

# Stepping forward

**F**rom the screens, behind which we have heard vague whispers of government-level contacts with the Taliban, something more definite is beginning to emerge, taking forward the hope that it may yet be possible to carve out the peace we so desperately need; the peace that could damp the constant threat of bombs and bloodshed and bring to the lives of people the stability they so desperately need to get on with lives. Our country needs that stability too so that it can move ahead in economic and developmental terms. As had been forecast for some time, Maulana Samiul Haq, the chief of his own faction of the Jamiaat-e-Ulema Islam and the head of major seminaries, has emerged as the man on whom attention will now focus in this respect.

At a one-on-one meeting with the prime minister in Islamabad on Tuesday, Maulana Sami was assigned the task of moving ahead with the talks process with the Taliban. He told the media after the meeting that the PM agreed that talks offered the best hope of peace. This had also been the verdict of the All Parties Conference on terrorism held in September, and the government has been under growing pressure to move ahead as per its recommendations. An important step has now been taken; some forward momentum gained. But Maulana Sami's task, as he has himself made clear, will not be a simple one. The key reason for this is the ongoing drone attacks. The equation is a simple one: for talks to succeed, the strikes must stop. But does Islamabad have the persuasive abilities necessary to persuade Washington of this? It certainly lacks the clout. Then there is also the issue of differences in opinion amongst Taliban factions. We know these exist. How significant they will prove to be only time will tell, with the man chosen as mediator going into what will be an immensely significant dialogue attempt with the backing of both the civilian and military setup. How things move on from here is something we will all be watching intently.

# The Afghan dimension

**T**he state may have been forced into a military operation against the TTP after the breakdown in peace talks but it should not take for granted the likelihood of success. Apart from all the usual hurdles to be overcome in a battlefield, there is an added wrinkle in the form of the Afghanistan factor. For years now, the Karzai government has alleged that Pakistan shelters and even funds and trains the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Now the shoe is on the other foot. The leader of the TTP, Mullah Fazullah, and many of his men from Swat are firmly ensconced in Afghan territory, where the government shows little interest in driving out or targeting these militants. Ironically, the excuses proffered by Afghanistan mirror those we used to make for not taking on the Afghan Taliban. Some variation on familiar themes like 'we already have a Taliban insurgency of our own to deal with' are delivered by the Afghan government. Now, with a military operation underway, the danger of Afghan inaction is greater than ever. The Foreign Office has requested the country not to provide a safe haven to any TTP fighters who may cross the border. Based on the past history of the Karzai administration, the hope is a forlorn one.

It is not the case that Afghanistan refuses to take action against Mullah Fazlullah only because its resources are too tied up in tackling its own militant problem. The US found, as was revealed in an American paper, that Afghan intelligence was actively supporting the TTP or some factions of it. The problem afflicting Afghanistan is the same one that we still suffer from. Each country sees the other as its biggest enemy, and not the militants who target them on a daily basis. Instead of working together to deny refuge and material support to all Taliban franchises, the countries have been more interested in undermining each other. With the US now threatening to pull out all its troops from Afghanistan since Karzai still hasn't agreed to the bilateral security agreement – something foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz has said is for Afghanistan to work out on its own – the two countries can opt either for cooperation or outright hostility that cannot even be tempered with US pressure. Afghanistan's cooperation as we take on the TTP will say a lot about which course it decides to pursue.

# Talking to TTP

**T**he PML-N agenda for peace talks with the Taliban has yet to take a defined shape, with many opposed to the idea of negotiations with the militant group. The military is believed to be reluctant to talk to those who have been directly targeting it, although the PML-N is confident that it will come in line with the government. The opposition parties, particularly the PPP and the ANP, are also not quite as keen on peace talks as the PML-N and the PTI. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has now also received a fillip from the JUI-F, whose leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman has now said that he is willing to help out the government although he refuses to be an intermediary between the government and the TTP. Fazlur Rehman also brings to the table the trust of the Taliban, with whom he always had links. In wondering if the PML-N had the support of everyone else in going ahead with negotiations, there was little curiosity about whether the TTP had any interest in holding talks. This is where Fazlur Rehman could prove to be a vital asset since he could convince a reluctant TTP that it is also in their interest to meet the government halfway.

Talks with the TTP now seem to be an upcoming reality but the PML-N must beware certain pitfalls. It must not fall into the trap of seeing the negotiations as an end in itself. The ultimate aim is to neutralise the Taliban and make them lay down their arms. We also have to convince them to stop their relentless campaign of bombings in our cities. In return, there might have to be taken the painful step of recognising the TTP as de-facto rulers of parts of the tribal areas. If this point is reached it would be a compromise that we were forced into by an intractable foe. The TTP has never abided by peace deals it previously made and we shouldn't expect this time to be any different. That is another reason to ensure that the Taliban don't stall for a couple of months so that negotiations can be held in winter, a time when the TTP is not equipped well enough to fight as effectively. Because if that happens, as soon as the weather improves the TTP will have regrouped and be ready to take the fight to the government. Such outcomes must be avoided at all costs.

# Killer skies

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While the TTP and its affiliates have stepped up attacks in recent weeks, despite the lure of peace talks being dangled, the US continues its drone campaign even though it is against every tenet of international law – and counterproductive to boot. In the early hours of Monday morning another three people were killed in a drone attack in North Waziristan. We have no way of knowing whether the casualties were militants or just civilians. The US simply isn't interested in sharing that data and even if it did we cannot trust its veracity. According to a report in the New York Times last year, the US classifies every man of military age as a militant unless they are expressly shown to be militants. This methodology is racist to the core. The best independent estimates show that the civilian casualties are intolerably high. A study last year by Stanford University and New York University showed that only two percent of drone attacks hit their intended targets while the Bureau of Investigative Journalism found that between 2004 and 2012, at least 880 civilians were among those killed in drone attacks. Drone attacks radicalise the local population and foster sentiment against the US and the Pakistan governments. The constant fear under which the population of Fata must live, never knowing when the armed machines in the sky will strike next, is doing nothing but aiding the TTPs efforts at recruitment. Pakistan has tried, without much success, to make its opposition to drone attacks known. There is a consensus among all the political parties, as expressed at the All-Parties Conference, that the attacks must stop. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also plainly made his objections known to the world at the United Nations General Assembly. But US unilateralism has not abated. To be clear, a cessation in drone attacks will not magically cause the TTP to give up its murderous cause and any politician who suggests that is either fooling himself or the nation. But it certainly draws more people to the Taliban cause and sets a precedent that the US can militarily intervene in any country it wishes – even if the country is an 'ally'.

# Ceasefire?

The TTP's offer of a one-month ceasefire puts the government in a difficult position. It comes after the militant group was given a chance to negotiate but spurned it by refusing to halt attacks while talks were ongoing. The military has started pounding TTP hideouts from the air and backed it up with ground forces and so the government may see the call of a ceasefire as a sign that the military option is working. The TTP appears to be under pressure as only a couple of days back its spokesman had rejected a unilateral ceasefire. The group does have a history of using negotiations as an opportunity to regroup and then resume its attacks. This may give pause to the government as it formulates its response to the offer, hopefully not unexpected as there are reports that the interior minister was conducting secret diplomacy. The leadership also needs to be aware that in a month or so the weather in the tribal areas will be more conducive to fighting the TTP on the ground so a pause right now may not be the worst idea. Thus preparations for military action must continue even if the talks are held on the sidelines. Before responding in the affirmative, though, a clarification is needed from the TTP about what it means by a ceasefire. Is it promising only to stop fighting military troops in the tribal areas in return for being left alone or will it also spare the rest of the country from bombings? The negotiating committees chosen by both the TTP and the government are still intact so they can be utilised to hash out the details.

If the offer is accepted, the government needs to make it clear that a single attack will be seen as a breach of the ceasefire. Just a few hours before the ceasefire statement was made, polio workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were attacked by militants. Such unprovoked, cowardly killings, cannot be tolerated. Nawaz Sharif may also want to consider holding a debate in the National Assembly to find out what the people's representatives think. The All-Parties Conference may have settled on the negotiations option but the TTP's conduct since then may give the political parties some pause before reiterating support for the ceasefire. It also needs to be made clear to the TTP that a ceasefire does not mean a withdrawal of troops from the tribal areas. There is too much cause to doubt the TTP's intentions for us to take it at its word. Input from the military will be crucial too. The army chief must have told the civilian leadership just how confident it is of victory over the TTP. The ultimate aim must be neutering the militants' ability to attack at will. The ceasefire offer will be a test of how the government thinks that can best be achieved.

# The killing of Mehsud

The apparent death of TTP chief Hakeemullah Mehsud in a drone strike in Miramshah is sure to be seized upon by many as a turning point in the war against militancy. Such speculation may be premature until the ramifications of this killing become clearer. Hakeemullah has been pronounced dead three times before, in 2009, 2010 and 2012 but reappeared each time, although we can be reasonably confident this time that the group will soon have a new leader. It is already being reported that the TTP has now confirmed the death and has also appointed a new leader. The more important consideration is whether Hakeemullah's death will end up changing anything. When Hakeemullah's predecessor Baitullah Mehsud was taken out in a US drone strike, it had no discernible impact on the TTP's ability to plan and carry out strikes. This, indeed, is what critics of drone strikes have pointed out all along. Targeting individuals brings scant advantage when dealing with a group with as many members as the TTP while the civilian cost of drone strikes only helps them recruit even more people to their cause. Add to that the question of sovereignty and you can see why the Foreign Office condemned the drone attack and will likely not take back that condemnation even though it will invite ridicule and scorn from those who support drone warfare.

One outcome of Hakeemullah's death can be that it will spur a leadership battle within the TTP. In recent months, as the TTP fired its spokesman and also sidelined Muawiya, the leader of the Punjabi Taliban, we have seen that the TTP is not a unified entity so much as a loose coalition of militant groups with different aims and strategies. Should these groups be divided in the aftermath of Hakeemullah's killing it could end up weakening the TTP. There is also certain to be a lot of confusion about the status of negotiations with the TTP now that the outfit doesn't have a leader of Hakeemullah's stature. Already the matter has been shrouded in some confusion with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif insisting that talks with the TTP have begun, something the militant group itself denied. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar had in fact announced just yesterday that a three-man delegation of negotiators will leave for initial contacts with the TTP today. After the drone strike he blamed Washington for sabotaging the peace talks. If the government is indeed serious about negotiations it should now capitalise on Hakeemullah's killing and begin talks with those in the TTP who are as amenable to the idea of negotiations as he was. The security forces should also brace themselves for a wave of retaliatory attacks, as happened after Baitullah was killed. The US may have killed him but we will have to deal with what comes next. Only history will judge if Hakeemullah's killing was a turning point in the war against militancy, but for now we should be prepared for the worst.

# The tangle

The committee named on Saturday by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan to conduct talks with the government has created quite a stir in the country. The names on the committee include Maulana Samiul Haq of the JUI-S, Mufti Kifayatullah, a former lawmaker for the JUI-F, Professor Muhammad Ibrahim Khan of the JI, Maulana Abdul Aziz who is the chief cleric of the Lal Masjid Islamabad, and Imran Khan of the PTI. The naming of Imran Khan, after an unexpectedly swift decision taken by the TTP Shura has, of course, raised many eyebrows. Khan himself immediately declined the offer and after a meeting on Sunday, his party said he could not be a part of the committee given his overall national role. The rest too, even with apparent consent, may be in a conundrum. Four of the five people named by the TTP are members of mainstream political parties that many would think should never be speaking on behalf of an outlawed group that is responsible for the killings of tens of thousands of Pakistanis. The naming of Maulana Abdul Aziz seems more of a poke in the eye of the government. He is a man who advocated armed rebellion in the capital. The goal for the TTP seems not so much to make negotiations work but to one-up the government in a public relations battle.

But the pressure on Imran is on. Maulana Sami, creating some degree of confusion over the precise nature of the committee named by the Taliban, has urged Imran not to back away from this offer given his strong support for talks and stated that this body will in fact play only the role of an intermediary between the government and the Taliban panels while the TTP will soon name an eight or nine member committee to put forward its position. This, of course, leads to confusion over precisely how the dialogue process is to proceed, but it is a certainty that things will clear up fast with everything now moving at an accelerated pace. While Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Sami have said that they will play their part on the Taliban named committee, the JUI-F and the JI will be holding meetings to determine if their own representatives are to have any role in the talks process. Irfan Siddiqi, the government body's spokesman, has meanwhile said there seems to be no problem in dealing with the panel named by the Taliban and that the talks process will begin as quickly as possible. Clerics in many parts of the country have welcomed the sudden spurt of progress. They argue that the US had, with its drone attacks, attempted to sabotage peace. But members of civil society as well as analysts are asking how talks can be held when no definite agenda is known and the Taliban demands are unclear. These are relevant points. The government has not helped its cause by offering negotiations without setting any preconditions or drawing lines in the sand that would mean an end to talks. Things seem to be moving at a pretty fast pace. But the danger of traps and insurmountable hurdles still lies ahead, especially given that the terrain to be covered is largely unknown and many uncertainties may lie dotted across it. Only once talks begin will we know what to really expect.

# A frail craft

**I**mran Khan, the public figure most associated with touting negotiations as the best strategy of dealing with the TTP, has declined to be a part of the talks himself. He likely had to take this step because his nomination to a negotiating committee was proposed by the TTP itself. As the leader of a party that rules Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province worst hit by TTP attacks, it would have been political suicide for Imran to give off the appearance of any kind of alliance with the TTP. Declining to be a part of the negotiating committee was the only real choice Imran had but we should nonetheless be thankful he did not make the blunder of representing the TTP. Following Imran's lead, Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the JUI-F also announced that his party would not be a formal part of the peace negotiations. This means that Maulana Kifayatullah, nominated by the TTP to be part of its committee, will not represent the militant group either. Curiously, Fazlur Rehman blamed the government for his decision to withdraw from the process, saying that Nawaz Sharif hadn't consulted him over the issue. If that is indeed the true reason for the JUI-F's refusal to support the process it reflects very poorly on Fazlur Rehman since he has all but admitted that he cares more about his power and influence than the prospects of peace.

The other three members nominated by the TTP – Maulana Abdul Aziz, Maulana Samiul Haq and Professor Ibrahim – held their first meeting in Islamabad on Monday and will be talking to the four-man government committee today. It is not clear if the committee has received any instructions from the TTP. The negotiations may finally be underway but the process promises to be a long and excruciating one since neither committee contains anyone with the authority to make decisions. We should expect a lot of frustrating back-and-forth over the next few weeks, with different sides accusing each other of bad faith and dragging their feet. The TTP committee is the one that should come in for greater scrutiny. So far the government hasn't set any conditions for talks but if, for example, they say that violence must be stopped and the constitution obeyed how are representatives of parties that contest elections going to argue against that? It is too early to come to a definitive conclusion but early signs are that this committee-based approach may keep teetering on the brink throughout the progress it may make.



# Seizing the moment

**T**he TTP's surprising offer of a month-long ceasefire was followed by an equally unexpected government response that air strikes targeting the militant group would also be suspended. The twin announcements give hope, however slight, that the moribund peace process could be revived. The next few days will be crucial as both sides size up the other's intentions. Any attack, like the horrible one on an Islamabad court on Monday, will bring the sincerity of the TTP into doubt. Denials alone won't be accepted and the government will need proof that the militant group is not involved. The government will also have to figure out why the TTP decided on a ceasefire now. If it is because the air strikes had spooked them into submission then trying to negotiate a favourable peace might be a wise option – all the while retaining the right to use force if called for. However, if the TTP was hurt by the military attacks and is now looking for a breather so that it can regroup to its former strength then agreeing to a ceasefire may end up being counterproductive. The judgements made by the government will be crucial.

Once the TTP has satisfied the government that its ceasefire call is genuine – and the only proof of this will be if no attacks are traced back to the militant group – it will be time to reconvene the negotiating committees. This time, though, the government should learn from its previous negotiating debacle. And it should not agree to a premature withdrawal of troops from the tribal areas either. Last time, the TTP demanded the release of its prisoners and then ended up slaughtering FC men. That alone should preclude setting any TTP men free – at least until every prisoner they are holding is released. This is the first time the TTP has offered a ceasefire unilaterally, signalling that it may be weaker than before. The fight against the TTP may still have its final reckoning on the battlefield but till then the state needs every peaceful victory it can get.

# Killings continue

**T**he speculation surrounding the on-off-on negotiations with the TTP makes it inevitable, and even understandable, that the first impulse after every attack is to wonder who is behind that. Let us not forget in the midst of all the theorising, though, that 11 blameless people were killed on Monday after what appears to be a bombing-and-firing attack on an Islamabad court. Thousands have now perished in a war that was not of their making. As we investigate who was responsible for this attack, we should do so in the hope that a measure of justice can be afforded to those who died, and their grieving families. The first suspect that comes to mind – the TTP – has denied that it was behind the attack. Since one of the victims, additional sessions judge Razaqat Awan, had previously dismissed a case against Pervez Musharraf for the Lal Masjid operation it is possible that some militant group that shares at least ideological affinity with the TTP, may have been involved. A new group calling itself Ihrar-ul-Hind led by one Asad Mansoor has claimed responsibility; he says he was in TTP in the past and has left it. What the TTP does against him will provide the proof of their sincerity for peace through a dialogue. Imran Khan and Maulana Samiul Haq have already blamed forces who want to destroy any chance of peace.

The TTP spokesman has said it is not his group's responsibility to uncover the attackers. Yes, the primary responsibility lies with the government, but if the TTP is sincere about its ceasefire offer then it too should be eager to find out the truth. It can start by naming the groups that are affiliated with it and those that are not. The day of a tragedy of this magnitude is not one in which to indulge in conspiracy theorising. Talking vaguely of a third force is highly irresponsible as it allows the guilty to escape justice. The government, for its part, will not only have to track down the culprits, it should also know better than to let its guard down. Strikes against this break-away group will be justified even during the ceasefire. Just because a ceasefire has been announced does not mean that the country will be spared violence.

# The next step

**C**an we trust a government that can't even keep its story straight about whether it has released imprisoned militants? The interior ministry claimed that 19 non-combatant members of the TTP, all of whom belonged to the Mehsud tribe, had been released from prison. An official statement from the PM House, however, contradicted this, claiming that the media had mistaken the release of petty criminals by the political administration in the tribal areas for the release of militants. The TTP had earlier given a list of prisoners it wanted the government to free and it appears, despite the dissembling, that the government has complied. That the TTP agreed to extend its ceasefire, which expired on April 1, by another 10 days is added evidence that the government is not being entirely truthful in its denial. As encouraging as it is that the peace talks have made some progress, it is equally disquieting to know that the government won't level with us. Any final agreement will require concessions to the TTP but those should only be made with the knowledge and consent of the public. Secretly appeasing the TTP while denying it publicly only gives ammunition to those who would rather pursue the military option against the militants.

The question for the government now is what it should ask in return for its gesture. The obvious course to pursue is to secure the release of civilian prisoners like Shahbaz Taseer and Ali Haider Gilani. The TTP had previously rejected this request, claiming that they didn't consider them civilians because they were part of a political party that launched military operations against them. With the release of TTP prisoners now, the militant group should show some flexibility to prove its commitment to peace. The issue of prisoner release was raised at a high-level national security meeting where the interior minister briefed the prime minister and the chief of army staff on the ongoing negotiations with the TTP-appointed committee and shura. This meeting is expected to be followed by one with the government and TTP committees, with Chaudhry Nisar present, to kick off the next phase of talks. The TTP only extended its ceasefire agreement begrudgingly and likely will not keep doing so indefinitely. Time may be of the essence but the government needs to ensure that it does not give away too many concessions to the TTP in this race to a peace agreement. The next step should be for the TTP to take.

# Talk and terror

The anticipated start of peace talks between representatives of the government and the TTP have not led to a cessation of militant attacks but they have caused a lot of confusion about who might be behind these attacks. On Sunday, four people were killed after two grenades were hurled at a cinema in Peshawar's Qissa Khawani Bazaar. This was exactly the kind of attack, both in the location and type of weaponry used, that one would expect from the TTP. The same could be said for Tuesday's bombing at Pak Hotel in Qissa Khawani Bazaar, which is part of an imambargah and offers affordable food and lodging to Shia travellers. Responsibility for the first attack was taken by Jundallah, a militant group that has ties to the TTP but is separate enough operationally that the TTP leadership could maintain plausible deniability. The second attack has not been claimed by any group and TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid has denied that they had anything to do with that. Taking the TTP at its word is always a dicey proposition even though they are usually first to take credit for attacks. At the same time, blaming them for the attacks without any proof could lead to negotiations being scuttled before they have even begun.

These attacks leave the government in a difficult position. A strong possibility exists that the attacks were carried out by a faction within the TTP but without authorisation from the leadership. Were that the case, it highlights just how difficult negotiating with the TTP will be. The TTP is a conglomerate of militant groups who will not necessarily listen to each other. Any agreement reached between government and TTP representatives does not apply to every faction. As it is, the negotiations themselves are on the verge of becoming a farce that no one takes seriously. The first meeting between the two sides was supposed to take place on Tuesday but the government representatives did not show up, ostensibly because they needed more directions from the government. The TTP's representatives, including as they do Maulana Samiul Haq and Maulana Abdul Aziz as well as a JI politician, will have their own agenda and cannot exactly be trusted by many as genuine negotiators. Already there is talk that Maulana Samiul Haq has hijacked the committee. Fingers are also being pointed at unprofessional handling by the government committee. No pre-conditions have been set for talks and neither side has been able to explain what they hope to achieve with the negotiations. Nawaz Sharif asked the nation to give peace a chance but right now we don't have peace and there seems little chance we will get it anytime soon.

# The talks scene

**T**he first meeting of the reconvened government and TTP negotiating teams may also be their last. It seems both sides have realised the futility of having negotiators who do not have the authority to make decisions on their own and need to keep going back and forth to get approval for everything under discussion. The likely composition of the reconstituted government negotiating team is sure to lead to much argument and debate. The inclusion of members of the PML-N should be a foregone conclusion since the ruling party now has to step up and accept responsibility for the peace talks strategy rather than try to hide behind third-party negotiators and the military. Apparently the PML-N also wants the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister or a representative of his on the committee. This would be an interesting political ploy since the PTI is the party most associated with the call for peace talks but which has also blamed all previous failures in negotiation on the government. Bringing the PTI into the fold may force it to play a more constructive role rather than be critical from the sidelines. However, there can be a case for the proposal to include military representatives, including from the ISI, as part of the negotiating team to be shelved. The military has to play its role in the battlefield in case an operation is needed.

The TTP, too, needs to be held responsible for the conduct of negotiations. During the previous, unsuccessful attempts at peace talks a member of its shura claimed responsibility for an attack in Peshawar even as the TTP distanced itself from the attack. All Shura members need to commit to the talks and directly take part in them, although they should never be granted the meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that they desire. Getting the TTP involved will force the leadership of the militant group to answer for their possible involvement in any attack, such as Wednesday's bombing in Kurram Agency which killed six security personnel. The TTP cannot have it both ways by announcing a ceasefire and then continuing to murder at will. In his press briefing today, TTP mediator Maulana Samiul Haq said he expected more attacks from the 'third force'. In such a confusing scene as this, with so many militant groups able to strike at will, such talk may or may not have elements of truth. But this is not important. It must be realised that the real conflict lies between the TTP and the state. All other confusions stem from it. Conspiracy theories should not be allowed to obscure TTP's terrorism. For negotiations to succeed with such a deadly force, what is required is for all to be clear-headed and firm about the nature of what they are up against.

# After Hakeemullah

The killing of TTP chief Hakeemullah Mehsud in a drone strike has led to a surprisingly unanimous reaction from Pakistan's political class: it is all the Americans' fault. That view was most strongly expressed by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan who found the timing of the attack suspicious and felt it was part of a US plot to scuttle peace talks with the TTP. Nawaz Sharif was slightly more circumspect at a cabinet meeting but maintained his strongly anti-drone stance. The prime minister and chief of army staff were also present to witness a demonstration of how drones can be shot, a move that was certainly meant to send a message to the US. The JUI-F's Fazlur Rehman declared that everyone who is killed by the US automatically becomes a martyr while the PTI's Imran Khan has vowed to stop Nato trucks from going through Pakistan after November 20, even blocking roads if necessary. Should the PML-N not agree with the PTI – highways after all fall under the power of the centre – we could end up with the unedifying spectacle of a provincial government taking to the highways to deny the writ of the federal government. Relations between Pakistan and the US have always been rocky but have plunged to a new low. There is also a danger that the unity witnessed at the APC will be destroyed as all the political parties try to one-up each other in expressing anger at the US.

The government would be better off taking a wait-and-see approach. The TTP will be in a state of confusion right now and we need to take advantage of its relative weakness. Asmatullah Shaheen Bhitani, the head of the TTP's supreme shura, has been appointed as the interim leader with Khan Said, better known as Sajna, the frontrunner to take over the leadership spot. Shehryar Mehsud, who is from the same clan as Baitullah Mehsud is another likely contender. The TTP may take some time to select a new leader since the group will be wary of meeting together for fear of being attacked by drones. To that extent, Nisar was correct that negotiations have been scuttled since we do not have a leader to negotiate with right now. He was also right in complaining that the US always dictates and is never ready to listen. The TTP, if it responds as it did when its other leaders were killed, is also likely to launch a wave of revenge attacks. For the US these possibilities did not have to be accounted for when they targeted Hakeemullah since the entirety of the fallout will be borne by Pakistan. The anger we feel at the US may be justified but at a time when we are stuck between the US on one side and the Taliban on the other anger alone won't suffice.

# Tirah and talks

**N**ews that the military has retaken the strategically-important Tirah Valley from the grasp of the TTP is very welcome, especially since it comes at a time when the government is seriously considering holding peace talks with the militants. Both the government and the TTP, though they have yet to initiate contact with each other, say that they are pondering the idea. If these talks do end up taking place they may very well lead to a ceasefire – although probably a temporary one – and so it would be advantageous for the government to take back as much territory as it can before this is done. Tirah Valley, in particular, is very important since it both borders Afghanistan and provides a route to Peshawar through Bara. By taking the area back we should be able to reduce cross-border militancy that originated from Tirah Valley and find it slightly easier to prevent militants from reaching Peshawar to carry out attacks. When the militants took over Tirah Valley last year, at least 150,000 people were forced out of the area with another 40,000 displaced by the military operation. The Lashkar-e-Islam, which was allied with the TTP, had distributed pamphlets in Bara warning residents against sheltering IDPs who belonged to the pro-government Ansar-e-Islam. Now that the valley has finally been freed from militant control, its beleaguered residents can be resettled in their homes.

The military operation is also a sign of how badly our war against the militants has been waged so far. Relying on the Ansar-e-Islam to fight the TTP and its allies was extremely ill-advised since the group itself is militant in nature and had been banned by the government in 2008. The only reason we supported it was because of its rivalry with the Lashkar-e-Islam, but surely we must have known that a group that essentially shared the same ideology as its opponents would eventually turn against the government. Before that, our equally unwise strategy of using lashkars contributed directly to the fall of Tirah Valley. The local lashkar just wasn't well-equipped or well-trained enough to ward off the TTP. The military mostly left the lashkars to their own devices, which invariably resulted in defeat. One of the reasons the state is in a position weak enough that talks look like an attractive proposition is the flawed tactics that we have employed in the war against militancy. Had a hands-on role been assumed and full commitment shown to taking back and holding territory, the TTP would have been denied the strong position it holds today. Taking back Tirah Valley is a start but must be followed by further inroads into Taliban-controlled areas.

# The ice breaks a little

As with any group meeting for the first time, the first day of talks between the government and TTP negotiating teams was a day for awkward introductions and an opportunity to feel each other out to establish common interests. Having outside representatives speak on behalf of both sides naturally meant that each was wary of the other's mandate. These first few days will be spent convincing the other side that the negotiators have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their patrons. Progress, if it happens at all, will be slow and methodical but the early signs were encouraging. Both sides have agreed on the need to halt violence for now and to conduct the negotiations within the ambit of the constitution, thereby apparently ameliorating the two biggest fears of those who were opposed to talks with the TTP. The Taliban have asked to meet the PM, the COAS and the DG ISI. They clearly know where power lies in the country and the thinking in all these quarters will be very significant as the talks go ahead. For now, the promise of a ceasefire, with both sides agreeing this should be put in place, will be welcomed by many living in the conflict zone. The government side also quite rightly pointed out in a long press briefing that the question of establishing Shariah law, as defined by the TTP, in the country was not within their purview since laws can only be changed by parliament. Having assured the TTP team that it had the requisite power to discuss other matters, it then made clear that it would prefer to confine negotiations to areas where the TTP already has a significant presence. This, as with all matters up for discussion, is both worrying and cause for hope. The ultimate aim is to bring the TTP into the mainstream, something that cannot be achieved by unilaterally ceding territory to the group.

The start may have been encouraging but sure success will not be within sight soon – if ever. One TTP negotiator is already out of the talks complaining that Shariah was not included in the agenda. Much also may depend on factors outside the control of the negotiating teams. An actual ceasefire may come to involve a halt to the deployment of troops in the tribal areas. This is where the role and approach of the army may assume decisive importance. There is better news from the US, where the Obama administration has halted drone attacks since December, reportedly at the request of the government. The TTP should see this as a good-faith initiative by the government and reciprocate by calling for an immediate end to militant attacks. The problem there, too, is the existence of different factions within the TTP umbrella, some of whom are stringently opposed to any compromise. Even as talks were getting underway, Mufti Hasan Swati, the head of the TTP Peshawar and a member of the group's supreme shura took responsibility for the attack on a restaurant in the city earlier this week. Such crimes, should they continue, could end up derailing talks – perhaps for good. The hope is for a different outcome but expectations should be kept at realistic levels.



# With stick in hand

**T**he government seems to have taken to heart Theodore Roosevelt's famous maxim to speak softly but carry a big stick. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan was the figure designated to offer soothing words, insisting that the majority of the TTP's members were not anti-state, even though the actions of the militant group offer no evidence for that suggestion. Lest the TTP think that we are getting soft as negotiations continue, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif reminded the militants that the government is ready to re-launch an operation at a moment's notice should there be violations of the ceasefire. Nisar and Asif also took differing viewpoints on the Islamabad court attack which threatened the ceasefire just a day after it had begun. Nisar is trying to downplay any possible TTP involvement in the attack, even going so far as to suggest that the judge had been killed by his own bodyguard rather than in the attack. Asif, meanwhile, lashed out against the TTP for not condemning an attack carried out by its splinter group and said few in government believe that the group is committed to peace through talks. While there is a possibility that these two differing statements reflect divisions within the government, it may also be the case that the intention is to keep up pressure on the TTP even while giving talks a chance.

Maulana Samiul Haq, a member of the TTP's negotiating group, predictably saw Asif's statements as needlessly provocative, even though the defence minister warned of consequences only if the TTP violated its own ceasefire. Samiul Haq seems less interested though in trying to reign in the TTP. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, through his own negotiating team, had asked him and the other members of the TTP team to go to the tribal areas and convey to the TTP the demand that it should disassociate itself from splinter groups and condemn any attacks. If the TTP cannot even bring itself to do the bare minimum of condemning attacks, how then can it be trusted to stop carrying out such attacks itself? The delay in getting the message across to the TTP is also showing the folly of relying on third-party interlocutors to conduct negotiations. It is about time the government appointed its own team, although the military has been wise to rule out its own involvement in the dialogue. That is not a job for the men in uniform. It is only if the civilians decide that the TTP has abandoned negotiations that the military will be expected to swing into action.

# Danger released

**P**akistan's release of seven Afghan Taliban members, on the request of Afghanistan to kick-start peace talks, is a move that is fraught with risk. The seven members, all of whom were mid-to high-level commanders, are not being tracked and there is absolutely no guarantee that they will choose the negotiating table over the battlefield. Still, this is what Afghan President Hamid Karzai requested during his visit to Islamabad last month and we have seen fit to comply. Afghanistan is still not entirely happy with the release since they wanted one of the freed prisoners to be Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was the top commander of the Taliban insurgents and was captured in Karachi in what was believed to be a joint Pakistan-US operation. Pakistan finds itself in a somewhat delicate position since Afghanistan is pressurising it to release Taliban prisoners – this being the second set of militants we have released at their request – while the US is worried that they will take up arms again. On top of that, we have to contend with the possibility that we will end up being blamed by Afghanistan of supporting the Afghan Taliban if they end up returning to the insurgency.

Despite this gesture, the prospect of peace negotiations is still distant. Karzai has been very erratic in his dealings with the Taliban, suddenly switching from support for the idea of talks to displaying inordinate offence when the Taliban office in Qatar displayed the Afghan flag dating to the period of their rule. Karzai's greatest worry is that the Taliban will be in a position to overthrow his government once the US begins withdrawing its forces next year. There are no good outcomes here but Karzai still has been convincing enough in explaining why talks with the Taliban are necessary. To this day, the Taliban have shown little interest in a negotiated settlement. They sense that they have the upper hand and just have to wait out the US. This is why there may be problems with their commanders being released without assurances from the Taliban that these men would not return to the battlefield and that they would be prepared to begin negotiations. This may also be seen as an indication of how weak Karzai has become. So only time can tell the wisdom or otherwise of the latest move in this complex and dangerous game of war and power.

# Agendas

The negotiations process between the government and the TTP took a step forward when the militant group presented its list of demands. The 15-point agenda of the TTP is a mixture of demands that are broadly reasonable and some that are completely out of bounds. Asking for equal rights for both rich and poor is surely something that can be accepted by all and calling for an end to drone strikes is something that is already the position of every political party in the country. But then the TTP also wants Shariah law in the courts and Islamic education in schools, and since we know exactly how narrow and twisted the group's definition of religion is, this is not something the government will be or should be able to accept. Withdrawing troops from the tribal areas and releasing TTP prisoners cannot be carried out either until we are sure that the TTP has truly stopped carrying out attacks. A suicide attack in Peshawar that killed four people should give the government pause, even though no one has claimed responsibility for it. There has been a definite reduction in attacks over the last week but it is still too early to take the TTP at its word and since smaller attacks are still continuing the government needs to remain wary and vigilant.

This list of demands is, of course, an initial wish list presented by the TTP and should be treated as such. The government negotiating team needs to respond with its own agenda. Now that the negotiating team chosen by the TTP has returned from its meeting with the militant group's shura, the government also needs to step up its game. Maulana Samiul Haq and Maulana Abdul Aziz have been bombarding the airwaves and putting the best possible spin on the TTP's intentions. This can be tolerated so long as the government and its team of negotiators isn't seen as bending over backwards to accommodate the TTP. Peace talks too will be a battle of attrition and any concessions will have to be wrenched from the TTP's grasp. There should not be a game of giving the TTP an inch and it soon demanding much more. The government needs to respond by demanding an equal number of painful sacrifices from its adversary. This is what negotiations are all about.

# Terrorism revisited

That there is no easy solution to the problem of militancy once again became obvious on Thursday when blasts in all the provincial capitals of Karachi, Lahore, Quetta and Peshawar rocked the country. In Karachi, three suspected militants mishandled an explosive device and ended up only killing themselves; in Lahore one person was killed when an explosive device placed in a restaurant in Anarkali detonated; in Quetta the worst happened when six people lost their lives and 42 were injured in the main shopping centre; and in Peshawar there was yet another explosion – although with no casualties this time. Anyone who thought that the prospects of peace talks may lead to a brief respite from the unceasing violence now has to confront the reality that the militants are not going to ease up on us. That much was obvious in an interview that the TTP chief Hakeemullah Mehsud gave to the BBC where he said that the Pakistan state as it is currently configured does not follow the dictates of Islam. Mehsud has basically reiterated that he is not at war against just the government or the US; any of us who do not want to live in a country ruled by him and his ideology are legitimate targets in his eyes. At the same time, Mehsud did say that he was open to the prospects of talks with the government although he absolutely ruled out accepting any preconditions to come to the negotiating table.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, even if he did not know before, should now be absolutely clear in his mind that we are facing an enemy that will remain violent and with whom almost no common ground can be found. This does not mean that he should abandon altogether the idea of negotiations with the TTP, as decided by the All-Parties Conference. But he should go into the talks understanding that there is only a limited amount talks can achieve. And since the militants refuse to stop attacking us even when the government is willing to talk, the prime minister should be under no obligation to cease law-enforcement and even military actions against the TTP. As it is, we face enough problems with prosecuting suspecting militants. That was pointed out by Nawaz Sharif in a visit to Peshawar where he said that even judges are too scared to take action against militants. The prime minister also reiterated changes in law enforcement that he had earlier proposed, including setting up a separate counterterrorism force and improving our intelligence capabilities. As the four blasts on Thursday showed, we are still a long way from being able to pre-empt attacks and will need major improvements in our terrorist-fighting capabilities. The only way talks with the TTP will yield any breakthroughs is if we have the strength and capacity to actually scare them into compromise. Right now, they are continuing to operate with impunity and that simply cannot be allowed to continue.

# We need answers

Peshawar's residents could be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss over peace talks is about. Two further attacks – a triple explosion at a cinema on Tuesday that killed 13 people and then on Wednesday an attack at the house of a person whose brother was in the police and had been killed by militants last year – will prompt many to lose faith in the negotiation process that has only just kicked off unless both the government and the TTP can explain why attacks are still continuing. Both the central government and the provincial PTI government claim that these attacks are an attempt to sabotage talks with the TTP. Such an evasive answer will not suffice. If they know who is behind the attacks and are not theorising in lieu of real answers then they need to tell the nation who this outside force is. The government has never been shy about pointing the finger at outside sources before, having repeatedly said that India was involved in troubles in Balochistan. Why the hesitation to name names now? Until we get convincing answers the only conclusion that can be reached is that the government is clueless about who is behind the continuing attacks or thinks that the TTP is responsible but does not want to sabotage the peace process.

The TTP, for its part, has never been hesitant to claim responsibility for attacks but now vows that it has nothing to do with the violence. One reasonable theory could be that elements within the TTP are opposed to any compromise with the government and so are operating as before, with the added determination to stymie talks. Not so, says TTP negotiator Maulana Samiul Haq, who says that every group within the TTP is committed to dialogue. We can never fully expect the TTP to level with us and neither should the government. Our law-enforcement agencies should then be even more alert and raise their investigative game. Knowing who is behind the attacks will determine the future course of negotiations so, apart from improving security in vulnerable areas, tracking down the culprits and ascertaining their affiliation should be a priority. Above all, the residents of Peshawar should not be left to feel like they are pawns in a larger game between the government, the TTP and some unknown, unnamed third force. After over a decade of suffering they deserve better than to be left to their own devices while everyone else pursues what they consider to be loftier goals.

# Taliban moves

**T**wo seemingly unconnected events point to shifts within the dark dynamics of the Taliban. Their office in Qatar, which was opened with much fanfare on June 18, has been closed, allegedly temporarily, because of what are said to be 'broken promises'. Closer to home, but no less significantly, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has sacked its spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan over an alleged threat to the Afghan Taliban to stop backing its opponents in the Mohmand Agency. A twist in the already tangled tale appeared on Friday when Ehsanullah Ehsan appealed to a Taliban jirga against his replacement. Whatever the outcome of this development may be, the former points to an accelerating deterioration in the always-shaky 'peace process' that was inclusive of the Taliban; and the latter a pointer to cracks in an agglomeration of groups that were never homogeneous, often internally fractious and whose lethal ubiquity the state has yet to effectively counter. Neither development spells good news for Pakistan.

The opening of the Qatar office enraged President Karzai who, seeing it as the Taliban opening a de facto consulate, immediately broke off bilateral talks with the Americans and threatened to boycott the peace process altogether. Karzai may be yesterday's man but his increasing instability is going to make any attempt at negotiation fraught in the extreme. The New York Times is reporting that the US is seriously considering speeding up its withdrawal from Afghanistan because of frustration with Karzai, as well as going for the 'zero option' – leaving no forces at all on Afghan soil after the 2014 deadline. If the US goes down that road then other states that were going to leave 'residual forces' post-2014 may be tempted to do the same. India and China will be watching closely. The replacement of Ehsanullah Ehsan comes after dozens of Afghan Taliban allegedly arrived in the Mohmand Agency from the Kunar province of Afghanistan – leading the TTP to ask that the Afghan Taliban stop interfering in its affairs. The details are complex and far from clear in terms of who did and said what, but the spokesman's replacement after what appears to be a serious clash between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban is indicative of both latent and actual conflict between the reportedly 30-plus factions and groups that make up the TTP. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, presiding over a meeting of MPs from Fata, has again vowed to eradicate terrorism. A new National Security Policy is supposed to be in the making, but an all-parties conference scheduled originally for this week has been delayed. Some politicians want talks with the TTP, but the organisation has itself said that it is no longer interested – citing mistrust and broken promises as have the Taliban in Qatar. Flimsy bridges are cracking on all sides and whether it is in Pakistan or Afghanistan no party has yet successfully engaged the Taliban in talks. The TTP has zero interest in constitutional democracy. As PM Nawaz has said: 'Pakistan is passing through critical circumstances'. He is not wrong.

# The swap meet

**T**he alleged release of six TTP prisoners in exchange for two Frontier Corps men being held by militants will be sure to cause controversy in the days ahead. The military has already denied the prisoner exchange but, while there is no independent confirmation of the swap, we have examples of such deals being cut with the TTP in the past. In 2008, just as the military was getting ready to pull out of South Waziristan and hold talks with the then TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud, 37 of his militants were released in return for 12 soldiers. At the time, that swap and the others which followed seemed necessary since the TTP was holding more than 200 Pakistani soldiers and officials, including our ambassador to Afghanistan. This time round, if indeed a prisoner exchange has taken place, the rationale for it is far less clear. Perhaps it was meant as a gesture to the TTP in advance of the peace talks agreed upon at the All-Parties Conference. If that is indeed the case, we should look back to the 2008 negotiations with Baitullah Mehsud, which produced a short-lasting agreement, the terms of which the TTP flouted at will and used only as an opportunity to regroup. There is a danger that the TTP will again see the prisoner exchange, lopsided as it is in their favour, as a sign of weakness ahead of the talks.

As a general rule, governments avoid prisoner exchanges with those holding hostages because it only encourages them to kidnap more people. The last thing the state should want is to start giving in to every TTP demand since that bodes ill for the upcoming peace talks. Everyone knows that the side which is likely to emerge victorious in negotiations is the one that comes to the bargaining table in a position of strength. The military successes in the tribal areas should have made the state the stronger party. Unilateral concessions such as this prisoner swap may end up undermining its position and convincing the TTP that it can be pushed around. If an exchange had to have taken place, the authorities should have demanded either an equal swap or that their men should be released first. Guarantees should also have been received that the released militants do not pick up weapons again. Without such steps, the state may end up shooting itself in the foot once talks begin with the TTP. One should not end up being a victim of one's own fear.

# Endangered

**T**he TTP's call for Shariah law – presumably as defined by them – to take precedence over the constitution is one of their many apparent demands that should never be accepted. We know too much of what the TTP means when it calls for Shariah. The Senate, in a unanimous resolution has insisted that there would be no compromise on the rights of minorities and women. It has repudiated the idea of using the most vulnerable sections of society as pawns in the negotiations with the TTP. The National Assembly where, unlike the Senate, the ruling party dominates should now follow suit. Let it be clear that basic human rights are already routinely denied to women and minorities and there is actually need to strengthen the legal and constitutional cover provided to them. All the Senate has done is assure us that they will not make things any worse, although given the state of the country today even that is no small deed.

Among the minority groups are also included the large Ismaili and small Kalash communities in Kalash. Both are peaceful groups that go about their business without troubling anyone. They have been threatened by the TTP which released a video earlier this month warning them. Chitral has been troubled by militancy due to its strategic location near the Afghan border and Ismailis have been targeted by militants belonging to the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in 2004. The new Taliban threats should serve as a timely reminder of the many people whose fortunes are at stake as the government negotiates with the TTP. Most minorities have never had it easy in the country but the advent of the TTP has only made their situation dire. The Senate resolution should be the start of winning back their right to live without fear.



# All set to talk

**I**n disbanding its original negotiating committee the government has all but admitted that its initial strategy for talks with the TTP was a flawed one. The government's choice to have journalists and former diplomats as its go-betweens was doomed for failure as soon as the TTP decided to appoint political figures with mass followings of their own, which they then serviced to the TTP cause. The new committee, reported to include Federal Secretary Habibullah Khattak, Additional Secretary to the Prime Minister Fawad Hasan Fawad and Additional Secretary Fata Arbab Arif, along with Rustam Shah Mohmand of the PTI, should be more savvy in its dealings with the TTP since its members have experience in Fata as bureaucrats and will also be better placed to make quick decisions without having to constantly refer to the government. The presence of a PTI representative is particularly noteworthy as it brings into the fold the party that is most strongly associated with the decision to negotiate with the TTP. That the PTI also happens to be the ruling party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also adds to its value as negotiators.

The newly-minted cooperation between the PML-N and PTI was sealed when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met Imran Khan at his residence and secured his all-important assent for the current negotiating strategy. Imran Khan changed tack somewhat when he agreed that military action may become necessary against factions of the TTP that refuse to renounce violence. The central figure in coordinating the actions of the negotiating committee and engineering the détente between Nawaz and Imran appears to be Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, who will need to add to his duties by regularly providing updates on the state of talks with the TTP. With the TTP's negotiating group now in North Waziristan to set up a meeting between the government side and the TTP shura, the talks will soon enter the vital stage where demands will have to be made and accepted. For all the speed and conviction with which the ceasefire was agreed and progress made, this promises to be the trickiest part of the negotiation. TTP demands for a withdrawal of troops from the tribal areas and the release of their prisoners may be a bridge too far for the government. The issue of who will guarantee that the TTP will adhere to its verbal or written promises is also a key one. How groups operating from the Afghan soil are tackled is another tricky matter. The better strategy may be to adopt one of Imran's ideas and start with things like getting the TTP to support the polio immunisation drive. Lasting peace with the TTP will be difficult to forge and starting with more manageable demands may be the best prospect for success.

# Fight – within and without

**T**he infighting within the ranks of the TTP, which has claimed more than 40 lives in the last month, represents both a potential opportunity as well as hazards for the government. The killing of Baitullah Mehsud in a drone strike and the leadership struggle that followed combined with disagreements over negotiating with the government have broken the previously unified front presented by the TTP. This might weaken the TTP as a whole and reduce its ability to strike, something the group has previously done at will. But it could also have a negative impact on the success of peace talks as the TTP leadership's attention is diverted elsewhere. The TTP's negotiating team has said that talks with the government will resume today. The most important item on the agenda will be prolonging the ceasefire, which expired on April 10, possibly indefinitely. But reportedly the TTP is already planning alternative attacks in Islamabad should the talks fail.

Even if a ceasefire is negotiated, further progress will be tricky. The TTP wants more prisoners to be released and for the government to allow it to operate freely in a safe zone. The latter demand is particularly problematic since it would require convincing the military to either withdraw its troops from any potential safe zone or allow the TTP to function without doing anything to hinder the militant group. Neither option would be particularly palatable to an institution that has lost thousands at the hands of the TTP. The infighting that has plagued the group has shown that even its shura cannot speak for everyone within the TTP umbrella. Spokesman Shahidullah Shahid tried to put the best possible gloss on the clashes that have led to 40 people being killed in the last month, saying that that the TTP remains united and the leadership will soon enforce a truce between the Waliur Rahman and Hakeemullah Mehsud factions. The reality is less rosy. The TTP has revealed itself to be not a unified force operating in unison but a loose coalition of ideologically like-minded groups who disagree, often violently, over tactics. That Sajna and Sheharyar Mehsud, both of whom fancied themselves to succeed Hakeemullah Mehsud, are now engaged in a war calls into question the long-distance leadership of Maulana Fazlullah from Afghanistan. The question now is if the government finds itself willing to take initiatives.

# The fog of terror

**E**ven as the modalities of a peace dialogue between government negotiators and a Taliban team continue to be worked out, we have nothing even remotely resembling peace in the streets and bazaars of our country. We can only wonder if it is even possible to talk peace, as citizens continue to die and security personnel going about their duties are ruthlessly targeted. The central purpose of talks is to put an end to killings, and it does not seem right now that this is happening. So far there has been a failure to staunch death. Perhaps this will prove possible, but each round of killing, each incident of ruthless terrorism, moves this hope just that little bit further away from us.

At least 21 people were killed, 11 near the Bara tehsil in the Khyber Agency, where a suicide bomber targeted a police APC in a bazaar and ten others in Quetta, as an explosive device attached to a bicycle was detonated as a Frontier Corps patrol passed. A passenger bus also happened to be present on the road at the same time, and two children were among the dead. Some among the 90 injured in the two blasts remain in a critical condition. Like the thousands others killed in the country over the past decade as a result of acts of terrorism, death came suddenly and unexpectedly, leaving behind torn limbs and shattered bones. We ask ourselves how long this will continue, and if we are even in sight of a solution. Certainly so far the picture is hazy, with initial hope that came with the idea of talks beginning to dissolve. The question of responsibility comes up. A little known group, the Ahrarul Hind, has claimed both attacks. There is no way of knowing if this force is linked to the Taliban, is a militant outfit that has other motives or if it is out to sabotage talks. Any of these scenarios could be true. But right now our priority must be to stop the violence, to end the disruptions they cause and find the peace we all seek. An end to the blasts, to the killing and the consequent sense of uncertainty is essential to all of us. Strategy must revolve around finding a way to achieve this and saving a country that is facing forces that are tearing it apart from within.

# Banish the thought

**A**ny guarded optimism that may have surrounded the imminent peace talks with the TTP has almost evaporated after military commanding officer for Malakand Division Major-General Sanaullah Niazi, Lt-Colonel Tauseef and Lance Naik Irfan Sattar were killed in an IED attack by the Taliban in Upper Dir. While hundreds of security personnel have been killed by Taliban militants over the last decade, the attack on high-ranking officers is a rarity. General Niazi was widely regarded as a highly committed military leader who had worked devotedly as GOC to return Swat to peace after the 2009 defeat of the militants in the area. Tributes have poured in for him also from the ordinary people of the areas he had served. It is difficult to understand what the motives of the TTP may be in striking at this time and what it hopes to achieve, and if Taliban units are even unified in terms of strategy and approach. The killings came the same day that the TTP said that it would only negotiate with the government if all troops were withdrawn from the tribal areas and militant prisoners released from jail. Complying with this request would be a non-starter since it would mean surrender, not negotiation. A Taliban that has its fighters back and no military to hinder their training and organisation is one that will continue to gain strength and attack at will.

The killings in Dir should serve as a reminder of the importance of continued military presence in the area. By virtue of sharing a border with Afghanistan as well as many of the tribal agencies, Dir is a strategically vital piece of territory. Apart from the TTP presence, it has also been used by Maulana Fazlullah to carry out attacks in Pakistan from his hideout in Afghanistan. Just because the state may favour talks with the TTP does not mean it should become suicidal and give the militants an opportunity to increase their influence in these important territories. Previous peace negotiations have shown the TTP to be a slippery and deceitful adversary. Combine that with their latest act and you have an enemy that is not to be trusted at all. The memory of Maj-Gen Sanaullah and others who died must not be besmirched. It is now the duty of the government and the state to ensure that their lives weren't wasted. There is further proof that the Taliban are not to be taken lightly and that the state should be ready to fight if the situation warrants it. Already more than 40,000 Pakistanis have perished in this war; there is no need for any more wake-up calls about the nature of the enemy. Yet there are too many who advocate negotiations not as a tactic to win in the conflict but as an admission of defeat. That attitude needs to be banished.

# A terrible atrocity

Peace talks between the government and the TTP may not be dead yet, but they are certainly on life support. The claim by the Mohmand faction of the TTP that it had beheaded 23 FC men kidnapped in June 2010 has naturally created shock, with condemnations pouring in. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has condemned the act as a grave crime. Sharif has also said that such acts hold back peace. At the same time officials have firmly denied Taliban allegations that their prisoners, held in custody, had been taken away and killed by security personnel. The question that arises is if the talks can continue. Certainly right now they are at a standstill. The government committee's decision Monday to stay away, under the new circumstances, from a scheduled meeting has been criticised by Prof Ibrahim from the Taliban nominated committee, who has said that the FC killings should have been discussed. He lamented that the government looked upon him and the committee members as being Taliban members when they were actually just mediators. He said that a ceasefire offer from the TTP had been on hand and so the government representatives should not have cancelled the meeting. The one thing the 'mediator' did not do was to say even a single harsh word about the cold-blooded murder of the 23 FC men. In these circumstances we wonder how far the government can go. The prime minister has himself said that there is a limit to what the government can tolerate. The Taliban committee has met; the government committee's head will be discussing the turn of events with the PM. We may also hear the expected allegations of conspiracy and a deliberate sabotage of talks.

There is no doubt the events we are now seeing bring despondency. The thin, slippery carpet of peace that some had hoped was being rolled out is being pulled away. The uncertainty we desperately need to banish from our country has taken hold again. Continued bomb attacks and Monday's kidnapping of an anti-polio team in Tank (KP) simply add to the confusion over what to do. Certainly the state cannot afford to give in to a force that uses death as its tool. Voices demanding the entire dialogue process be abandoned are speaking out louder and the wrath of the military establishment gives them force. The killings of the FC men are a terrible atrocity when we stand at a crucial turning point which may well determine what the future is to be. We must carefully consider our options, determine what to do next and act not with emotion but sagacity to pull the nation out of crisis. This is now what the government must focus on as a new process of decision-making and consensus building begins. What lies beyond this bridge we still do not know. It is too early to say that the government will abandon talks and go for the military option. But such attacks surely lead to retaliation and, to many, the TTP has signalled its lack of interest in peace as the government gave peace a chance. But there can be hope for talks if the TTP condemns and disowns the group that has claimed responsibility for the killings. Talks should be held but with those who behave.

# The rule of the fox

**T**he greater the conviction with which a politician makes a statement the more reason there is to doubt the truthfulness of the words being uttered. In recent days, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan and Sindh Information Minister Sharjeel Memom have all confidently asserted that the operation in Karachi will continue, that it is a success and that all the political parties in the city are on board with the plan. The facts and numbers show that their confidence is misplaced. The best way to judge the operation in Karachi is by finding out if it has led to a reduction in violence. Using this basic and crucial metric shows that any gains that may have been made are relatively insignificant. More than 2500 people were killed in Karachi last year, with no measurable decrease in murders after the operation began. So far this month, there have been more than 60 killings, out of which 15 were policemen. Violence in Karachi continues to have many facets, with mafia gangs, armed groups linked to political parties and the TTP all continuing to murder at will. The government can recite statistics about the numbers of people arrested all it wants but so long as violence isn't reduced considerably the operation cannot be judged as anything other than a failure.

The federal and provincial governments continue to maintain that all the political parties in Karachi are behind the operation, and the police stand at the centre of the entire affair. But given the highly politicised nature of the gang warfare raging in Karachi, it is hardly surprising that the issue of transfers and postings within this force should interest all 'political parties' with their fingers in various pies. So it appears that the federal and provincial governments continue to maintain a lie. The issue of transfers and promotion has cropped up again, and it could become uglier. While the federal government, in discussion with the

Sindh setup, had established a three man committee, comprising the DG Rangers, the IG Sindh and the CCPO Karachi, to oversee all transfers and postings, it would appear this panel has been bypassed in some cases and the pattern is expected to be repeated in more such cases. A member of the PPP government is being seen to have an active role in the affair. The operation is also running into logistical difficulties, since the Rangers have been given the responsibility of catching suspects but only the police have the authority to take the investigation further from there. And this situation is made far more complicated with the political intervention involved in police postings and transfers. Ultimately, the curse that Karachi lives under is the patronage given to gangs and mafias by the very political parties that are in charge of restoring peace to Karachi. The city is one large henhouse and all the foxes are deciding how best to guard it. A totally neutral and all-powerful force is needed to handle everyone without prejudice, fear or favour. This, however, will sadly remain an illusion.

# A new target?

The Thursday attack on the Markaz of the Tableeghi Jamaat in Peshawar adds a new twist to the violence tearing our country apart. It is hard to know who would go after an outfit that has generally stayed away from controversy, militancy and politics – engaging itself essentially in the preaching of religion. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has quickly and significantly denied having had anything to do with the blast that killed eight people and injured some 60 others. Police say five kilograms of explosive were used, of a kind not encountered before in our country. How much weight the TTP denial should carry is the question. It is a decentralised organisation whose component parts may be in ideological agreement but do not always see eye to eye on tactics. The TTP has never shied away from attacking places of worship before so there is no particular reason why it would be morally opposed to this attack. But, for the same reason, we may wonder why those who perpetrated the attack would not want to own it. Are we seeing a new strand being woven into the intricate pattern of violence? How significant is this development? That a bomb was recovered the same day from the Tableeghi Markaz in Nowshera points to a coordinated attack, another hallmark of the efficiency and ruthlessness the militants are known for. The police believe at least three people were involved in carrying out the attack, since a second bomb was recovered from the area. Had that bomb also detonated the casualties would have been significantly higher. The attack was clearly intended to maximise casualties by targeting the most densely-populated public area in the city.

It is essential that investigations be conducted in a scientific and professional manner. This is going to be a true test of the ability of the PTI government. So far all the party has had to offer is negotiations with the TTP. After the Peshawar church attack and now the Tableeghi Markaz bombing, with countless other attacks in the province in between, the PTI will have to show that it is able to point to and catch the perpetrators of such attacks. No matter how sincerely the PTI believes in the idea of talks, it cannot stop at that. The early verdict on the PTI's performance is far from positive. The provincial government's response to honouring Aitizaz Hasan, the school-child who came in the way of a suicide bomber, was so lethargic that it even earned a rebuke from Imran Khan. When the government is so tone deaf that it does not know how to react in such obvious situations, it doesn't engender much confidence in its ability to govern. The militants will probably have judged it weak and ineffective. That will only make the prospects of talks more distant. We hope too that the Tableeghi Jamaat, which keeps a low profile and maintains its own security, cooperates fully so that we can understand what is happening and bring the various groups that operate out of the shadows in which too many of them remain shrouded.

# Talking security

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chaired the first meeting of its kind as the chief ministers, key federal ministers, chief of army staff and other military and intelligence officials discussed the security of the country. Given the importance of the attendees it is perhaps a little disappointing that the meeting seems to have been convened only to rubberstamp the security policies that the government has been touting ever since it came into power. Among the decisions reached, all of which are part of the national security policy the government unveiled last month, one was to set up a joint intelligence directorate to better coordinate intelligence-sharing between the various agencies and to have a rapid response force that can immediately provide help after a militant attack. There may have been a paucity of ideas at the meeting but at least it gave the prime minister an opportunity to brief government and military officials on the progress of peace talks with the TTP. Here, Nawaz Sharif was more encouraging as he insisted that talks with the TTP would only be held in accordance with the constitution. This presumably means that expected TTP demands like imposing their interpretation of Shariah law in the country will not be accepted.

The prime minister was perhaps being a little optimistic at the meeting when he said that it would be up to the TTP to tackle the threat of any splinter group that has opposed the ceasefire and talks and is still carrying out attacks. The TTP has distanced itself from attacks that took place recently, with the new Ahrarul Hind group claiming responsibility for them, but it has not condemned the attacks outright or offered to take action against the group. One reason the government may not agree to the TTP demand of releasing all its prisoners is that many of them would have grown even more bitter during their years of imprisonment and may just end up carrying out further attacks against the state after being freed. The TTP's claims about 300 women, children and other non-combatants being secretly held by the state have been denied by state officials repeatedly. But we have as yet no way of ascertaining the truth that may lie somewhere between TTP media manoeuvrings and the state's concern with 'security'. Be that as it may, what must always be upheld is due process and human dignity and rights. Innocent people caught between militancy and counter-militancy are not exactly an unheard of possibility here. And, unfortunately, as hearings in the Supreme Court have made clear, the practice of abducting people and holding them indefinitely leads to alienation that militancy of all kinds feeds upon. If there is an element of truth in the claims, the situation needs to change – not to appease the TTP but for the sake of justice.



# Cease!

**T**he government is about to learn if it is possible to negotiate with an enemy that has reserved the right to attack anywhere and at any time. By choosing not to extend its ceasefire, the TTP can no longer be given the presumption of innocence whenever there is a bombing, including any attacks attributed to its offshoot – the Ahrarul Hind. From the series of explosions at an FC depot in Landi Kotal just a day after the ceasefire ended to the Peshawar bombing on Friday that killed a security official, the TTP will be now answerable for every attack. The TTP's reasoning for ending the ceasefire is simply not good enough for the government to take it as anything other than a declaration that the militant group is not willing to compromise. It says that the government displayed its lack of sincerity by ignoring its demands to release non-combatant detainees and give the TTP a safe zone from which to operate. This ignores the fact that the government, at the cost of significant public outcry, did free prisoners and suspended operations in the tribal areas even as the TTP itself refused to release either Shahbaz Taseer or Ali Haider Gilani. The TTP's idea of a negotiation, it seems, is to get everything it wants without having to give anything in return.

Despite these provocations, the government has decided to give peace another chance – even if this time it may do so more warily. Even the military, which is believed to favour operations, backed the PM at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on National Security. The task at hand now is to show the TTP that the continued willingness to talk is borne out of strength, not weakness. When Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan next approaches TTP intermediary Maulana Samiul Haq he will have to make it clear that any resumption in talks is contingent on either renewing the ceasefire or agreeing to halt all attacks. The TTP already faces problems of its own as infighting within the group has become troublesome enough that the Afghan Taliban have been asked to step in as peacemakers. There have also been reports of more substantive cooperation between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban. If we do have as much leverage over the Afghan Taliban as has been claimed now would be the time to use it and pressurise the TTP. Any progress made over the last couple of months is in danger of being nullified and every tool at disposal, including the Afghan Taliban, must be used if the military operation is to be avoided.

# The powers of destruction

**O**n the same day that militant forces presumably linked to the Taliban, launched attacks in Bannu, D I Khan, Hangu and Mardan, resulting in the death of one policeman, injuries to seven security personnel and multiple civilians, the leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban in the Mohmand Agency, Khalid Umar Khurasani has expressed conditional agreement to a debate in Lahore, stating that 'the Taliban did not want further destruction in Pakistan'. He sought a guarantee from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf for this. Khurasani's 'offer', and his laying out of conditions, do not quite gel with the remarks made by TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid, who claimed responsibility for the attacks in various towns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Saturday and said they were intended as revenge for the killing of Ha-keemullah Mehsud. He warned that more such violence would follow. The incidents across KP targeted members of the security forces.

The TTP has already said that those representing the state would be its primary target. In the Kurram Agency, near Bannu, a suicide bomber targeted a vehicle carrying police and Tochi Scouts. Three policemen, two scouts and two civilians were injured. In D I Khan a roadside bomb killed one policeman and injured six others. In Mardan another police vehicle was targeted by an explosive device and in Hangu rocket shells injured five people, including four women, in a bazaar. These certainly do not represent the acts of a force seeking discussion of any kind. Indeed Khurasani's statement regarding an apparent desire for peace, which stands in sharp contrast to the TTP spokesman's harsh comments, simply underscores the fact that we are dealing not with one entity but one divided into many different factions. This makes any process of conducting peace negotiations all the harder. We have no idea precisely what the standing of the ameer of the Taliban in Mohmand is within the wider whole of the TTP. But right now, judging by past offers of talks from persons lying outside the central body of the organisation, it would probably be more realistic to expect the beginning of the campaign of vengeance that Shahidullah Shahid has spoken of rather than any end to the violence that has been coming our way. The series of blasts and rocket attacks, which the TTP states were coordinated by it, may just suggest what we are up against and it would be sensible in such circumstances to brace ourselves for more similar action in the days ahead even while we consider the complications inherent in dealing with a body that is made up of so many diverse groups.

# Standing still

**A**midst the heated debate over whether we should pursue negotiations or military action to tackle the TTP, the government has chosen a third, even worse, option: stasis. In the last couple of weeks alone there has been a suicide blast at a school in Hangu, two attacks each in Peshawar and Shangla, the assassination of Chaudhry Aslam and then the attack on security forces in Bannu that killed over 20 soldiers. Then, on Monday, a suicide attack at a check post near RA Bazaar in Rawalpindi killed 14 people, including six army personnel. This audacious attack, near the army headquarters, should be the last straw for a government that has shown no urgency even as the TTP has stepped up its campaign of terrorism under the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah. At least Nawaz Sharif cancelled his trip to Davos, something he did not do when he was in Sri Lanka as violence swept the country during Muharram. The prime minister has not taken any action yet but has started talking a lot about taking action. In a telephone conversation with COAS Raheel Sharif, Nawaz said that difficult decisions would have to be made although he did not explain what those difficult decisions would be. He also said at a federal cabinet meeting that out-of-the-box solutions are needed to tackle militancy, although once again there was no elaboration on what those solutions may be.

The cabinet meeting, which took on extra significance after the Rawalpindi blast, discussed the prospects of talks with the Taliban. That more than seven months after the government took power and held an APC to forge a consensus on the matter it is still pondering over it shows just how lethargic it has been. The appointment of Maulana Samiul Haq, and the prime minister's off-hand mention that people like Imran Khan and Fazlur Rehman could also talk to the TTP, now seems a mere smokescreen to buy time. Samiul Haq has welcomed a TTP offer for talks but neglected to mention that the militant group is only open to negotiations if the government shows 'sincerity'. What the TTP means by that is unclear. If 'sincerity' requires the government to halt all military action in the tribal areas even as the TTP itself continues its campaign of violence then this is an untenable position. The TTP, as we are reminded anew after every murderous attack, is not to be trusted. The government should feel free to pursue negotiations but not if it requires defanging the military and ruling out future operations. Whatever it decides to do, though, the government has to take action of some kind immediately. We have had enough of the fiddling while the country is burned to the ground.

# Now is the time

The 'dialogue' had stood on shaky ground all along and the murder of 23 FC troops, it seems, was the final straw. A full-scale operation against the TTP is now underway, involving both air strikes and boots on the ground. Perhaps such an outcome was inevitable given the TTP's inability or refusal to stop attacks after peace talks commenced and the military's none-too-secret desire to take the militant group on. Once hostilities are underway there is a temptation to rally around the flag and become unthinking cheerleaders. But now is precisely the time when our past experiences with such operations should have a sobering effect and make us careful in our assessments. At best, such operations have been successful in clearing an area of militants for a temporary period before they invariably regroup and return. If the government and the military have now decided that they have no other option left to them then they must ensure that they fight a smart, effective and, yes, humane war. For the TTP cannot and should not serve as an inspiration for the state. Equal attention must also be paid to the forgotten victims of the war – the long-suffering residents of the tribal areas. Past military operations have led to accusations of gross human rights abuses from respected human rights organisations. Then there are those displaced by war, forced to flee their homes but usually unwanted elsewhere in the country. The breakdown of peace talks, as announced by Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan at a press briefing on Wednesday, and the start of military action were near simultaneous. This means that residents had even less time than usual to evacuate the area.

It is difficult to say precisely what is happening given the lack of access to areas of conflict. The figures being given out, of about 45 deaths, in 'precision strikes' over the Khyber Agency and North Waziristan are impossible to confirm. But what we often forget is that thousands of ordinary people – men, women and children – live in these parts and want nothing more than to go about their lives in a peaceful manner. When bombing takes place, it is their lives too that are disrupted; it is they who suffer, they who also die. That is why independent reporting from North Waziristan is the need of the hour. For now it is almost non-existent. Civilian deaths are inevitable in a war zone and, as with drone strikes, the deaths of non-combatants have the effect only of radicalising the population further. Wariness is in order whenever claims of victory are made.

Tactically, it would make sense to allow the negotiating teams to continue their talks. Even if a breakthrough is not expected, there is surely no harm in keeping the avenues of communication open. The ultimate aim, of course, must be to neuter the TTP as a force that can launch attacks anywhere in the country at any time. We should have no illusions that the fight will be anything other than tough and brutal. It is now up to the government to show that its last six months of vacillation between talks and operations has not vanquished our will. There is no clarity yet on whether the military strikes are planned as a one-off action or as part of something that will continue longer, claims of government ministers that it was actually a one-time strike notwithstanding. It is the government that needs to take the lead, tell people precisely what is happening and involve them in the process of deciding what our future holds.

# Talk and fight

**A**t first sight recent statements by COAS General Kayani and Nawaz Sharif are at variance. On the one hand, there is General Kayani praising the people of Pakistan for having come out and voted in their millions despite the threats from terrorists. He said that the electorate had 'defied the unfounded dictates of an insignificant and misguided minority' – by which it might be assumed that he was referring to the Taliban and the TTP. On the other hand, there is Nawaz Sharif saying that the offer of talks from the Taliban should be taken seriously – and why not sit with the Taliban and talk with them? The two statements appear contradictory and mutually exclusive, but that would be far from the reality – which is that in the majority of conflicts there are spaces where the adversaries may talk. The talk may not immediately lead to peace but no war is forever and, eventually, there is an outbreak of peace, usually brokered by the talks that continued even as the conflict went on around them.

Nawaz Sharif says that his party is going to utilise 'every option' to end bloodshed and maintain rule of law. Billions of dollars have been wasted due to the ongoing 'streak' of terrorism. Talking to the Taliban has always been an option, and there have been deals and ceasefires brokered in the past that have quickly fallen apart with either or both sides claiming that the other was 'insincere'. Be that as it may, there are going to have to be more talks against a background spattered with the blood of the hundreds of people the Taliban murdered in their attempts to terrorise people out of voting. What the talks are about, and what is going to be negotiated, is a matter that requires the closest scrutiny. It must be made clear from the outset that democracy is neither up for sale nor a bargaining chip. The Taliban have repeatedly expressed their opposition to democracy, deeming it un-Islamic, though in the final analysis it may just be a bargaining chip. They wish to see a country ruled in its entirety by their version of Shariah law. Pakistan, on the other hand, has just demonstrated in the clearest possible fashion that the majority of its population wishes to continue as a democracy. The religious parties did badly as they always do when it comes to elections and the democratic mandate of the winners of the election is writ large. The army will continue to fight the Taliban, the Taliban will continue to bomb indiscriminately and in the mayhem there will be a place where the talking is done. It is for the Taliban to accept the will of the people, not the other way around. And the will of the people is that Pakistan continues on the democratic road. What the Taliban will end up accepting as a solution is not yet clear.

# Action or what?

The government has decided to shroud its military action against the TTP in North Waziristan in secrecy at a time it needs to level with the public. The ubiquitous military sources claimed that Adnan Rashid, the militant convicted of an attempted assassination on Pervez Musharraf – and who had escaped from prison in Bannu – had been killed but the TTP denied this. Those same sources also say that of the 50 people killed so far, 36 were foreign militants. This too should not be taken at face value since airstrikes are rarely that precise and trying to convince us that most of the militants are foreigners could be a ploy to garner support for the action. What we can say with some certainty is that the prospects of talks have stalled, perhaps forever. Maulana Samiul Haq, who had been chosen as an interlocutor for negotiations with the TTP, has used the military action as a reason to withdraw his participation. Minister of Defence Production Rana Tanveer is fooling no one when he says that the military operation is not actually an operation and is only meant as retaliation for the recent surge in TTP attacks. He laughably also said that the government would decide later if it would launch an operation or pursue negotiations instead. That decision for now has been taken out of the government's hands since the TTP is not going to agree to talks at this moment, if it was ever serious about negotiations to begin with.

Of all the options available to it, the government has taken possibly the worst one. If it is indeed being honest when it says that these airstrikes are only a limited retaliation then it has sabotaged any prospect of peace while making negligent gains against the TTP. Touting the scalp of Adnan Rashid does not cancel out the fact that the state will be unable to take back territory in North Waziristan through bombardment from the air alone. The impression the government is giving is of a headless chicken that has no idea where it is going. Stumbling into military action without a plan is no substitute for a policy that has definite tactics and aims. Maybe the coming days will offer more clarity but such optimism is unwarranted when the government has made a habit of flip-flopping between the military and negotiation options. We also need more information about possible behind-the-scenes wrangling. The military has claimed it will support whatever course the government charts but there have been murmurs that it opposes talks. Could the action in North Waziristan be a way of boxing the prime minister into a corner? Only time will tell if we have been led into an entirely avoidable catastrophe.

# Meeting point

**J**ust how delicate and fraught the peace talks with the TTP will be was shown by the difficulty of even reaching an agreement on when and where the first direct contact between the TTP shura and the government would be held. The TTP's negotiating committee, led by Maulana Samiul Haq, met the government committee, with Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan also present, at the Punjab House in Islamabad and deciding on this relatively simple matter took over two hours. Fortunately, the two sides were able to settle on a location although it was not revealed because of the obvious security issues. It was believed that the TTP was apprehensive to meet anywhere outside of Waziristan although Samiul Haq tried to pour cold water on that suggestion. The venue of the meeting could end up saying quite a lot about which side has the upper hand in the negotiations. Should the TTP be forced out of its comfort zone, the government could plausibly claim that it is dictating the direction of the talks. Who, apart from its negotiating team, attends the meeting from the government side will also be a crucial question. If no one else is present at the meeting, the TTP may claim that the government is not serious about the talks while sending too high level an emissary may grant the TTP more legitimacy than it merits.

Once these details are sorted out, the agenda of the meeting will be foremost in everyone's minds. The initial demand from the TTP side appears to be the release of its prisoners, including women and children that it claims are being held in government captivity. The government, for its part, wants the TTP to take action against its offshoot – the Ahrarul Hind – which has rejected negotiations and continued to carry out attacks. The TTP must agree in principle and practice to eliminate the Ahrarul Hind threat. The first meeting, to guard against failure, should be restricted to these initial forays into compromise until a measure of trust is built. Only then can matters like troop withdrawal and dewatering become part of the agenda. There is a need to move quickly because the TTP ceasefire ends in about a week and, should they refuse to extend it, any progress made this month will quickly be laid to waste. The TTP and the government should agree to an extension of the ceasefire immediately, for the sake of peace and security in the country.

# After the carnage

**A** day after the deadly attacks that killed more than 80 people from Pakistan's Christian community – at a church in Peshawar – the sense of anger rages on. There have been protests in most major cities; Christians were joined by at least some members of the Muslim majority in most places. But it was sad to observe that, on the whole, the turnout of non-Christians was relatively low in many places. Clearly, many of us are still to learn that if we do not act now our country will be destroyed by the hate and fanaticism that have killed thousands of people over the years, most of them Muslims. It is unfortunate that not many in the provincial and federal governments are willing to address the killers by name, speaking only of 'inhuman elements' or 'animals'. It is somewhat hard to understand how they have intended to conduct dialogue with those they themselves say are not human. Condemnations are coming thick and fast with Pope Francis and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon adding their voices to the worldwide outrage. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, moved by the voices of protests, has admitted, en route to the UN General Assembly session in New York, that the attacks have made it impossible to go ahead with the talks with the TTP. For now that is the only course he could have taken. Peace talks are a misnomer when one side is so hell bent on violence. Claims of responsibility have, as expected, come in from the TTP – specifically a new group which, its spokesman reportedly said, had been created to combat 'foreign elements'. The authenticity of these claims is in some doubt. But what is beyond dispute is that the same extremists who had struck before have acted once again. The TTP has reportedly vowed to continue targeting foreigners and non-Muslims as revenge for drone attacks. What do our Christian and other non-Muslim brothers and sisters have to do with the drone attacks? Howsoever brutal and criminal drone attacks are – and they indeed are – the TTP is only using them as an excuse to continue attacks on any group whose faith they don't accept.

It is a testament to the inherent peaceable nature of the Christian community that the protests all over the country were conducted in justifiable anger – but without violence. Church leaders stepped up and asked the community to demonstrate restraint, and admirably so. Anyone who would complain about protesters blocking roads and burning tires should understand just how traumatic the killings have been to a community that has already felt under siege. Understanding and empathy have certainly been lacking in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government which spent as much time attacking its opponents as it did condemning the attack. The stance taken by PTI chief Imran Khan, whose party rules KP, is mysterious. He has suggested that elements opposed to dialogue had carried out the deadly attack. Various commentators have already asked why hundreds of other attacks have been conducted at times when there were no prospects of negotiations. The JUI-F too has suggested that the attacks were meant to derail peace talks. Do these leaders know something the rest of us do not? They should be able to share it with the families of those whose bodies and bones have littered the streets. Otherwise, they are doing nothing but earning a place in the hall of shame. The Peshawar police have said they will investigate the attack. But bringing the perpetrators to justice will be the tricky part. The federal government has vowed to rebuild the church – a fine gesture but meaningless unless the governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the centre can protect vulnerable groups and refuse to rest until their tormenters have been brought to justice. The country still needs something concrete, a collective effort, to wash this shame off its face.



# Internal security

**N**awaz Sharif's declaration to the cabinet that peace talks are now dead was a simple statement of facts on the ground. The beheading of 23 FC prisoners left the matter out of the hands of the government and led to the invariable, and still ongoing, military strikes in North Waziristan. The prime minister did tell his cabinet that negotiations could resume if the TTP announced an unconditional ceasefire but the words and actions of the militants make this an offer that has no chance of being taken up. The task Nawaz now faces is to show the nation that tackling the Taliban should never have been reduced to the peace talks/operations dichotomy. Militancy is a problem too entrenched in the country for a single tactic to work. Nawaz's presentation of a draft of the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2013-2018 to the cabinet, where it was approved, was a long overdue attempt to rectify the simplistic debate that has so far dominated conversation of the TTP threat. Just how late this policy document was can be seen by the fact that the very title indicates that it was meant to be adopted last year. Since the review of our security policy was announced in August there has been one delay after the other – something unlikely to inspire confidence in the ability of the government to defeat the TTP.

The few details of the NISP that have been made available do not suggest anything particularly objectionable. The ideas being proposed have been discussed and recommended many times before. The NISP, for example, wants to make the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) the central clearinghouse for all national security matters and for the joint intelligence directorate to ensure that our mishmash of intelligence agencies abandon their turf wars and share intelligence with each other. The problem with the NISP is that these proposals are aspirational rather than functional. Nacta has existed on paper for many years but remains underfunded, leaderless and with only a skeleton staff. Other agencies dealing with national security are understandably hesitant at ceding any power and so the authority remains essentially dormant. Similarly, creating a new directorate will not on its own end battles between various agencies nor will it prevent the duplication of work. Military and civilian intelligence agencies will still be suspicious of each other. For the ideas contained within the NISP to succeed the government will have to focus on implementation rather than theory. That it took the best part of six months for the policy to even reach the cabinet does not augur well for the next stage of turning words into action.

# Terror policy

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan may not have been the most inspiring figure to sell the government's new security policy and so it proved as he faced dissent from the opposition parties while detailing the National Internal Security Policy in the National Assembly. He already faced a stiff task in front of the hostile audience as he explained the three-pronged policy – two parts of which include dialogue and operational aims, while one part would remain secret. This led to a back and forth where the leader of the opposition Khursheed Shah complained that none of the opposition parties were consulted in the six months it took to draw up the document, to which Nisar retorted that all the parties were asked for their input but only the MQM actually provided any. This sniping, sadly typical in parliament, was unseemly at a time when unity is paramount in ensuring the success of military operations in North Waziristan. All the political parties, whether in government or the opposition, seem more intent on scoring points against each other than securing victory against a deadly foe. Instead we had Nisar lambasting the previous government for not formulating a policy of its own while the government of the day was accused of secrecy.

The parts of the policy that Nisar did reveal provided nothing revolutionary. The National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta), still basically defunct, was touted as the panacea to our militancy problem and the formation of a 500-strong rapid response team to terrorism was announced in Islamabad and the provinces. While such teams are needed in the aftermath of the attacks, the fact remains that they will do nothing to solve the problem of terrorism itself since by definition they are reactive. Nisar's appearance in the National Assembly was essentially a *fait accompli*. He told parliamentarians what they already knew: that talks had broken down because of continued TTP attacks and that the group's leaders would be targeted in their hideouts. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was no more inspiring, making a quick appearance to repeat most of what Nisar had said and saying that the security policy would be discussed with the leaders of all parties to incorporate their concerns. He then rushed out citing a prior engagement. This was reflective of a government that has preferred to either take decisions on its own or through extra-parliamentary means like All Parties Conferences. Winning this war will require keeping all the people's representatives in the loop and ensuring they have a role in crafting our response to the TTP.

# The war within

**M**urmurings about rifts within the Taliban and suggestions that the group was not a unified entity but one made up of dozens of different factions have been heard for a very long time. It now appears that these rifts could have very serious consequences indeed, with the internal battle perhaps assuming greater significance than all other factors involved in what is a highly complex struggle. The clearest indication of the gravity of this divide has come with the killing on Monday of senior Taliban leader Asmatullah Shaheen Bhattani in a gun attack on his vehicle as he was travelling to Miranshah, in North Waziristan. Two others died with him. According to a report in this newspaper, another senior Taliban leader, Said Sajna, is believed to be behind the attack. The feud between Bhattani and Sajna goes back some way, and involves tit-for-tat killings. Bhattani is also known to have played an instrumental role in Mullah Fazlullah's elevation to the head of the Tehreek-e-Taliban, with Sajna at one point in a key position to gain that slot.

It is difficult to say how things will now pan out. The Bhattani killing goes beyond personal rivalry. While Bhattani favoured the process of dialogue with the government, other elements did not. These issues have cropped up before too, with questions raised over how these divisions would affect talks. There have also been clashes between Taliban groups led by different commanders over leadership issues, with these emerging more openly both after the death in 2009 of Baitullah Mehsud, and then in 2013, of his successor Ha-keemullah. Even though the Taliban work under deep shadows, with their interactions and methods of decision-making somewhat opaque, it is obvious the murder of Bhattani will leave deep scars. The existing tensions could intensify, given that Asmatullah Bhattani was both the head of his tribe and a man with considerable standing with the Taliban. The war within the group is then becoming very significant. It could just have as much a say on the final outcome of things as the war being fought against the militants using bombs and guns. Events within the group will be very closely watched then for some time, as the precise lines of division become clearer and make it obvious that different schools of thought exist within the Taliban, with personal rivalry in some cases wrapped around these – making the truth very hard to discern. But these divisions, if cleverly exploited by the government, could also provide an opening to break up the TTP and gain supporters for peace through a give and take policy.

# How not to fight, or talk to, terror

**N**awaz Sharif owes his position as prime minister not just to the voters who elected him and his party but to parliament, which has the power both to select and remove him. Despite this, Nawaz has decided to snub the National Assembly. He was expected to deliver an address to the National Assembly on the security challenges facing the country but was a no-show yet again, making it more than four months since he last deigned to appear at the assembly to which he was elected. Predictably, the session then ended up becoming more about Nawaz than the TTP menace, with opposition members staging a walkout and demanding that Nawaz's membership be cancelled. The National Assembly has been sidelined from the very beginning. Instead of debating our strategy for tackling the TTP in the National Assembly and then voting on a solution, Nawaz took the option of convening the All-Parties Conference and letting the decision be made by the leaders of the political parties rather than their rank and file. Part of the reason Nawaz can afford to ignore the National Assembly, unlike his PPP predecessors, is that his party has enough of a majority that he doesn't need to consult with any parliamentarian to ram his policy preferences through.

This overwhelming numerical majority is why the most important meeting in Islamabad on Monday was not the NA session but the PML-N parliamentary meeting earlier in the morning. For this meeting the prime minister was in attendance and heard Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, previously a strong proponent of negotiations, say that he just doesn't trust the TTP anymore. Nisar did say that neither negotiations nor a military operation would work without a consensus. Given that the PML-N parliamentarians seemed to overwhelmingly support the military option, it would make it seem as if talks have been ruled out for now. Nawaz himself didn't have much to say to the parliamentary meeting, hitting his usual notes about terrorism and the economy being our biggest challenge but failing to explain how we can solve them. Greater leadership is needed from the leader of the country. He needs to, at a minimum, give a televised address explaining what he plans on doing about the resurgence of militant violence. Right now the government is dithering, using the excuse of 'consensus' to do nothing. Nawaz Sharif can no longer hide amid the safety of his party supporters. It is time to appear before the nation and explain why the government has failed so miserably at keeping us safe.

# First contact

Optimism is in limited supply after the first direct meeting between the government negotiating committee and the TTP shura. Any hope that the two sides could swiftly find points of agreement and perhaps even agree to an instant extension in the ceasefire – set to expire on Monday – has been extinguished. The TTP has two main demands and seems bent on offering zero concessions till the government facilitates them first. The shura told the government negotiators that they expect free movement in North Waziristan, which essentially means evacuating the area of military presence. Trust in the TTP is simply not high enough – if it exists at all – to allow it free, unsupervised rein. There is no way of knowing if the militants take advantage of this space to prepare for battle in the tribal areas or launch attacks on the rest of the country. The second TTP demand, the release of up to 400 prisoners it claims are non-combatants, could be accommodated. So far the military denies holding any of the people on the TTP list – most of whom the TTP alleges are women and children. If there are any such prisoners, no one will be surprised if some are found, should the TTP show some flexibility.

For the TTP to expect its demands to be met, it needs to start releasing civilians it is holding. The government committee demanded the release of Shahbaz Taseer and Ali Haider Gilani but the shura refused on the grounds that they do not qualify as non-combatants. The TTP logic here appears to be that since their fathers were part of a government that launched operations against the TTP those 'sins' have been transferred to their sons. Both the negotiating committees, in the form of Professor Ibrahim and Maulana Samiul Haq, declared themselves satisfied with the first round of talks although neither was able to claim any breakthroughs. For now both sides are at an impasse and with the ceasefire expiring in the next few days there could be an explosion of violence should the deadlock not be broken. This should not happen as once hostilities break out, even a faint hope of reaching a peaceful agreement would vanish. The TTP needs to know and understand that resuming its campaign of terror will beget further violence. This may be the last chance for talks to work before both sides choose guns over words.

# Talking to the TTP

A defiant prime minister walked into the National Assembly for the first time in six months but departed without having challenged the status quo in the fight against militancy. Nawaz Sharif's address to parliamentarians was, for the most part, on the mark. He paid tribute to the victims of militant attacks – his singling out of the Peshawar church bombing was a particularly apt touch – and made no apologies or excuses for the murderous TTP. Nawaz's speech also served as a telling rebuke to the right-wing politicians, many of them in his own party, who believe and would have others believe that terrorist attacks will come screeching to a halt as soon as drone attacks cease. Without disavowing his principled disapproval of drone strikes, Nawaz attempted to delink drones and the TTP, pointing out that the militant group would continue to attack even if the US stopped targeting them. The stirring and harsh rhetoric employed by the prime minister seemed to indicate an imminent announcement of a military operation. The ground had been set for this shift in tactics in recent days by members of the government. But Nawaz Sharif explained at some length that he was eager to give peace another chance and end the violence tearing the country apart. So he took up a TTP offer of peace talks and named a four-man committee that would advise the government on the proposed negotiations.

The committee itself is a mixed bag. The inclusion of Rahimullah Yusufzai, the pre-eminent journalist from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is welcome since Yusufzai is known for his expertise and fairness. The same cannot be said for Major Amir, an old Nawaz loyalist who was part of the Midnight Jackals plot to bring down the first Benazir Bhutto government. Amir's contribution will likely centre around bringing Maulana Fazlullah to the table since the TTP chief was once taught by Amir's father at a madressah. The other members of the committee, former diplomat Rustam Shah who is now linked to the PTI and columnist Irfan Siddiqui are both known for being pro-talks. Nawaz Sharif explicitly called this a last chance for peace but did not explain if a cessation of terrorist attacks was a prerequisite for talks. As long as the TTP keeps up its reign of terror there is precious little chance of negotiations working. We all want an end to violence; and for these reasons understand the sentiments expressed rather emotionally by the PM. But at the same time, there has to be caution. The state has already lost much of its writ and power. It cannot afford to give more away. There is as yet no clarity at all on what the agenda for talks will be or what terms will be set. It is obviously necessary to have a clear picture in mind, with parliament taken into confidence. Beyond a certain point, the issue is too big to be kept secret. Imran Khan raised a point about transparency in parliament. The PM must honour his promise to ensure this. From the mainstream political parties the most supportive statement came from JUI-F chief Fazlur Rehman who declared this an opportunity not for the Taliban but for the nation. His optimism will only be borne out if the prime minister gives a more detailed explanation of what he hoped talks would achieve. 'Peace' is far too vague and unrealistic an answer to suffice. At a time when new thinking is needed, Nawaz Sharif offered us more of the same. He will only have a short time to try and make this approach work before more drastic measures may be needed. The talks option will now be tested out, and it will become easier to know what to do next, depending on the situation that arises over the coming weeks. This will be a crucial time – as the PM has said, announcing a decision of huge significance to his government and to us all.

# The talk scene

There is finally a point of agreement between the government and the TTP: everyone seems to agree that this round of talks will likely be the last. Either an agreement will be hashed out now or the prospects for peace will dissipate. At a national security meeting, the prime minister demanded results even though the distance between the two sides seems wider than ever. This sudden realisation that immediate progress will be needed shows just how daunting the task really is. The TTP's negotiating team seems more concerned with winning the public relations war than bridging the gap with its counterparts in the government. Professor Ibrahim of the Jamaat-e-Islami ventured into unrealistic territory when he called for the army chief to meet with the TTP negotiating committee. While Ibrahim may consider himself a mere interlocutor, for the rest of us he and the other members of his negotiating committee have now become mouthpieces of the TTP.

The government, meanwhile, has lost an unofficial negotiator of its own. Major Amir had not been a formal part of the talks since the first negotiating committee was expanded but he continued inserting himself in the middle of the action. His close ties to many in the TTP was seen as an asset although those allegiances may have been more of a hindrance than a help. With talks expected to resume later in the week, the TTP's negotiators are trying to reset the terms of the debate. Maulana Samiul Haq, for example, believes that the continuation of talks should take precedence over extending the ceasefire. He should be aware that one is contingent on the other. If the TTP continues fighting with security forces and launching attacks across the country then the prospect of talks succeeding is virtually nil. Maulana Yousuf Shah, the coordinator of the committee, said that "our neighbours" – he presumably meant India – have planted their men and are ready to sabotage the dialogue process. Such irresponsible conspiracy theorising ignores the reality that talks broke on the previous two occasions because of the TTP. Should that happen again, this third round of talks will surely be the last.