedom, possibly forever if the rules allow it and the convict continues to be professionally assessed to be a threat.

What is troubling though is how many segments of society have demanded a public execution of the alleged serial killer.

A bloodlust appears to have overcome society, perhaps an indication of a public that does not feel safe and does not believe the state has the ability to regularly and consistently protect the people.

Justice as vengeance may satisfy the mediaeval instincts of some, but the state cannot become part of a spectacle of death before cheering crowds.

The right lesson to be drawn from this harrowing episode of assault and killing, even if it is drowned out by emotions, is for the state to examine the multiple failures that allow a serial killer to carry out his monstrous crimes undetected for long and for society to understand what steps need to be taken to better protect children from the threat of predators.

The Kasur tragedy can become a watershed moment, but there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of what went wrong and a determination to address the faults.

PU violence

THE Punjab University dispute could well turn into a raging conflict, involving the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba and the Pakhtun students — mainly on Balochistan's quota — who have emerged as a force to reckon with in recent years.

The two sides bring to the campus, and specifically to hostel life, two different sets of values.

Last March, IJT students were accused of disrupting a cultural event organised by the Pakhtun students.

There was a clash and the police had to intervene. A few days ago, it was the Pakhtun students' turn to disrupt preparations for an event the IJT wanted to hold to welcome new students to the university.

Violent clashes led the police and education ministry officials, including the higher education minister, to seek an urgent resolution through the force of law.

The police's invasion of the hostels predictably complicated an issue which could perhaps have been handled best by the university administration.

A couple of hundred students have been either booked or expelled since the latest clash between the two hostile groups earlier this week.

Angry statements are being exchanged by the hour and more players, including politicians, appear to want to exploit the situation so that they can make their own point.

There are various elements which are alleged to have played a role in the making of this ugly situation at PU, especially for those who are lodged in the university's hostels.

The one very obvious element is the visible weakening of the IJT, which has emboldened another group to challenge its writ on university campuses.

In the absence of student unions, which could well have been bound by some kind of a political ideology, the opposition to the IJT has easily taken on an ethnic hue.

And then there is the part played by the government through the police and other agents.

A case can be built around the police not doing enough when it was most required of the force.

If there had been proper action on the complaints filed after one party to the conflict tried to impose its code on the other last March maybe there would have been an example to deter those who initiated the clash this time round.

In the event, inaction gave the complainants an opportunity to label the police — and the government at large — as a loose ally of the disrupters. This is a dangerous tag that could have dire repercussions.

Sisi's authoritarianism

THE arrest of a leading presidential candidate against Abdel Fattah el-Sisi should surprise no one, for Egypt, unfortunately, has become a police state that in many respects is worse than what it was under president Hosni Mubarak. Sami Annan was arrested for reasons that appear ludicrous. Even the news of his arrest was not made public immediately, and it was left to two of Mr Sisi's top aides to break the news, one of them doing so via Twitter. Later, an official statement accusing Mr Annan, a former chief of staff, of breaching army regulations and inciting people against the armed forces, attempted to justify his arrest by saying the regime had acted to uphold the principle of the sovereignty of law. With Mr Annan in prison, only one candidate, Khaled Ali, still remains in the arena, but observers doubt if he will be allowed to contest the election, for in September he

was convicted for ‘making an obscene gesture’ in public. Mr Sisi’s ‘re-election’ as president is now certain.

As army chief, Mr Sisi had responded to the Arab Spring by asking Mr Mubarak to resign. In the election that followed, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood formed the government and made Mr Sisi the defence minister. In July 2013, Mr Sisi staged a coup, overthrew the Morsi government and launched a crackdown on Brotherhood supporters, including the Aug 14, 2013 massacre that left thousands dead and injured. He then went on to hold bogus parliamentary and presidential elections. Mr Sisi hopes to go down in history as a builder. He proposes to build a new capital near Cairo and has ambitious plans to bring more land under cultivation. To ensure that his rights’ violations do not invoke American sanctions, Mr Sisi chose to be absent from the OIC summit in Istanbul on President Trump’s Jerusalem decision. Given the absolute power he enjoys, there is no doubt the March ‘election’ will give him what he got in the last presidential poll — a 97pc vote.

INGOs and foreign tourists

A CURIOUS exchange in the National Assembly on Wednesday indicated that after an extended period of a hostile and capricious policy towards international non-governmental organisations in Pakistan, a more rational approach may be evolving. The house saw the current and former interior ministers, Ahsan Iqbal and Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan respectively, clash over how the state should deal with perceived security concerns arising from, firstly, granting INGOs permission to work in Pakistan and secondly, a more liberal visa regime for foreign tourists. The incumbent minister dilated upon the government’s recent decisions to allow INGOs to continue their operations pending a final decision on their appeals against cancellation of their registration, and allow visa on arrival to tourists from 24 countries. Chaudhry Nisar defended his hard-line approach as interior minister that has seen INGOs function in a constant state of uncertainty since 2015 when the government announced new, stringent rules for their registration and funding, and an official oversight mechanism to ensure compliance. However, instead of a more streamlined process, there have been interminable procedural delays and much confusion that has thrown critical humanitarian work into disarray.

Conservative elements in Pakistan have always looked askance at NGOs in general, given that much of their work involves the rights of women and marginalised communities. However, international NGOs in particular came under scrutiny after Save the Children was linked with the fake vaccination campaign that led to Osama bin Laden's capture. No doubt, that allegation called for a thorough investigation, whose conclusions should have formed the basis of an appropriate response. Instead, the episode engendered a paranoia that regards every foreigner with suspicion, and ascribes sinister motives to all INGOs unless they have been put through the wringer. Even then, the process appears to be arbitrary, and calculated to drive them away. This is a singularly myopic and callous approach. The state has long been incapable of meeting its citizens' basic health and education requirements. Local NGOs fill this vacuum by working with their international partners who provide funding for projects and training for capacity-building. If indeed a more calibrated policy towards INGOs is in the offing, it would be first and foremost a service to millions of Pakistanis who depend on social welfare programmes funded by these organisations.

A similar distrust of foreigners is manifested in our tourism policy, which tends towards hindrance rather than facilitation of visitors to the country. Chaudhry Nisar's cussed insistence on a reciprocal visa regime ignores several key considerations. Pakistan's scenic beauty has a huge potential to attract tourist dollars and revive local economies and, last but not least, project a more benign face — that much sought-after 'soft power' — to a world that perceives this country as a grim and cheerless place. Security concerns must of course be factored in, but they can be handled with common sense and adroitness.

Losing power

THE latest report from the power sector regulator, Nepra, says the public-sector thermal power generation companies have lost up to 15bn units of electricity in two years simply at the generation stage, before anything has been sent out to the grid. For perspective, Pakistan generates just over 90bn units of power every year. Assuming an average cost of Rs10 per unit, the amount of loss suffered at the generation stage alone is estimated by the regulator to be around Rs150bn,

or just under half the circular debt accumulated since 2014. This is an enormous amount. In its report where Nepra points out this figure, it is also stated that the reason is a “poor state of affairs at Gencos resulting from equipment deterioration, lack of scheduled and preventive maintenance, insufficient technical expertise and poor management”. In short, this state of affairs — ie the amount being lost and thereby added to the circular debt or billed directly to consumers by way of the complex pass-through formula under which end-user power tariffs are calculated — is entirely preventable.

The government will likely claim that the bulk of this loss is occurring at the older generation plants that are scheduled to be replaced once the new LNG-fired power plants come online. Here, they are right. The age of the fleet of power plants currently running Pakistan is a big factor, and replacement has been long overdue. What is also a fact, however, is that mismanagement under successive regimes, beginning with the rule of Pervez Musharraf, has allowed our fleet of power plants to become so dilapidated that we are pumping more fuel into them and getting more heat and carbon dioxide instead of electricity in return. Replacement is fine, but the same fleet could have been upgraded to improve its performance as well. As it turns out, the government had greater interest in more power contracts instead of investing in upgradation and maintenance. So now we will have a brand new fleet with far higher capacity charges, and surplus power generation capacity, and thereby replace one set of costs with another, instead of working to bring down costs the hard way. The power sector badly needs greater transparency, which is the bedrock for better governance, before it can be said that things have credibly improved.

Sindh’s healthcare woes

GIVEN Pakistan’s weak socioeconomic indicators, it is astonishing that political leaders continue to duck their task of restructuring the country’s healthcare system and making access to it equitable and affordable. This is very obvious in the case of Sindh where most health facilities are on the brink of a crisis. Political missteps are partly at fault — for instance, the provincial government has fallen short of allocating resources and building consensus for implementation plans. One such case reported in this newspaper yesterday is that of a virtually non-functional mother and child health facility in Malir located on the outskirts of

Karachi. Established in 1984, this maternity centre lacks resources and the technical capacity to cater to a local population of around 30,000. It even lacks running water and electricity. Despite the influx of international aid for maternal and child health, the government has failed to equip and maintain this clinic located on the periphery of a bustling city. The authorities should ensure this centre is up and running with medicine and staff to aid nearby communities. If anything, this is a damning indictment of the PPP — which has always claimed to be a champion of the poor and vulnerable.

At the crux of this stasis is the state's inability to prioritise quality maternal and child healthcare. Over time, this leads to inequities at all levels. Child stunting and malnutrition, for instance, and are responsible for the death of thousands of children under the age of five in Pakistan each year. On the other hand, evidence shows that skilled birth attendance and maternal education reduces maternal mortality. Lady Health Workers play a vital role, given their ability to reach rural communities and offer basic healthcare and instructions in family planning. To end, only brave political commitment that is sustainable beyond electioneering will bring quality healthcare to the masses.

Pak-US drone dispute

THE politics of drone strikes is back with a vengeance.

For years, Pakistan and the US played a dangerous game of publicly denying what was obvious to all: drone strikes carried out by the US in Pakistan targeting militants.

What was less clear was the extent of cooperation between Pakistan and the US. A surge in drone strikes in the last months of the George W. Bush administration was taken to new heights in the first few years of the Barack Obama administration, which eventually led to a fierce pushback by the Pakistani state.

Now, with President Donald Trump seemingly determined to unshackle the US military and step up operations in Afghanistan, a new chapter in drone wars and their repercussions for Pakistan-US ties appears to have opened.

The only thing once can say about the drone strike on Wednesday is that it took place. The site and the target of the drone strike, though, are being disputed by the US and Pakistan in an unusual, unnecessary and potentially destabilising spat.

The Pakistani state has argued that the drone strike targeted an Afghan refugee camp in Fata and that, perhaps unknown to Pakistani authorities, a militant, who was on a US list of targets, had found sanctuary among the Afghan refugees. The US appears to believe that the site targeted was a Haqqani network camp.

Reconciling those two seemingly divergent positions, the following possibility exists: the US is deliberately and recklessly increasing the pressure on Pakistan by unilaterally targeting the Haqqani network on Pakistani soil, while the state here is playing politics with the issue of Afghan refugees by trying to link the latter to terrorism.

Both the US and Pakistan ought to reassess their approaches, if it is true that they are using drone strikes to engage in brinkmanship. The Pakistani official claim about Afghan refugee camps in Fata is particularly puzzling since it is widely known the camps that did exist in the region were closed a number of years ago.

But there has been a concerted attempt made by the Pakistani state to use the millions of Afghan refugees, both official and undocumented, as a way of putting pressure on the Afghan government and the US.

While there are some undeniably legitimate concerns regarding refugees, to use human beings as bargaining chips and pressure tactics in state conflicts is unconscionable and an act that no modern, rule-of-law or progressive state should indulge in.

Pakistan should refrain from vilifying Afghan refugees, who have suffered enormously and also made genuine contributions to Pakistan over the decades they have been here.

As for the US, the idea that drone strikes can be used to coerce or embarrass Pakistan is a dangerous gamble.

Better to seek cooperative solutions than push Pakistan into a corner from which no side can realistically benefit.

NFC award

THE failure of the government to build consensus around a new NFC award during its term could prove a thorn in the side of the next administration. A recent seminar held in Karachi showed that very divergent, and innovative, ideas are now being entertained by various stakeholders which could make things even harder for the federal government. The long interlude, and the sustained neglect that the issue has suffered since July 2015, has become the incubator for these ideas to develop, and some of them deserve serious attention. Chief amongst these is the idea that builds on the observation that the majority of government revenues comes from highly regressive indirect taxes, while the base of direct taxation has shrivelled. The new thinking suggests that the government devolve more indirect taxes to the provinces, while taking the responsibility to collect agricultural income tax itself. This is a very innovative suggestion, and if the provincial authorities use the interlude between now and whenever the discussions for the next NFC award resume to build upon it further, it could lead the way towards more strident demands from the provinces to continue the process of devolution of resources that began with the last NFC award.

One of the reasons the federal government failed to achieve consensus around an NFC award in its term is due to the additional demands being placed upon it to arrange resources for security-related concerns. According to one participant in the seminar, who has served as economic adviser to the Sindh and Balochistan governments, the centre has been asking for 7pc of the federal divisible pool resources to be earmarked upfront for security and development expenditures in Gilgit-Baltistan, Fata and Azad Kashmir. This, according to him, was not acceptable to the provinces and the process stalled. It is true that the government has had to increasingly balance demands for development resources and security priorities during its term, when both expenditure heads have increased while the rigid revenue system has failed to keep pace. There is a bigger failure that lies behind this though, and that is the failure to reform the revenue system and broaden the taxation base. Instead, there has been attempt to pass the bill to the provincial governments, causing the NFC process to stall. Now the stage is set for an even bigger showdown whenever NFC discussions resume.

Mandir restoration

IN these dark times, across the world the forces of obscurantism and hate are on the march, trying to 'cleanse' their societies of minorities and resisting, often forcefully, calls for pluralism and multiculturalism. This nation, too, is not immune to such bigoted tendencies, especially where religious and sectarian strife is concerned. However, despite all the negativity, there have been moments of hope where a more inclusive message has been sent. One such moment occurred on Thursday, when an iconic but decaying mandir located in Karachi's Manora island was restored. For visitors to Manora, it is hard to miss the majestic Varun Dev Mandir. However, the vicissitudes of time and the forces of nature had left the temple in a fragile state. With help from the US government and a local NGO, the mandir, which is mentioned in late-19th century records but is believed to be older, was opened after the completion of its rehabilitation on Thursday. As an official of the Pakistan Hindu Council noted, only two years ago, the temple was not fit for religious services, but thanks to the intervention it had now been rehabilitated.

While bigotry and violence targeting minorities has been a nationwide problem, Sindh, which has otherwise been known for its pluralistic society, has also been affected by these negative trends. Religious extremism and militancy have been on the rise, with Sufi shrines attacked and Hindu temples desecrated, while the province's Hindus have also complained of forced marriages of girls belonging to the community. In such a situation, the temple's restoration — though it may be a drop in the ocean — sends a message of coexistence and respect for all communities. In fact, state and society can join hands to safeguard and restore other such structures belonging to minority communities in Sindh to reflect the pluralist ethos that had earlier prevailed in the region. Such efforts can build bridges and help combat the extremist mindset that has started to take root.

Afghanistan: the internal mess

THE number of dead and injured, the site of the attack deep inside Kabul, and the fact that an ambulance was converted into an enormous bomb are all deeply shocking.

Afghanistan has suffered untold horrors in four decades of near continuous war, but the Kabul attack on Friday will long be remembered for its sheer depravity.

If Afghanistan is to be spared further such atrocities and unconscionable attacks, urgent action will need to be taken by the Afghan government and security forces as well as outside powers with a great deal at stake in Afghanistan.

The inability of the Afghan security forces to protect high-security zones even in the capital city is because, other than a small section of special forces, the overall security apparatus in Afghanistan is in a shambles.

Pressure by the Afghan Taliban is undeniably partly to blame for the shocking disarray in the Afghan security forces, but many of the failures of the security apparatus are well known and internal to it.

Poor training, poor morale, the ability of the Taliban to seemingly infiltrate the security apparatus at will, and a high rate of attrition are all persistent problems.

This suggests that perhaps the size of the security apparatus – military and police – may be too large and that a smaller force could be trained to be more effective.

Security experts are perhaps better placed to identify the specific problems and recommend changes, but it is relatively clear that simply continuing with the existing strategy is not an option.

Indeed, it could lead to progressively worse outcomes – an almost unthinkable possibility for a country and people that have already suffered so much.

Another factor contributing to the surging violence is surely the unending political conflict in Afghanistan. The National Unity Government perhaps now only exists in name with President Ashraf Ghani presiding over a system in which he appears to have little influence.

Without US backing, the government could conceivably collapse overnight.

Theoretically, there could be parliamentary elections later this year and a presidential election in 2019, but there are significant doubts about whether those deadlines can be met.

With such fundamental uncertainty hovering over the political landscape, is it any surprise that an already struggling military component of the state is facing ever more pressure from the Afghan Taliban and the militant Islamic State group? True, outside powers can and should do more to help, but the building blocks of the Afghan state need urgent stabilising.

Yellow journalism

SOME sections of the media in Pakistan operate in an ethics-free zone, crossing the line between fact and fiction with few compunctions, no matter how serious the possible consequences. Indeed, they seem to have taken on some of the worst aspects of an often sensationalist social media. A recent example is the Zainab rape-murder case where some elements have propounded theories with such certitude that these could easily be misconstrued as fact. Take the claim of a well-known anchor that the prime suspect in the Zainab rape-murder case was operating several foreign currency accounts and had links with an international child pornography ring. A JIT inquiry probing the claims, with the help of the State Bank, reported that no such accounts exist. However, the allegations have continued, sowing confusion in the public mind in a matter where emotions are already running high. A new JIT has now been formed to yet again look into his claims.

Notwithstanding the best efforts to fact-check information before putting it in the public domain, misinformation — that is, inadvertent dissemination of incorrect information — is an occupational hazard for journalists, and it should be promptly dealt with through corrections and clarifications. Disinformation, or fake news — an oxymoron in the eyes of journalistic purists — is a far more dangerous beast. Driven by personal motives and a desire for self-aggrandisement, it is often strategically used to further sinister agendas that emanate from segments of society inimical to democratic ideals. Of course, fake news, especially in a world where social media sometimes sets the agenda, is not exclusive to Pakistan. It is

present even in countries where mainstream media is relatively free, official sources of information more accessible and hence the public less susceptible to conspiracy theories. The most effective antidote to fake news everywhere is a media that provides information that is, as far as possible, reliable, accurate and objective. Such an approach would act as a check even on the rumours and calumnies that emerge from social media. Unfortunately, however, sections of the Pakistani media — especially among the news channels — have come to regard themselves as an unaccountable force, a bully pulpit armed with a licence to manipulate public opinion, even if lives are put at risk. Journalists in Pakistan have fought a long battle for press freedom. Their struggle against autocratic regimes' efforts to silence them or act as vehicles for their demagoguery could be lost by a few media persons who appear to have vested interests.

Trump on Palestine

DONALD Trump's debut at the World Economic Forum in Davos last week was — as most things associated with the US president are — quite colourful. While Mr Trump tried to woo the world's movers and shakers that meet annually in the rarefied environs of the Swiss Alps, he could hardly contain his anger at the media, which he addressed using a bevy of vivid adjectives. However, it was his earlier comments on Palestine — delivered in an almost imperial tenor — that showed once again how far Mr Trump's Washington has come from playing any constructive role in the Arab-Israeli issue. Speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sitting dutifully — and almost gleefully — by his side, Donald Trump tore into the Palestinians in a patronising tone, threatening to cut off all funding for the Arabs unless they came to the negotiating table. His anger was precipitated by the recent Palestinian snub of US Vice President Mike Pence, whom the Arab side refused to meet during his recent visit to Israel. Mr Trump complained the Palestinians had “disrespected ... our great vice president. ...” However, the US leader conveniently forgot that it was he — with his unilateral move to declare Jerusalem Israel's capital — who had offended the Palestinians and disregarded decades of global consensus on the disputed status of the holy city. Trump added that either the Palestinians make peace, “or we're going to have nothing to do with them”.

Perhaps due to the US president's unflinching commitment to Israel, he failed to realise that it is Tel Aviv which has, over the decades, obstructed all efforts at a lasting peace. By progressively devouring Arab land, increasing illegal settlement activity, and pulverising the Palestinian people after brief intervals, Israel has proved it thinks little of international law or the human rights of the Palestinian people. Before Mr Trump gives lectures on peacemaking to the Arabs, he should read history, specifically regarding the brutal treatment the Zionist state has meted out to Palestinians on their own land for seven long decades.

Preparing for polls

THE swirl of speculation, uncertainty and rumours that had engulfed the upcoming Senate elections to be followed by a general election later this year appears to be clearing. Chairman of the Senate Raza Rabbani and Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal have both indicated that they now believe elections to the Senate, the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies will be held on schedule. For the Senate, that would suggest an election in early March. The National Assembly's five-year term ends in the first week of June, after which the ECP would have up to 60 days to hold an election. There is no constitutional requirement that elections to the provincial assemblies be held simultaneously and at the same time as the National Assembly poll, but a norm has developed that voters elect their national and provincial representatives on the same day. That would suggest a general election in the first week of August.

While political controversies and institutional tensions are likely to continue, it is arguably more important that the electoral process not be disrupted. The democratic project is clearly about more than simply holding regular elections, but without democratic continuity there can be no improvement in the quality of democracy. In the previous general election, the electorate demonstrated a refreshing and enormous appetite for the power of the vote. The turnout was historic and the nation delivered governments led by different parties in each of the four provinces. Five years on, there is a significant amount of choice available to voters, and the major parties all have track records to defend. While some themes of the upcoming general election are already set, the parties have an opportunity to hone their political messages and manifestos in a manner that sets up genuine governance and legislative contrasts. Until now, the parties have

treated their election manifestos as an electoral formality, and the media, civil society and other sections of the public have not pressed them to explain or justify the manifestos.

The quality of democracy in the country will ultimately only be as good as the quality of democratic institutions. Few, if any, of the mainstream political parties have given priority to the strengthening of democratic institutions. The PTI has recently flagged its reformist credentials in KP, but a spate of reforms in the fifth year of an assembly's term tells its own tale about actual government priorities. The persistent uncertainty and doubt that has hovered over the democratic process has many reasons, an anti-democratic lobby in the country being one of the foremost. But the political class will need to recognise its own role in preventing democracy from strengthening faster. The form and substance of democracy are interconnected. Moreover, as Pakistan's population grows, the need for robust democratic institutions will also increase. Doing better is both necessary and possible.

Mountain rescue

OVER the weekend, we all witnessed one of the most dramatic mountain rescues of all times when a two-member climbing team on Nanga Parbat, one of the most dangerous peaks for mountaineers, ran into serious difficulties at an altitude above 7,000m and called for help. The rescue effort required flying in a team of four highly capable climbers from an expedition on K2, some 180km away, to a drop-off point at 4,900m on the slopes of Nanga Parbat. Two members from that team then managed to climb a one-kilometre-high wall of ice in record time at night and in the depth of winter to safely evacuate one of the climbers in distress. Sadly, the other climber, whose condition was stated to be critical and who was lying in a tent more than 1000m above where the rescue took place, had to be left behind due to deteriorating weather conditions. The heroic mission carried out by the Polish and Russian climbers in the rescue team is an inspiring example of the feats of superhuman endurance that mountaineers are capable of, as well as the exceptional technical skill that was required to make it happen.

It is unfortunate, however, that a controversy erupted over the effort when people learned that the aviation wing of the Pakistan Army demanded payment guarantee for the use of the helicopters before undertaking the flights that were necessary to transport the rescue team. In fact, upfront guarantees for such flights are always a precondition for helicopter evacuation for mountaineers, even in Nepal, the other country that has peaks as formidable as Pakistan's. Expeditions are told this before their permits are issued and are made to sign an undertaking agreeing to this condition. They have the option to leave a refundable deposit with the authorities, but even then there could be additional charges if the logistics of the rescue demand more flights. Given the altitudes they work at, and the kind of risks that mountaineers take — from potentially falling into a crevasse to facing avalanches, to experiencing altitude sickness, equipment failure or inclement weather — no authority can guarantee their safety and free evacuation. The mountaineering community knows this better than those raising the controversy, and does not complain in situations like this. The controversy should not cloud the triumph of the will over the unimaginable adversity that we all just witnessed.

Lyari Expressway

AFTER a wait of nearly 16 years, both tracks of the Lyari Expressway in Karachi were finally opened for public use on Sunday in a ceremony presided over by the prime minister. Originally launched in 2002, the project had been under discussion by planners since at least the mid-1980s. Dogged by controversy and cost overruns, the grand project connects the city's northern suburbs with its southern business hub and the port. Thousands of families had to be relocated during the course of its construction, while the project has ended up costing nearly double the Rs5.5bn price tag that was originally attached to it. Some civil society activists have questioned its utility, asking if the thoroughfare — a toll road — will really help lessen the congestion on the metropolis's roads. While it cuts through populous districts Central and East, carrying commuters to the business hub in the south in a relatively smooth fashion shaving many minutes off what can be a nightmarish commute, only time will tell whether the city's motorists will prefer to use this option to get to work/business and back.

While the debate over the Lyari Expressway's utility is still ongoing, what is clear is that thoroughfares such as this are only one part of the solution to Karachi's traffic mess. Indeed, currently several mass transit projects are in various stages of construction, including the Green and Orange line bus services, while others have been discussed by the provincial government. Meanwhile, despite official promises that the project is on the verge of realisation, the revival of the Karachi Circular Railway seems like a distant dream. As has been mentioned before, what Karachi needs is an integrated mass transit plan with a variety of transport options to cater to the commuting needs of this expansive city. Opening a toll road here or a bus line there reflects a discombobulated approach. Instead, city planners and elected officials, with the input of citizens, must come up with a workable mass transit plan.

‘Gift’ for Balochistan

YET another government has announced a so-called package for Balochistan, a grand scheme to deliver equal development across the province's districts. The announcement has come only months ahead of a general election and just weeks after the PML-N was defeated in the provincial assembly. Sceptics will inevitably suggest that the latest economic package for Balochistan, however well-meaning, will in practice amount to a giveaway to a province where hundreds of billions of rupees have been poured in over the last decade to little visible effect. Still, given the persistently abysmal socioeconomic indicators across Balochistan, targeted economic and social interventions must continue to be applied. What Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who announced the 'equalisation package', ought to consider is how far the new scheme will deliver marginal improvements; resource delivery must be tailored accordingly.

With low expectations but an open mind, the latest economic package for Balochistan could improve the quality of infrastructure as long as considerations about adequate personnel and administration are also taken into account. Building more schools without adequate teaching staff, for example, merely adds to the number of students without imparting a meaningful education. In the case of hospitals, the problem is more pronounced. The best medical technology in the world translates into few health benefits if there is an acute shortage of trained doctors and other medical personnel in public hospitals and clinics. Mr

Abbasi did not mention how matching funds by the centre can address questions about the quality of service delivery in Balochistan — in which case, the package might appear to be little more than an attempt to win over PML-N dissidents in the Balochistan Assembly ahead of the Senate polls and potentially help the PML-N ahead of the general election with patronage distribution.

Ultimately, there will be a need for a hard-nosed analysis of the underlying challenges in Balochistan that have relegated the province to the bottom of the political, social and economic development ladder according to most independent measurements. Certainly, as in Fata, without adequate and well-spent economic resources, Balochistan would not be able to catch up with the rest of Pakistan. At the same time, allowing political and security challenges to go unaddressed will only ensure that Balochistan remains in the grip of insecurity, no matter what the value of any financial or development package may be. Like all his predecessors in this era of democracy, Mr Abbasi speaks the language of development in Balochistan without having the courage to address institutional differences that have allowed the security establishment to dominate policy in the province. There continues to be a democratic willingness in the other provinces to do whatever it takes to help Balochistan join a modern, progressive vision of Pakistan. But security is the issue that does and will dominate.

Journalists' safety

FOR too long, journalists in Pakistan have been at the mercy of various power centres that threaten, abduct and even murder them with near total impunity. Around 60 media persons since 2000 have lost their lives in this country in reprisal killings, or in violence while on assignment. Only the murders of Daniel Pearl, Wali Babar and Ayub Khattak have seen some accountability. Not surprisingly, many journalists prefer to skirt around or underplay 'sensitive' issues rather than put themselves at risk. Better late than never, therefore, is a proposal by the Senate Standing Committee on Information that every media house contribute 5pc of its revenue towards a fund to be established under the Journalists Safety, Security and Protection Act 2017. The government, it is suggested, would initially provide Rs200m seed money for the fund. The draft bill provides for a council comprising, among others, representatives of journalist bodies, media safety experts, human rights activists and a special prosecutor to

investigate crimes against journalists, including allegations of state institutions' involvement in such acts. Owners of media houses would not be part of the council so as to preclude their influence on the body.

It is heartening that instead of yet more futile hand-wringing and platitudes, a serious attempt is at last being made to address the security hazards faced by journalists in Pakistan and the impunity enjoyed by those who create this environment. However, the many sound ideas in the draft can be further improved if it is shared with various stakeholders, such as the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, and their feedback sought. They could, for instance, bring to the notice of the committee that it is also important not to sideline freelance journalists and ignore their contribution to newsgathering. Such journalists, including many district correspondents who have established their credentials despite not being regular or contractual employees of media houses, often report from smaller cities and semi-urban and rural areas where security is even more of an issue. A body especially mandated to ensure the safety of journalists would send a message to powerful, unaccountable segments of society that crimes against media persons will no longer go unpunished. However, the culture of impunity can only come to an end when there is tangible progress in bringing to book the perpetrators of these despicable acts. Sadly, there is no dearth of cases of slain journalists for the council to investigate.

Drug-testing law?

IT is routine in this country to try and address serious concerns by issuing highfalutin statements that are underpinned at best by nothing more than good intentions — certainly not research or concerns of feasibility. In a recent example of such tendencies, we had no less a personage than Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah announce on Monday that it would be made mandatory for students of all public and private institutions to undergo drug-detection tests. This was no off-the-cuff remark; the meeting he was addressing was attended by luminaries that included the provincial education and health ministers among others. Observing that there were some alarming reports about drug abuse from some leading universities, the chief minister constituted a committee to draft a law in this regard.

Mr Shah's intentions appear to be noble, and the issue without doubt is of serious proportions. However, the details do not seem to have been thought through. First, such a law would violate students' right to privacy, given that it would amount to all of them coming under the unsavoury suspicion of drug abuse — many for no reason at all. Second, how would it even be possible to safely, reliably, and without confusion/contamination test millions of young people from Class VI to Intermediate? Drug tests include blood and/or urine sample analyses; unfortunately, this is a country where not only are the safety of syringes and practice of basic hygiene compromised but where medical and laboratory expertise to handle wide-scale testing is also in short supply. The Sindh government has grasped the stick by the wrong end. Slowing drug-abuse rates would more effectively be achieved through shutting down supply lines: from ingredients (ephedrine, to name just one) for local manufacture and/or processing, to cross-border smuggling (UNODC estimates that Pakistan is the destination and transit country for approximately 40pc of the opiates produced in Afghanistan), to dealers and suppliers. Drug abuse is too serious a matter to be treated as business as usual.