

In This Issue

- Karachi: A City in Perpetual Turmoil
- Freedom to question
- Under siege
- Govt notifies new cybercrime investigation agency to tackle Peca offences
- Pakistan slides two places in RSF's press freedom index
- No need for NCCIA
- '10 terrorists' killed in KP, Balochistan encounter
- Hasty transition
- FIA shifts focus on 'fraudulent' work visas
- Narcotic darkness
- Visa fraud
- 7 barbershop workers from Punjab shot dead in late-night attack in Gwadar's Surbandar
- Combating terrorism is a 'shared interest' with Pakistan: US
- Gwadar outrage
- Save the witness
- The lethal troika
- Street safety
- Orwellian slide
- Terror against girls
- Seven security personnel martyred in North Waziristan
- Vending organs
- Pakistan, US recognise TTP as threat to regional, global security
- Man sentenced to 20 years over boat tragedy
- Secretive state
- CTDs' shortcomings
- No to Cyberbullying
- Out of the abyss
- 29 terrorists killed along Afghan border
- Russia says Islamic State behind deadly Moscow concert hall attack
- Afghan puzzle
- Conviction rate for drug cases drop in Punjab
- Pakistan, UK sign letter of intent to combat illegal migration, drugs
- Forces kill 2 'terrorists' in Hassan Khel operation



Karachi: A City in Perpetual Turmoil

BY DR. SYED KALEEM IMAM

Karachi, the vibrant heart of Pakistan, is a city teeming with opportunity. Alas, beneath its lively surface, the spectre of crime casts a long shadow. It was once feared that this sprawling megalopolis was hurtling towards chaos – it now seems to be in the midst of it. The critical questions that arise are how long can this city survive without the rule of law, and whether the cycle of fear and corruption perpetuated by its powerful elite will ever cease.

Having witnessed the city's struggles first-hand, I am well aware that any time there is an attempt to find lasting solutions to its problem, doubts and scepticism are raised regarding the steps that must be taken, which end up derailing these efforts completely. At the same time, a lack of commitment, diligence, and dedication among those responsible has allowed a dangerous status quo to gradually become entrenched. This status quo is marked by a vicious cycle of crime and corruption rooted deeply in the city's socio-political landscape, and it remains unchallenged specifically due to the intellectual dishonesty mentioned above.

As the nation's largest city, Karachi should be a beacon of progress and prosperity. Instead, it suffers from anarchy and lawlessness. It is impossible to find a home that has not been mugged or which does not have a story to tell. Decades of sectarian strife, ethnic tensions and political intrigues have divided its people, making them susceptible to exploitation by both criminal elements as well as outwardly respectable members of the elite, who directly or indirectly benefit from the crimes committed under their watch.

Rapid urbanization and population growth have strained the metropolitan infrastructure and widened socio-economic disparities. Slums proliferate, providing fertile breeding grounds for crime and the drug trade. Weak law enforcement, politicization of the police force and rampant corruption have fostered a culture of impunity. Criminals operate freely, and justice seems like a distant dream. Despite sporadic crackdowns and high-profile arrests, these fundamental issues have persisted, leaving the city mired in insecurity.

Intriguingly, Karachi, with over 20.3 million inhabitants, reported a surprisingly low number of crimes – approximately 65,000, as per the police record, and 93,467, according to the Citizens Police Liaison Committee – in 2023. This figure contrasts sharply with Lahore, which, with a lesser population of 14.4 million, reported a staggering 365,000 cases for the same year. This discrepancy raises questions: Is Karachi concealing its crime statistics, or is Lahore experiencing a surge in criminal activities?

The disparity suggests a complex interplay of factors, including a possible lack of trust in law enforcement, leading to underreporting in Karachi. Meanwhile, higher reporting rates in Lahore

could indicate either an increase in crime or a more robust reporting culture. It is time that we realize that the consequences of underreporting crime can be severe, as they allow criminals to evade justice and thereby perpetuate a cycle of impunity. Getting to the bottom of the statistics is crucial in ensuring effective law enforcement; it is shocking, then, that officials seem to be giving more precedence to creating a false sense of security.

Then there are other issues. The provincial authorities, instead of appointing a full-time police chief in Karachi in response to the rising wave of crime, have assigned additional duties to the additional inspector-general of the Counter-Terrorism Department. As outstanding professionals of the Police Service of Pakistan, both AIG Imran Yaqoob Minhas and IG Sindh Ghulam Nabi can be banked on to revive Karachi's fortunes. However, they need more than just titles to be successful. To appoint officers, combat delinquency within the ranks, and enforce the law impartially and without political interference, they need tenure, autonomy, resources and sufficient legal authority.

The urban police models recommended in the Police Reforms Committee report must be implemented, and forensic facilities must be upgraded as part of the city's crime-fighting strategy. Furthermore, the introduction of geofencing technology to investigating officers can enhance their ability to track and apprehend suspects more efficiently. As an alternative to carrying AK-47s, which each weigh around 3.8 kilogrammes, the local police force should be trained as a 'pistol force'. It should be backed up with a dedicated squad of quick-response units fully armed with heavy and modern gadgets whenever firepower and tactical advantage become necessary.

The chronic crime problem in Karachi demands a multifaceted approach. There should be operational autonomy for law enforcement, special courts for speedy resolution of cases, an increase in police presence, removal of police personnel from protocol and individual security duties, and the implementation of technological advances like AI-driven policing and Safe City, which are now long overdue. Lastly, the community needs to be engaged to cultivate a cooperative atmosphere between police and citizens.

Separately, Karachi's governance and accountability cultures also desperately need a transformation. For too long, self-interest has overridden public welfare, perpetuated corruption, and hindered the eradication of crime. It will be impossible for meaningful change to take place in the city until its leaders start placing public safety above politics. They must be made to realize that criminality and poor quality of life are consequences of state failure, and they affect the community as a whole.

A safer Karachi requires action. The city can break free from the grip of terror and reclaim its future only through collective effort and steadfast determination. One local leader recently noted that "investing in policing and removing extraneous interference is key to ensuring the safety of future generations and protecting our rights." Wiser words were never spoken.

SOURCE: EN.WENEWS.PK, MAY 1, 2024

Freedom to question

WITH frequently suspended freedoms, increasing violence and few to speak out for the oppressed, it is unlikely that the human rights situation in Pakistan will improve anytime soon. True, the country's policy landscape, replete with weighty legislations and proclamations, presents a different picture. But officialdom has consistently failed to implement its promises. It is essential, therefore, for people to voice inconvenient truths and their concerns regarding usurped rights. The recently concluded fifth edition of the Asma Jahangir Conference, a two-day moot themed 'People's Mandate: Safeguarding Civil Rights in South Asia', has become an important platform for such voices. This year, the conference highlighted repression in the country and called upon political parties to talk to each other, sign a charter of fundamental rights, and refrain from involving unelected quarters in their quest for power. It was encouraging to note that a vast tract of violations was discussed, indicating that those dedicated to civil liberties will persevere. Multiple concerns, such as internet restrictions, military trials of civilians, the need for parliamentary intervention, judicial helplessness in cases of enforced disappearances, expulsion of Afghan refugees and the oppression faced by minorities, women and trans people, were raised before a young and engaged audience.

Such platforms can play a pivotal role in building robust social development constructs that advance awareness and ensure the law's application. While Pakistan's youth is charged and concerned, it is largely misdirected due to a sociopolitical environment that discourages questions. Fora that encourage diverse opinions and highlight the fight for throttled rights are above politics. Pakistani society needs informed facts and a culture of tolerance to dilute polarisation. This is the path to a just social contract, in which powerful hierarchies can be challenged and public approach and state policies crafted for equal political, economic, civil, cultural and social rights. All aspects of human life and dignity must remain inviolable.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 2, 2024

Under siege

JOURNALISTS across the world are facing unprecedented threats – from legal and economic pressure to outright threats of violence – hindering their ability to report freely. The war in Gaza highlights the perils faced by journalists in conflict zones. Since Oct 7, at least 97 journalists and media workers have been killed.

In India, press freedom has seen a marked decline, driven by a political climate that increasingly stifles dissent. Media ownership is concentrated among a few aligning closely with the BJP – slated to win a third straight term in power – narrowing the diversity of voices in the media. Journalists face harassment and legal actions, and purse strings dictate media narratives.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh, ranked lowest for press freedom in South Asia, faces its own challenges. The Cyber Security Act approved last year threatens to deepen the state's control over media, limiting journalistic freedom and leaving room for the arbitrary interpretation and application of the law. Such developments, alongside violence and judicial harassment of journalists, underscore a growing hostility towards independent journalism.

A similar climate prevails in Pakistan, where the media has always been under siege. The battle is dual-fronted: the government and security establishment both assert control, looking to influence editorial policy. This suppression continues regardless of which party holds power. A notable example is the implicit 'ban' on media channels from naming PTI founder Imran Khan. This policy, initiated during Shehbaz Sharif's last tenure as PM, persisted through the caretaker rule and remains sporadically enforced.

Opposition parties, despite their cries for media freedom, often employ similarly suppressive tactics once in power. Whether through direct censorship, withholding advertising, or sinister measures such as harassment, legal intimidation and violence, the press in Pakistan navigates a hazardous terrain.

Making matters worse is a troubling shift within segments of the media landscape, where the lofty ideals of journalism have been sidelined in favour of compliance. Many media houses, once bastions of fearless reporting, now capitulate under the aforementioned twin pressures.

This surrender is often motivated by financial incentives or coercive force, leading to journalism that panders rather than probes. Powerful corporate entities are an additional pressure, some of whom throw money at media houses to campaign against specific outlets. Most recently, four leading publications published an ad in response to an investigative report by Dawn, disgracefully attempting to run it as news.

The need for unity in Pakistan's media has never been stronger, to navigate pressures more effectively, maintain journalistic integrity and push back against attempts to influence editorial content. On this World Press Freedom Day, let us resolve to put up a unified front, to not only safeguard our operational independence but also fortify the very foundations of press freedom in the country.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 3, 2024

Govt notifies new cybercrime investigation agency to tackle Peca offences

The federal government on Friday established the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency (NCCIA), rendering the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) Cybercrime Wing as "defunct".

The Information Minister Attaullah Tarar had announced that the government was forming a separate authority to "safeguard the digital rights of people" and "counter propaganda and rumours on social media".

"There must be an end to harassment, including online," he had said, calling for a specific authority to address the issue of online harassment as at present there is no law to protect the digital rights of consumers.

The federal cabinet under the caretaker government had approved the NCCIA in December to take over cybercrime investigations from the FIA.

According to a notification in The Gazette of Pakistan from the information ministry, the NCCIA was formed under Section 51 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (Peca) and the FIA would now cease to perform functions as the designated investigation agency under the act. It added that all existing personnel, assets, liabilities, rights, obligations, privileges, inquiries and investigations related to the FIA's "defunct" Cybercrime Wing would now stand transferred to the NCCIA.

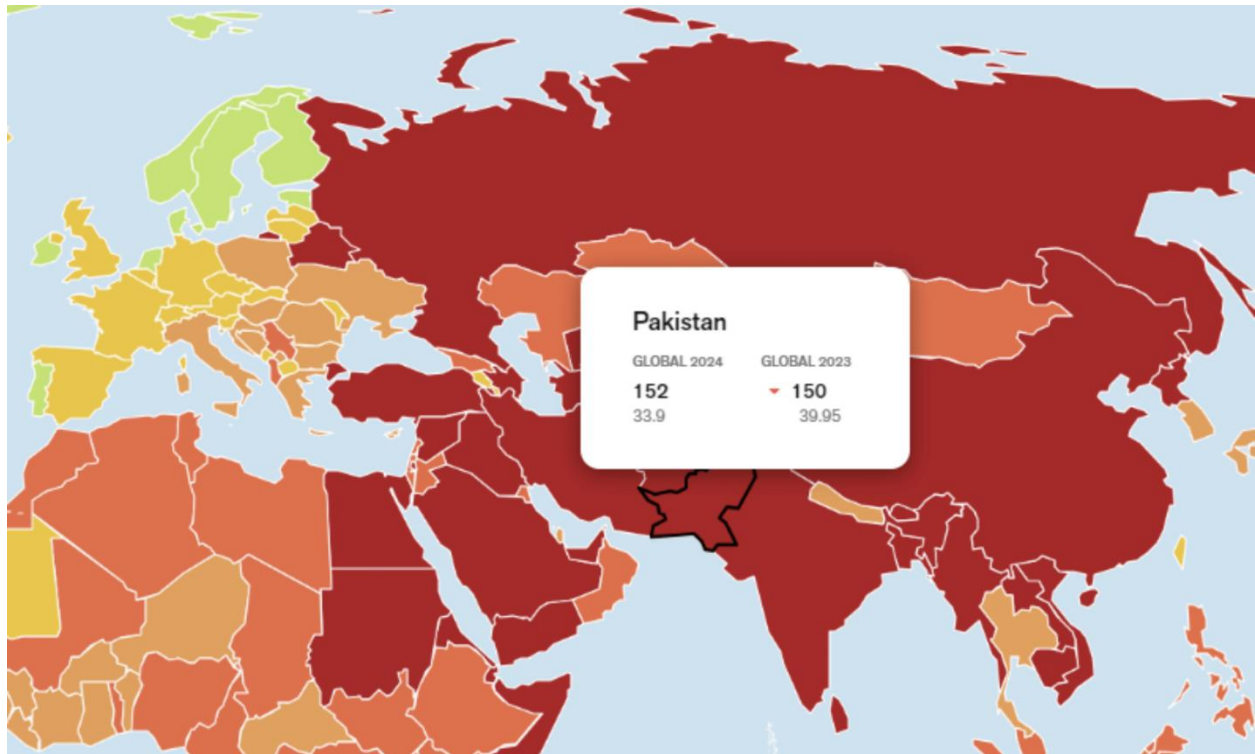
However, it said that existing personnel of the FIA Cybercrime Wing would continue to perform their duties for another year until the appointment of staff in the NCCIA.

The NCCIA will be headed by a director-general, chosen by the federal government to serve a two-year term. It pointed out that the candidate would have to have "not less than 15 years of experience" in the fields of computer science, digital forensics, cyber technology, law, public administration, information technology, telecommunication or related fields to enable him to deal with offences under the Peca act.

The notification said the NCCIA chief would exercise the powers of an inspector general of police while the agency's affairs related to the federal government's business would be allocated to the Interior Division. It added that the NCCIA would also be the designated agency in respect of international cooperation.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 3, 2024

Pakistan slides two places in RSF's press freedom index



Pakistan drops two spots in RSF's annual press freedom index.

Pakistan dropped two places in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

According to the index, published to coincide with World Press Freedom Day, Pakistan now ranks 152 out of 180 countries, compared to its standing at 150 in last year's index.

In its country profile, RSF said that since its founding in 1947, Pakistan has "oscillated between civil society's quest for greater press freedom and a political reality in which the political-military elite retains broad control over the media".

It noted that Pakistan's media landscape became "extremely diversified" since the state monopoly on broadcasting ended in 2002, adding that English-language press had a "strong tradition of independence". RSF also noted that online media was "booming".

It noted, however, that privately owned media was dependent on legal notices and public sector advertisements for its funding, resulting in "information ministries threatening to withdraw advertising in order to influence editorial policy".

As a result, it said self-censorship was being encouraged in the field of journalism since “salaries are often cut when their employers are going through financial difficulties”.

RSF highlighted that “no matter their ideology, political parties support freedom of the press, but they are incapable of defending it when they come to power, due to the control of the military over the country’s affairs.”

The media watchdog noted that the government had direct control over media regulators, which “systematically favour defence of the government over the public’s right to information”.

It added that “as the military has steadily tightened its grip on civilian institutions, coverage of military and intelligence agency interference in politics has become off limits for journalists.”

The index said Pakistan was “one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, with three to four murders each year that are often linked to cases of corruption or illegal trafficking and which go completely unpunished.”

The findings were backed by the Pakistan Press Freedom Report prepared by the Freedom Network released on Monday, which documented a total of 104 cases of violations against journalists and other media practitioners, including murders, attacks, injuries, kidnapping, threats and legal cases.

India, on the other hand, moved up two places to 159 compared to its 2023 ranking of 161. RSF noted that India’s media has “fallen into an ‘unofficial state of emergency’ since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 and engineered a spectacular rapprochement between his party, the BJP, and the big families dominating the media”.

Norway retained its top position, while Eritrea came last, taking over from last year’s lowest-ranked country, North Korea.

Among the most significant declines were Afghanistan, (which fell 26 places to 178th), Togo (down 43 to 113th) and Ecuador (down 30 to 110th).

The bottom 10 included China, Iran, North Korea, Syria and Eritrea.

But the watchdog warned that politicians across a wide range of countries were targeting the media.

“Some political groups fuel hatred and distrust of journalists by insulting them, discrediting them and threatening them,” it said. “Others are orchestrating a takeover of the media ecosystem.”

It singled out Argentina under newly elected President Javier Milei, down 26 places to 66th, saying his decision to shutter the public press agency Telam was a “worrisome symbolic act”.

It also highlighted Italy under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, where a member of her coalition is trying to acquire news agency AGI.

Respondents in three-quarters of countries (138) reported to RSF that political actors were often involved in disinformation and propaganda, and that this was systematic in 31 countries.

RSF said there was “spectacular mimicry of Russian repressive methods” across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, stretching as far as Serbia, “where pro-government media carry Russian propaganda and the authorities threaten exiled Russian journalists”.

The most challenging region remained the Middle East and North Africa, where the situation was “very serious” in nearly half the countries, with Qatar now the only country where the situation was not classified either as “difficult” or “very serious.” Europe was the only region to include any countries classed as “good”.

Greece was ranked worst in Europe (88th overall), coming below Hungary and Poland.

Despite improvements in its score, Greece was criticised over its continued failure to deal with a scandal around wiretapping journalists by the intelligence service and the murder of veteran crime reporter Giorgos Karaivaz in 2021.

Now in its 22nd year, the RSF report is based on data collected by the group about abuses against journalists, and questionnaires sent to professionals, researchers and rights defenders.

President, PM emphasise press freedom

A statement issued by the office of President Asif Ali Zardari noted the need to provide an “enabling environment free of intimidation or harassment” for journalists to freely express their opinion.

“It is, therefore, imperative to initiate measures for the safety and security of journalists enabling them to freely report on important issues, without fear,” according to a statement on X by the president’s official account.



“The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees freedom of the press; however, it is also the responsibility of the media to abide by journalistic ethics and report responsibly and accurately, keeping in view the national interest,” the statement read.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif emphasised that freedom of press and expression is the foundation of democracy.

“The media and all parties must work together for correct information,” he said in a statement on X, adding that the state would play a vital role in improving the media industry.

He also called paid tribute to journalists in Gaza, calling them “heroes of humanity”



SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 3, 2024

No need for NCCIA

KHAWAJA KHALID FAROOQ

THE Establishment Division had earlier endorsed the setting up of a national agency to tackle cybercrime. The creation of the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) as a separate entity from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has now become a reality. It raises concerns that go beyond the duplication of efforts and resources, the move may also gravely affect citizens' right to privacy, which seems to have been overlooked in the rush to bolster cyber defences. .

The FIA has had a cybercrime wing dedicated to handling issues related to cybersecurity. This suggests that there is already a framework, with the requisite set of capabilities, in the country to deal with cyberthreats.

Creating the NCCIA to replace the FIA's cybercrime wing could result in an overlap of responsibilities, leading to bureaucratic inefficiencies and confusion. There were questions whether the cybercrime officers of FIA would continue with the NCCIA. If they did, would it be different from continuing with the FIA and doing the job they were already doing? If they did not, why would the government want to waste trained human resource and make efforts to train others, not to mention waste other resources spent on this training? Does that make any sense at a time of economic crunch? As it turns out, existing personnel will continue with their duties for a year until staff is appointed at the NCCIA.

Even during this interim period, it would be crucial to avoid duplication of duties and inefficiency as the NCCIA starts functioning. Clear legislative frameworks would have to define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in cybersecurity, and would have to include protocols for inter-agency collaboration and information sharing. Without responsibilities clearly delineated, jurisdictional disputes could hinder the swift action required in cybersecurity operations. It is evident then that introducing another agency to handle cybercrime will add layers of bureaucracy, potentially slowing down decision-making processes and response times to cyber incidents.

The establishment of any new agency requires significant investment in terms of funding, resources, and time for development and operational readiness. Similarly, operationalising the NCCIA would involve significant financial outlay to set up new infrastructure, hire specialised personnel, and develop new protocols. Given the FIA's existing infrastructure and expertise in cybercrime, enhancing and scaling its capabilities would have been more cost-effective and efficient than starting afresh with the NCCIA.

This approach would have avoided extra expenditure and kept to a streamlined allocation of scarce cybersecurity resources – Pakistan does not need experiments during a financial crisis. Thus the resources spent on the NCCIA would have been more effectively utilised in strengthening and expanding the capabilities of the FIA’s cybercrime wing, for enhanced training, technology upgrades, and international collaboration to bolster effectiveness.

In the rush to form it, the creators of the NCCIA did not provide a clear justification for why the existing efforts and mechanisms within the FIA were insufficient to meet the country’s cybersecurity needs. Without clear evidence of the FIA’s inadequacies in this area, the necessity of establishing the NCCIA will be questioned.

The creation of a separate agency will lead to the loss or dilution of talent and efforts that could otherwise have been concentrated within a single, more robust entity. This could weaken the country’s overall cybersecurity posture rather than strengthening it. Also, FIA’s now defunct cybercrime wing might already have been collaborating internationally, with a sound reputation in the field of cybersecurity. The NCCIA will need to rebuild these relationships and prove their effectiveness, which could take considerable time and effort.

The expansion of cybersecurity efforts must be balanced with the protection of citizens’ privacy rights. The establishment of new agencies like the NCCIA raises questions about oversight mechanisms and safeguards against overreach. There’s a risk that in the pursuit of cybersecurity, privacy rights could be compromised without stringent checks and balances in place.

Ensuring robust privacy protection would include transparent operations, judicial oversight, and mechanisms for accountability. The government should engage with stakeholders, including civil society, the tech industry, and the public, in a discourse about balancing cybersecurity measures with privacy rights. This would help in the formulation of policies that are both effective in countering cyberthreats and being respectful of individual freedoms.

The conversation around cybersecurity in Pakistan focuses heavily on strengthening defences and prosecuting cybercrime and does not sufficiently address the right of privacy of citizens. This omission is concerning, as the effectiveness of cybersecurity measures should not only be gauged by their ability to counter threats but also by their adherence to democratic values and human rights, including privacy. In the cybersecurity rush, let us not become an intrusive state that peeps into citizens’ lives unnecessarily and for less-than-noble purposes.

Efforts to raise public awareness about cybersecurity and to educate citizens on how to protect themselves online can be carried out effectively without the need for a new agency. Existing institutions, including the FIA and educational organisations, could have spearheaded these initiatives, as highlighted by the success of Pakistani teams in international competitions under the current framework. In the recently held Black Hat cybersecurity competition in Saudi Arabia, for instance, Pakistani teams performed quite well. This shows a latent pool of talent already in country which could be expanded in the right direction.

In conclusion, while strengthening cybersecurity is imperative, the approach should not focus on creating new entities like the NCCIA but enhance existing structures, while ensuring that these measures do not infringe on privacy rights. The creation of the NCCIA can be regarded as an unnecessary move that will not only duplicate existing efforts and resources but will also divert attention and funds from organisations like the FIA, which already possess a solid base for cybersecurity operations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 4, 2024

'10 terrorists' killed in KP, Balochistan encounter

PESHAWAR / QUETTA: Police and security forces killed at least 10 alleged terrorists in separate exchanges of fire in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa areas..

The military's media wing said six terrorists were gunned down and their hideouts were busted in an intelligence-based operation carried out by security forces in North Waziristan district of KP, while the counter-terrorism department (CTD) of Balochistan said four terrorists were hunted down and killed after they fired at a police vehicle on Quetta-Sibi Road late in night.

A statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) read the security forces carried out the operation, following the reported presence of terrorists in the area. During an intense exchange of fire with security forces, six terrorists were killed, it added.

According to the ISPR, those killed during the operation had remained actively involved in targeted killings of civilians in the area and numerous militant activities against security forces. Sanitisation operation is being conducted in the area, it stated.

Attack on police

In the late hours of Saturday, four terrorists riding two motorbikes attacked a police vehicle patrolling the Shalkot area on Quetta-Sibi Road, officials said. However, the cops remained safe as the van was semi-armoured.

The cops retaliated, killing one of the terrorists on the spot while others fled to a nearby building. The police cordoned off the building and called for reinforcements.

Subsequently, the CTD operation team rushed to the site and took the charge from local police. "Terrorists were asked to surrender, but they continued firing," the CTD spokesman said. Eventually, the CTD team entered the building, took positions and necessary safety measures before shooting them down in an exchange of fire.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 5, 2024

Hasty transition

OUT of nowhere, the government has launched a new cybercrime authority: the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency. This move to replace the FIA's cybercrime wing raises substantial concerns about the motive behind it.

The NCCIA is mandated to handle offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, which, activists allege, was used routinely by the FIA to silence dissent. Of course, conversely, bad actors use social media to spread disinformation and misinformation, necessitating oversight. But at a time when digital rights and privacy remain key issues for the state to address, the authorities have opted to forgo any meaningful dialogue with digital rights groups, the IT sector, or even the public. Such an opaque approach fosters distrust and scepticism towards the government's intentions. It has neither presented a clear rationale nor demonstrated the deficiencies within the existing framework that necessitated this move.

The reuse of the FIA's resources — personnel, assets, and existing cases — under a new banner raises a fundamental question: what exactly is the objective of the NCCIA that the FIA could not achieve? If the goal was to enhance capabilities or streamline operations, would it not have been more prudent to bolster the existing framework rather than dismantle it? The abruptness of the move suggests the new rulers are not behind it. The move will likely create redundancies and confusion, diluting the focus from actual cybercrime threats to the procedural chaos of transitioning to a new agency. Also, such disruptions could hinder ongoing operations and complicate international cooperation under links nurtured by the FIA. Furthermore, the NCCIA, with its broad and unclear mandate, could potentially lead to increased surveillance and data collection practices, encroaching upon the personal liberties of citizens under the guise of security.

It appears the PML-N government is working in the same manner as when Peca was being promulgated, when no input was taken. The situation has called into question the regulatory environment for the internet in the coming years. Ostensibly, the aim is to exert greater control over social media and to gain more power to crack down on activists, dissidents and journalists critical of state policies. The government owes the public an explanation of the necessity and aims of the NCCIA. It must articulate how this new set-up will better serve the cybersecurity needs of the nation without compromising democratic freedoms. It is also crucial that further developments in this area involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Engaging with experts in digital rights, cybersecurity, the legal domain, and the public is essential to ensure that the agency's operations are balanced, effective, and respectful of the rights it is purportedly designed to protect. The urge to police social media must be resisted.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 5, 2024

FIA shifts focus on 'fraudulent' work visas

- **Move follows busting of human smuggling network in Romania**
- **Air route through Central Asia becoming increasingly popular**

LAHORE: Dismantling of a Pakistani human smuggling network in Romania recently has prompted the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to expand its efforts against the menace as it will now be checking misuse of work visas for European countries in collaboration with the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment.

According to the Europol, police last month busted an organised crime group involved in migrants' smuggling.

The group arranged the illegal arrival in Romania of migrants via fraudulently obtained work visas, with plans to facilitate their further illegal movements towards other EU countries.

The criminal network facilitated the illegal entry of Bangladeshi, Egyptian and Pakistani nationals into the EU through fraudulent work visas.

"We will launch probe once we receive details of this scam from Europol," a senior FIA officer told Dawn.

He said the group of Pakistanis that reached Romania must have paid either to the Overseas Employment Promoters (OEPs) or some consultancy firm(s) for arranging their travel to Romania through work visa.

Another official told Dawn that OEPs would usually send Pakistanis on work visa to Romania like other destinations. "Since the work visa charges are not much for Romania, close to \$4,000, some individuals associated with the companies out there in collaboration with the promoters here had started making handsome money by transporting aspirants to various European destinations.

Such aspirants after reaching Romania would slip into Austria, France, Italy, or some other destinations in western Europe, he added. "The FIA needs to collaborate with the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment to check misuse of work visas for Romania especially and other such destinations."

A good number of Pakistanis during the last two years had moved out to Europe on work visa.

An immigration consultant told Dawn that work visa rate for European destinations, especially the UK, had been doubled during the last two years. "In such an upsurge in the demand of

work visa, the element of fraud or exploitation by human smugglers and dubious consultancy firms cannot be ruled out," he said.

Emerging air route

Besides, the FIA has also started focusing on the air routes that human smugglers are exploring to transport aspirants to Europe.

"Human smugglers are also using air routes such as from Libya and Central Asia to transport aspirants to Europe. Of late, human smugglers have started taking the aspirants to Central Asia from where they transport them to Europe after charging them handsomely," the official said.

The FIA official agreed that the land route, especially from Quetta to Iran, Turkey and Greece, had been frequently used by human smugglers, but said that the air route of Central Asia is now picking up.

Europol Report

According to the Europol report, 12 persons were arrested last month in Romania.

"The criminal network was composed mainly of Romanian and Pakistani nationals, who had established companies in Romania. The suspects allegedly brought Bengali, Egyptian and Pakistani nationals to Romania with work visas, fraudulently obtained by misleading the competent authorities. The investigation identified other Romanian companies, managed by Romanian nationals cooperating with the criminal network, which were also used for fraudulently acquiring work permits and visas."

The criminal network requested 509 work permits in total from Romania and acquired permits for 102 migrants. "The migrants used these fraudulently obtained visas to illegally enter Romania. Investigative leads suggest that 76 migrants who arrived in Romania using these fraudulent documents have then made secondary movements to other EU countries. During the investigation, 26 migrants were detected in Romania, Italy and Austria. The criminal network charged between EUR5,000 and EUR6,000 per person to arrange the arrival to Romania and another EUR2,000 to EUR5,000 per migrant for the secondary movement to another EU country. The criminal network is believed to have gained at least EUR1 million illegal profits."

The report says members of the network based in Pakistan were responsible for the local recruitment of migrants who wanted to reach the EU. "Other members of the criminal network arranged the accommodation of migrants in different locations in Brasov and Bucharest before further transporting them to the area of Timisoara. From there, other accomplices picked up the migrants and transported [them] to the Romanian-Hungarian border, where the migrants illegally crossed green borders on foot or hidden in various means of transport. National authorities detected a number of migrants smuggled by this network while they were crossing the borders or directly in the territory of other EU states, mostly in Italy and Austria. In one of the cases in Italy, the Italian authorities detected 45 irregular migrants on foot along the Italian-Slovenian border."

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 8, 2024

Narcotic darkness

WE have plenty of smoke with fire. Citizens, particularly parents, caught in Pakistan's grave drug problem are on edge. Despite frequent reports of police and the ANF busting drug cartels, information about legal actions against peddlers is as scant as the conviction rate. The Organised Crime Unit of Lahore has captured an international ring that provided narcotics and 'party drugs' to elite youth. These criminals – the Jordan Gang – ran a network from Central Asia, Mexico, Canada, the US and other countries, and supplied exorbitantly priced drugs in Lahore and Multan, targeting select students in academic institutions. Their modus operandi – offer deals to youngsters on the internet through fake IDs and in partnership with corrupt GPO and police officials – should be a cause of concern for the authorities. This is not the first attempt at infecting the young: last August, two security officials at the Islamic University of Bahawalpur were caught with crystal meth and offensive videos of teachers and students. The Punjab Police released an alarming report last month: some 234 police officers were involved in the drug trade across Punjab.

Young people are experimental, anxious and restless, keen to dodge routine with a heady hit. Small wonder, then, that public health experts urge policymakers and law enforcement to understand that punishment-driven strategies are counterproductive. Instead, they must weed out rogue personnel and powerful groups who claim a lion's share of the profits from narcotic rackets, so that sealing supply routes, including those along a porous border, is successful. The crisis also demands awareness campaigns and collaboration among parents, NGOs and educational facilities to identify signs of addiction and provide therapy and rehabilitation. Long-term success hinges on restructured narcotic courts so that faster trials can ensure a rise in conviction levels – the latter should, ideally, match the regularity of narcotic seizures. This country cannot allow addiction to rip through society and ravage our future generations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 8, 2024

Visa fraud

THE FIA has a new task at hand: cracking down on fraudulent work visas. This was prompted by the discovery of a Pakistani human smuggling network in Romania, which arranged for migrants to enter the EU through such means. The smugglers not only facilitated illegal entry into the EU but also the migrants' further clandestine movement towards more affluent European nations, exploiting their hopes for a better life. The criminal network requested 509 work permits, successfully acquiring 102, and generating illicit profits exceeding a million euros. The FIA is broadening its focus from traditional sea and land routes to include air routes through Central Asia. Smugglers now use these air pathways alongside the earlier routes from Quetta through Iran, Turkey, and Greece, charging exorbitant rates to transport individuals into Europe. The urgency to address this menace has never been clearer. The government recently organised a conference in Islamabad in collaboration with international bodies to discuss human smuggling. However, this initiative must be part of a broader, more comprehensive strategy to tackle the issue.

The socioeconomic drivers of migration – unemployment, poverty, and lack of security – must be addressed. Traditional pressures and the aspiration to uplift one's familial and social standing also contribute significantly to this risky endeavour. Treating these individuals as criminals rather than victims of exploitation only exacerbates their plight. It is vital to shift this perspective and see them as victims of broader systemic failures. The state's role should be protective and proactive, not merely punitive. Enhanced legal frameworks, increased support for economic development in migration-prone regions, and eradication of corruption in migration processes are crucial. Additionally, enhancing the capacity and integrity of the FIA and related institutions is essential to ensure that these measures are not just temporary fixes but part of a long-term solution. International collaboration should also be harnessed to improve border management and dismantle smuggling networks effectively.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 9, 2024

7 barbershop workers from Punjab shot dead in late-night attack in Gwadar's Surbandar



Seven barbershop workers were killed and one was injured in Surbandar, Gwadar when unknown gunmen entered their residential quarters and opened fire on them while they were sleeping, police officials said.

Speaking to Dawn.com, Gwadar Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Zohaib Mohsin said the incident took place at approximately 3am, adding that the victims worked at a barber shop in Surbandar, which is some 25 kilometres from Gwadar.

According to a list of the casualties shared with Dawn.com by the SSP, the victims hailed from Punjab's Khanewal and Lodhran districts, while the injured belongs to Mian Channu, Khanewal.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack so far.

AFP quoted Muhammad Mohsin, a senior police official in Gwadar, as saying: "We are investigating the matter at the moment but apparently it looks like they were attacked because they were Punjabis."

Following the incident, the police shifted the injured person and bodies of the deceased to Gwadar Hospital, SSP Mohsin said. He added that the area was cordoned off by law enforcement as action had begun to find the miscreants.

According to Gwadar Deputy Commissioner Hamoodur Rehman, the bodies have been shifted to their native areas via four ambulances. The injured has also been shifted to Karachi after medical aid was administered to him, he added.

Balochistan Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti condemned the killing of the workers in Gwadar, calling it "open terrorism".

He expressed his condolences to their families and said that their families would not be abandoned, vowing to provide all possible support to the families.

"We will chase after terrorists and their facilitators," Bugti said, adding that there is no soft corner or place for them in Pakistan.

"Whatever force is needed against the terrorists will be used," the chief minister said. He stressed that the writ of the state would be enforced in any case.

"Every single drop of the blood of Pakistanis will be accounted for," he said.

Condemnations

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned the incident and expressed his condolences to the victims' families, according to a statement on X by state broadcaster PTV News.

"This incident of terrorism is a cowardly act of the enemies of the country. We are determined to eradicate terrorism from its roots," the statement read.



Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi echoed similar sentiments, expressing deep sorrow and condolences over the killing of the seven labourers.

“The beasts who play with the lives of the innocent don’t deserve to be called humans,” Naqvi said in a statement shared by the Ministry of Interior on X.



Balochistan Home Minister Mir Zia Ullah Langau said the terrorists will be dealt with strictly. He noted that a report of the incident has been called for, and the incident is being reviewed from all aspects.

“The killing of innocent labourers is a cowardly act,” he said, adding that the terrorists will be brought to justice.

Meanwhile, the Balochistan government also condemned the killing and called it “open terrorism”, according to a spokesperson.



Administrative officers reached the site of the incident and were in touch with district administration, the spokesperson said. Families of the deceased are being contacted, the spokesperson added.

An investigation into the incident has been ordered, the spokesperson noted.

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also condemned the incident, saying the “brutal killing of innocent workers is open terrorism,” according to a statement on X from the party’s official account.

“The people of the entire country, including Balochistan, are extremely angered by this barbarity; humanity is ashamed,” the post read.

The beasts involved in the crime should be brought to justice, Bilawal said, adding that Pakistan is committed to the complete eradication of terrorism.


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پی پی پی چیئرمین بلاول بھٹو زرداری کا گوادر میں 7 محنت
کشوں کے بہیمانہ قتل کی شدید مذمت

بے گناہ مزدوروں کا سفاکانہ قتل کھلی دہشتگردی ہے: بلاول بھٹو
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میں ہیں، انسانیت شرمندہ ہے: بلاول بھٹو زرداری

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SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 9, 2024

Combating terrorism is a 'shared interest' with Pakistan: US

WASHINGTON: The United States emphasised its 'shared interest' with Pakistan in addressing the critical threat that terrorism poses to the entire region.

At the State Department's daily news briefing, Spokesperson Matthew Miller also focused on the treatment of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and urged Islamabad not to repatriate them due to the dire situation in Afghanistan.

"We remain committed to working with Pakistan to address the shared threat posed by terrorist groups throughout the region," said Miller, commenting on a recent ISPR statement about the involvement of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in a series of terrorist attacks in the country.

Pakistan has suffered greatly at the hands of terrorists, and "we regret the loss of life and injuries sustained and offer our heart-felt condolences to those affected by these attacks", he added.

Underlining the need to protect Afghans forced to seek refuge in neighbouring states, he emphasised: "We will continue to encourage Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan, to respect the non-return advisory, given the dire situation in Afghanistan."

Miller refrained from taking a stance on speculations that former prime minister Imran Khan would be released soon, stating: "We do not take position on those matters. Those matters are for the government of Pakistan to decide."

In his briefing on Tuesday, the spokesperson welcomed diplomatic engagement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, applauding Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's expected visit to Islamabad later this month.

Asked to comment on the Saudi prince's visit, Matthew Miller said: "Certainly, we always support diplomatic engagement between our partners," adding that he did not have further details about the visit.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 9, 2024

Gwadar outrage

JUST two days after the president, while on a visit to Balochistan, discussed the need for a political dialogue to address the province's problems, terrorists struck in Surbandar, on the outskirts of Gwadar, murdering seven innocent men as they slept. All the victims, who worked at a local barbershop, hailed from Punjab. This is the third incident of its kind in the province over the last few months. Nine passengers were pulled off a bus in Noshki by militants last month and after their papers were checked, the men were later found murdered under a bridge. Meanwhile, six labourers were killed as they slept last October in Turbat. In all these incidents, the victims were originally from Punjab. No cause can justify these ghastly crimes. The political leadership, from the prime minister down, has condemned these barbaric murders, and has vowed to secure justice for the slain men.

The apparent aim of these reprehensible acts is to foment ethnic unrest by targeting individuals of a certain ethnicity or regional background. While locals in Balochistan should be given preference in jobs, there can be absolutely no justification for targeting workers from outside the province trying to make an honest living there. Most of the victims are driven by poverty to leave their homes and families behind just to ensure their loved ones have food on the table. Moreover, citizens of all federating units have the right to live and work anywhere in Pakistan, so targeting people by terming them 'settlers' and 'outsiders' is totally unacceptable. It is a matter of concern that terrorists have struck at a time when the state has raised the need for a political dialogue in Balochistan. The involvement of hostile foreign actors cannot be ruled out either, especially given the fact that the Chinese are active in Balochistan, while Gulf investors are also considering putting money into schemes in the province. If prosperity comes to Balochistan, and locals are given employment opportunities through foreign investment, the narrative of the separatists will be seriously punctured. Therefore, the grotesque acts of violence could be designed to scare away foreign investors. The state needs to provide security to all Balochistan's people, while those involved in these gruesome crimes must be brought to justice. Sustainable socioeconomic development cannot take place in Balochistan in the presence of terrorist threats.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 10, 2024

Save the witness

THE old affliction of failed enforcement has rendered another law lifeless. Enacted over a decade ago, the Sindh Witness Protection Act, 2013, was a crucial and comprehensive measure to provide foolproof security to witnesses in criminal cases, including accommodation for them, lifetime security, monetary support and compensation for heirs in the event of the shielded person's death. The Sindh High Court was informed on Wednesday that, for eight long years, stakeholders had not responded to the draft of the Sindh Witness Protection Rules, but the law department insisted that the drafted rules had been verified in September 2014. The state's inability to keep witnesses safe even when it is cognisant of threats to their life, family and property has led to abysmal conviction rates, allowing the culpable to walk free. A report released in 2020 revealed that the absence of a witness protection programme impacted at least 1,700 cases at 33 anti-terrorism courts.

There is no dearth of instances where witnesses in prominent criminal and terror cases have been eliminated, or magistrates have dropped murder charges because people stayed out of witness stands. Callous attitudes have to change; rather than tilting towards offenders, the system must facilitate safe depositions against the accused by permitting testimonies to take place via video links. Such a provision allays fears about an individual's protection in court when powerful actors are involved. Indeed, the present scale of militancy and crime does not allow for more primary eyewitnesses to turn hostile. A crumbling criminal justice system cannot be rescued without foolproof investigations, improved, sensitised policing and a robust witness protection mechanism. With witness protection laws in all provinces, Pakistan can ill afford complacency. Hence, in camera trials, identity protection, economic benefits and decent, discreet and heavily guarded safe havens need to be seen as preconditions to peace. While these aspects pose financial and procedural challenges, they do promise a leap forward.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 10, 2024

The lethal troika

TARIQ PARVEZ

MANY factors were responsible for the defeat of the erstwhile Soviet Union and then the US in Afghanistan. A common factor was the existence of a combination of extremely resilient militant groups resisting both superpowers. This combination consisted of three categories of militants: local Afghan militants resisting foreign invaders; Pakistani militants crossing over to help their Afghan brethren; and thousands of mujahideen from various countries, particularly in the Middle East, participating in the Afghan jihad. With some variations in their composition, role and external supporters, they fought together against the US and USSR for 30 years, forcing them to withdraw. Alarmingly, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, this Afghanistan-based lethal troika now targets Pakistan.

The situation necessitates a fundamental shift in the terrorist threat assessment in Pakistan – from focusing exclusively on the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan to broadening the threat calculus to the troika of the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and Al Qaeda.

Concerning the nexus between the Taliban and TTP, the latest UN report on Afghanistan states that the Afghan government was supplying weapons, training facilities and regular financial packages to the TTP. Al Qaeda's primary goal, after lying low in the region for many years, is to revive itself without annoying its Afghan hosts or attracting the West's adverse attention.

In view of this, it seems to have opted to carry out its activities in Pakistan through the TTP, while staying below the international radar. The importance Al Qaeda gives to the TTP is evident in that it selected 15 of its commanders to assist the group conduct terrorist attacks in Pakistan. It also supplied armed fighters to the TTP in its attack in Chitral in September 2023, which killed four security officials. Al Qaeda's camp in Kunar, headed by Hakim ul Masri, is responsible for training suicide bombers for the TTP.

The TTP, which has been the most lethal terrorist group in Pakistan over the last three years, is on the same page with the Taliban and Al Qaeda not only because of an ideological affinity and a shared history of fighting foreign invaders in Afghanistan, but also due to similar goals of Sharia enforcement in Pakistan.

There were reports of the TTP helping the other two members of the troika by killing Taliban members defecting to the rival Islamic State-Khorasan Province in Afghanistan. The basic point is that while the troika is united on targeting Pakistan, the members play different roles. The Taliban are likely to help TTP discreetly in Afghanistan by providing sanctuary, with Al Qaeda supporting both openly in Afghanistan through mentoring and in Pakistan through its sympathisers. With its edge, the TTP is likely to carry out ground attacks in Pakistan and lead a campaign to build up its narrative of violent extremism.

As far as the strategy and tactics to be adopted by the troika go, the TTP intends to replicate in Pakistan what the Taliban did in Afghanistan. In a recent interview to Khorasan Diary, TTP ameer Noor Wali Mehsud stated, “our jihad in Pakistan ... has entered a decisive phase”. He went on to say ominously: “Pakistani security agencies have unjustly occupied our homeland” and “our goal is to liberate our homeland and implement the divine law”. In a nutshell, the TTP seems to be falling back on the two-point narrative of resistance in Afghanistan, ie, ‘liberation of homeland’ and ‘enforcement of divine laws’.

This brings us to the likely impact of the troika on the terrorist threat landscape in Pakistan. Since 2021, the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has been consistently increasing every year. This is likely to continue in 2024, with three possible changes. One, the number of Afghan nationals taking part in terrorist attacks in Pakistan may increase – we recall here the suicide bombing against military personnel in 2023 in Bannu by Afghans. Two, given its penchant for high-profile attacks, Al Qaeda may train the TTP to carry out such attacks. Three, given that the top Al Qaeda and Taliban instructors will train TTP members, the quality and sophistication of the attacks in 2024 are likely to be enhanced.

Another area likely to be impacted by the troika is infiltration. Earlier, in the 1990s, Al Qaeda infiltrated educational institutions such as Karachi and Punjab universities to recruit educated youth. These recruitment cells in universities may be reactivated. Also, to stay abreast of latest government planning in counterterrorism, the TTP, like the Taliban did in Afghanistan, may attempt to infiltrate government departments, including intel agencies.

The third and most important dimension of infiltration is that of the military, which was carried out by Al Qaeda in Pakistan in the late 1990s. It may be pertinent to mention that the last attempted terrorist attack by Al Qaeda was in 2014 in Karachi, when a group of naval officers tried to hijack a navy frigate and crash into a US ship in the open seas.

Al Qaeda worked somewhat openly in Pakistan from the 1980s to 2001, and built up an elaborate network of civilian volunteers in many cities of Pakistan, who assisted in collecting funds, recruiting volunteers, and providing hideouts for the group. These sleeper cells might again be contacted by it and reactivated. Similarly, there were some Pakistani militant organisations of the 1980s, like the Harkatul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, etc, sympathetic to Al Qaeda and lying low these days. Al Qaeda may re-establish contact with them and get their support for the TTP.

Finally, both the Taliban and Al Qaeda are known for their high-quality propaganda campaign. The TTP media wing lacks that finesse. In the light of guidance from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, we are likely to witness a significant improvement in the quality of propaganda.

As Sun Tsu stated, “if you know your enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”. Sadly, it seems that Pakistan is erring in assessing the collective capabilities of the TTP, supported by the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 11, 2024

Street safety

MOHAMMAD ALI BABAKHEL

THE Sindh chief executive's resolve to address street crime is encouraging. This commitment raises important questions: are these crimes organised or opportunistic? Can traditional policing strategies alone be effective, or is a blend of conventional and technological methods required? How important is educating the public on safety measures for the prevention of street crime? Also, one must consider whether street crime is predominantly an urban or rural phenomenon.

Street crimes typically include the snatching of mobile phones, cash, and motorcycles by individuals aged between 18 and 35. The environment, such as street lighting, architectural designs, and administrative practices, also plays a significant role in these incidents. Although initially appearing to be opportunistic, these crimes are increasingly becoming organised, driven by environmental and situational factors. They usually occur in densely populated and economically disadvantaged areas, particularly where there is minimal surveillance, such as lack of CCTV, private security, and alarm systems.

Several factors contribute to the rise in street crime, including high unemployment rates, poverty, easy access to small arms, a low criminal conviction rate, enticing high-value items, insufficient police presence, low CCTV coverage, weak police-community collaboration, and limited public knowledge on safety practices. Hiring unverified labourers and domestic workers in urban areas like Karachi also plays a role. The psychological impact is significant, leading to increased feelings of insecurity and a rise in mental health issues among residents.

Recent reports indicate a significant surge in street crime in Karachi, with daily occurrences of theft and violence. However, lengthy processes and low trust between police and the public often prevent victims from reporting crimes. Streamlining the process for registering FIRs could enhance public trust and provide more accurate crime data. Karachi Police, with a force of 44,000 personnel, dedicates only 13,500 to patrol duties, with the remainder assigned to non-patrol roles. This distribution poses challenges in effectively managing street crime, as traditional policing methods often result in unsuccessful investigations.

Karachi's unchecked demographic changes have led to the unregulated growth of slums, necessitating the establishment of a 'Slums Regulatory Authority' to oversee these areas and ensure proper integration of newcomers from other cities with collaboration between union councils, police, and Nadra. To effectively prevent crime such as auto theft and ATM robberies, improvements in vehicle security, increased surveillance around ATMs, and greater police visibility are essential. To address such challenges in Pakistan, the police introduced the

Ababeel, Mujahid, Shaheen, and Dolphin squads, but public expectations require a more proactive approach and technological backup.

International examples, such as Malaysia's successful strategies, can offer valuable insights. These include enhanced police visibility, identifying crime hotspots, and fostering police-community partnerships, which have proven effective in improving public safety and reducing crime rates.

To effectively combat street crime, the police should harness advanced technologies like AI, CCTV and mobile apps to detect crime and aid their prevention. Facial and licence plate recognition are key to identifying and managing offenders, while GPS tracking is invaluable for recovering stolen vehicles and monitoring taxis.

However, relying solely on technology is not enough to reduce street crime. Effective law enforcement and active community engagement are equally crucial. Police need increased mobility, and the motorcycle business, including vehicle registration, requires stringent regulation. Initiatives like Safe City projects should be launched in major cities such as Karachi to enhance urban security. As most street crimes occur after sunset, identifying and reinforcing hotspots with security and lighting and public education on safety are imperative.

Improving the justice system is essential to addressing inefficiencies and corruption. Enhancing investigation quality, prosecution, and witness cooperation is vital for increasing conviction rates. Citizen education regarding the safe use of mobiles, safe car parking, using ATMs, etc, should be part of urban policing. For this purpose, all capital police departments in Pakistan should initiate citizen-police education initiatives, including through distance learning.

A holistic approach involving technology, community engagement, political will, professional policing, and responsible citizenry is necessary to deter and defeat street crime.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 11, 2024

Orwellian slide

IN recent years, Pakistan has made several attempts at introducing an overarching mechanism through which to check the strident criticism of the state, its institutions, and their policies, on social media. However, the authorities have repeatedly had to fall back on various extra-legal means to keep the 'problem' in check, largely because legislative measures have proven insufficient and because major platform operators remain unwilling to engage with our authorities' concerns and refuse to entertain their requests for more access to platform users' information. Meanwhile, social media users seem to have grown increasingly emboldened while directing their opprobrium at the state, protected by the anonymity offered by most platforms. Lately, they have been directing unprecedented vitriol at institutions that were once considered untouchable. Understandably, this has been quite upsetting for those in charge, who seem to be panicking at their inability to control social media as easily as they can the mainstream media operating in the country.

This seems to be the long and short of why the government has introduced two new authorities in recent days: the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency, to replace the FIA's Cybercrimes Wing, and the Digital Rights Protection Authority, which is awaiting the cabinet's assent. The DRPA, whose name seems to follow the nomenclature for government ministries in George Orwell's 1984, will, by one account, "create a secure and trustworthy digital environment while promoting user protection online and safeguarding fundamental rights". However, those on the ground believe that this state-defined reasoning for DRPA's creation is little more than a fig leaf. They say that the authorities have long wanted a watchdog that can freely hound critics who get too bold online; they refer to the around two dozen cases registered against journalists since the Peca laws came into effect to justify their apprehensions. To be fair, the context in which these changes are being introduced and the speed at which things seem to be moving do not really allow for a more charitable interpretation of the government's intentions. Just a day after the DRPA received the prime minister's approval, the military authorities issued stern words on what was described as "digital terrorism" unleashed by "inimical forces" trying to lure citizens away from the nation's armed forces. Sounds like an ill omen for the freedoms Pakistani citizens have grown used to in the digital age.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 11, 2024

Terror against girls

ONCE again, the ogre of terrorism is seeking the sacrifice of schoolgirls. On Wednesday, just days after the announcement of a four-year education emergency in the country by the prime minister, unidentified militants blew up a private girls' school in Shewa tehsil of North Waziristan district; the school administration had received multiple threats prior to the attack. Last May, two government girls' schools in Mir Ali were obliterated in a midnight assault. In 2018, the year the KP-Fata merger was signed into law, bomb explosions razed two schools for girls and pamphlets warning residents against sending older girls to schools in various tribal areas were widely circulated. Before Operation Zarb-i-Azb began in 2014 in what was then the North Waziristan Agency, educational institutions in KP and former Fata suffered frequent bomb attacks by militants. According to a report, about 1,500 schools stood decimated over a span of a decade, with enrolment, in many places, virtually grinding to a halt. The message is clear. And as the past is not another country, it cannot go unheeded.

It is obvious that targeting avenues for female empowerment is rooted in the regressive propensities of militant groups, especially the TTP, whose latest action is not only a reflection of its own past but also mirrors the hard-line approach taken by the Afghan Taliban, who have clamped down on girls' education in their country. Hence, it is incumbent upon the Pakistani state to intensify pressure on Afghanistan's rulers to abandon their anti-women policies and immobilise their ideological brothers. It is a concern that should worry all countries in the region. The tribal belt, ravaged by terrorism, poverty and fear, is crying out for the implementation of an upgraded, comprehensive security policy, including training and resources for counterterrorism units so that effective kinetic responses can dismantle terror networks. However, our security apparatus must understand that the battle against a mindset is harder.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 11, 2024

Seven security personnel martyred in North Waziristan

NORTH WAZIRISTAN: Seven security personnel were martyred and two others sustained injuries in two militant attacks on security forces at different locations in North Wazir-istan, local sources said.

They said the first attack took place in the Hassan Khel area of Tehsil Datta Khel when an improvised explosive device went off targeting a bomb disposal unit. Soon after the blast, they added, militants opened fire on the forces.

As a result, five security personnel embraced martyrdom while two others sustained injuries.

Local sources said that in another incident, militants stormed a security post in the Seeman area of Mir Ali. Two security personnel embraced martyrdom in the attack, they added.

They said that the bodies of the security personnel and the injured personnel were airlifted to Com-bined Milit-ary Hospital, Bannu.

Security forces cordoned off the areas immediately after the attacks and launched a search operation in the areas.

Also, in North Waziristan district, a private girls' school was blown up by unidentified militants in Tehsil Shewa on the night of May 8, police sources said. They said the militants first tortured the school watchman and later blew up two rooms of the school.

Similar attacks took place in May last year when two government schools for girls in Mirali had been blown up. No loss of life was reported in the incidents.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 12, 2024

Vending organs

IN these cash-strapped times, black marketers in the organ trade are returning to rake it in by harvesting the organs of the desperate. Sadly, recent reports of raids show that the racket is once again on the rise. The Punjab Healthcare Commission, FIA and the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority recently arrested three suspects for illegal renal transplants at a private hospital in Lahore, but some of the staff as well as the owner escaped. While officials speculate about the involvement of a large network in the kidney transplant scam, hospital employees confessed to 10 unlawful transplants at the facility. Two raids in March had also unearthed interests of criminal gangs. In one incident, the police busted an organ trade ring, which took poor labourers to Islamabad and removed their kidneys. Another six accused were taken into custody during a separate operation; they were performing an illegal kidney transplant of a female patient at a private medical facility in Lahore.

Pakistan had been the epicentre of organ sales – illicit domestic transplants and transplant tourism – until legislation in 2010 proscribed the practice. But the criminal justice system has, time and again, failed to take stringent action against organised organ trade and corrupt medical practitioners. The courts too should be clear about putting offenders out of business. Without sustained caution and application of the law, the country will relapse into savagery, becoming a global market for organs. Moreover, law enforcement should be brought up to speed on modern protocols to keep one step ahead of vile racketeers. The last thing our fragile economy needs is an organ racket revival. Hence, political parties, NGOs, health authorities and the police have to foster awareness and vigilance to prosecute unethical doctors, traffickers and brokers so that the menace is exterminated. As despicable edifices of exploitation are torn down, advocacy for deceased organ donations and lawful transplantations has to grow louder.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 13, 2024

Pakistan, US recognise TTP as threat to regional, global security



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and the United States have recognised that banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Da'ish terrorist group are posing a threat to regional and global security, underscoring close cooperation between the two countries to deal with the challenge.

The two countries held a counter terrorism dialogue in Washington last week and a joint statement.

Additional Foreign Secretary for the UN and OIC, Ambassador Syed Haider Shah, and US Department of State Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Ambassador Elizabeth Richard, co-chaired Pakistan-US Counterterrorism Dialogue on May 10 in Washington DC.

The joint statement said the Counterterrorism Dialogue underscored the cooperation between Pakistan and the United States in addressing the most pressing challenges to regional and global security, including TTP and ISIS-Khorasan.

The statement is seen as significant as the US recognised the TTP posed a threat to regional and global security. Previously, the TTP was seen as a threat to Pakistan only. Islamabad has been telling the outside world, particularly the key stakeholders that ignoring the TTP threat may eventually haunt them.

The statement said discussions centered on the counterterrorism landscape in the region, with a focus on areas of mutual interest.

“Pakistani and US senior officials emphasised the importance of expanded counterterrorism collaboration and capacity building, including exchanges of technical expertise and best practices, investigative and prosecutorial assistance, provision of border security infrastructure and training, including the United States training of more than 300 police and frontline responders since the last Pakistan-US Counterterrorism Dialogue in March 2023, and strengthening multilateral engagement such as in the UN and the Global Counterterrorism Forum,” read the joint statement.

It also noted that Pakistan and the United States recognised that a partnership to counter ISIS-Khorasan, TTP, and other terrorist organisations will advance security in the region and serve as a model of bilateral and regional cooperation to address transnational terrorism threats.

Both governments resolved to increase communication on these topics and continue collaboration to detect and deter violent extremism through whole-of-government approaches. The Counterterrorism Dialogue reaffirms Pakistan’s and the United States’ shared determination to contribute to both regional and global security and stability.

Tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have been brewing for months over the cross border terrorist attacks.

Pakistan has been repeatedly urging the Taliban government to take action against the TTP and its affiliates. However, the Taliban regime has been reluctant to act, triggering an unusual stalemate between the two countries.

SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, MAY 13, 2024.

Man sentenced to 20 years over boat tragedy



younger sibling faces 35 year sentence while elder faces 20 year term.

GUJRANWALA: A court in Gujranwala has handed down a 20-year prison sentence and imposed a fine of Rs4.2 million on the main culprit involved in the Libya boat incident.

This marks the first sentencing related to the Libya boat tragedy, with the special court in Gujranwala delivering the verdict against Muhammad Mumtaz in all three cases.

The convict has been penalised under the Immigration Ordinance 1979 by Special Court Judge Muhammad Naeem Sheikh.

The charges against the accused stemmed from three separate cases of human smuggling registered at the FIA station in Gujranwala.

Allegations were made that Muhammad Mumtaz had received Rs11.1 million from four young men, including two brothers, with the intention of unlawfully smuggling them into Italy.

Tragically, the four young men – Muhammad Muneeb, Allah Ditta, Farhad Ali, and Muhammad Tawheed – lost their lives in the boat incident in Libya on June 14, 2023.

The incident resulted in the deaths of 281 Pakistanis, including over 50 young men from the Gujranwala Division.

Sajid Akram Chaudhry, Director of FIA Gujranwala Zone, emphasized the efforts made to ensure that crucial evidence was presented in court to prevent bail for those involved in human smuggling.

He condemned such individuals for playing with human lives, causing immense grief and despair among families.

Evidence including bank statements, documents, phone records, and investigative findings were meticulously presented in court.

Chaudhry reiterated the commitment to ensuring justice in such cases, and the court's decision to hand down a severe sentence reflects the gravity of the crimes committed.

Source: The Express Tribune, May 14, 2024.

Army officer martyred, 3 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in Balochistan's Zhob

An army officer was martyred and three terrorists were killed during an intelligence-based operation in Balochistan's Zhob district, the military's media wing said on Tuesday.

According to a press release issued by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), security forces conducted an IBO in the district's general area of Sambaza and "effectively engaged" the terrorists, adding that three were subsequently "sent to hell".

The ISPR said weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from them.

"During the intense exchange of fire, leading his troops from the front, Major Babar Khan, 33, resident of District Mianwali, having fought gallantly, paid the ultimate sacrifice and embraced martyrdom," the ISPR said.

It added that a sanitisation operation was being conducted to eliminate any other terrorists present in the area.

"Security forces of Pakistan, in step with the nation, remain determined to thwart attempts of sabotaging peace, stability and progress of Balochistan, and such sacrifices of our brave soldiers further strengthen our resolve," the ISPR concluded.

Last month, three terrorists were killed by security forces in an IBO in Balochistan's Pishin District.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in KP and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

According to an annual security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Pakistan witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in 2023 – marking a record six-year high.

KP and Balochistan were the primary centres of violence, accounting for over 90 per cent of all fatalities and 84pc of attacks, including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 14, 2024

Secretive state

THERE is a fresh push by the state to stamp out all criticism by using the alibi of protecting national interests. Monday's post on X by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif only strengthens this impression, though the irony of a government representative using a platform blocked by his own administration to convey the message is quite bizarre. Mr Asif said that those who leak official secret documents could be tried under the Official Secrets Act, while those who share such information could go to jail or be fined. He specifically mentioned that material on social media, which could harm Pakistan's "strategic and economic interests" or hurt its ties with "friendly and brotherly countries", would not be tolerated. Other high officials have of late also criticised 'harmful' matter on social media. The Punjab government, meanwhile, is reportedly considering a defamation law to counter 'false' news.

The aforementioned efforts are indicative of a state apparatus, which is used to controlling the flow of information and narrative, unable to cope with the flood of information and opinions – some of it indeed inauthentic – unleashed by social media. The defence minister's threat to haul up those exposing state secrets appears to be an overreaction. Genuine matters involving national security – especially material that may put lives and identities of state operatives in danger – can and should be withheld or redacted. But imposing a blanket ban on releasing all information the state is privy to smacks of censorship. This would effectively be a death sentence for what remains of investigative journalism in Pakistan, while whistle-blowers seeking to expose corruption within the corridors of power will be silenced. The minister's mention of 'strategic and economic' interests is also overly broad. For example, will columns, tweets and posts quoting official sources discussing privatisation or other key economic matters be deemed liable to 'punishment' under the new information regime? Instead of bulldozing such laws, the administration needs to consult stakeholders and civil society to ensure that the right to freedom of information, and the right of the state to hold back genuinely sensitive details, are balanced. Checks need to be in place, while the government must jettison opacity by making citizens' right to access information more transparent. Enforcing blanket bans will only add to disinformation, as conspiracy theories and half-truths will be promoted in the absence of facts.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 15, 2024

CTDs' shortcomings

WHILE threats from terrorist groups need to be countered on the battlefield through military means, long-term success against violent extremists requires action by civilian LEAs. Yet as a recent report points out, the provincial counterterrorism departments lack the capability to adequately address the terrorist threat. The document, published by the Islamabad-based Pak Institute for Peace Studies, points to several inadequacies in the performance of CTDs. The think tank says that CTDs “lack clarity” on the dynamics of militant groups, and have few skills needed to analyse relevant intelligence. Moreover, apart from the Punjab CTD, departments in other provinces face funding constraints.

It should be noted that ‘capacity building/ strengthening of CTDs’ is amongst the points mentioned in the revised National Action Plan. Moreover, many law-enforcement professionals, especially those who have worked in CT, advocate a greater role for the police, specifically in CTDs, in order to uproot militant groups. Also, the federal interior minister has spoken of ‘restructuring’ Nacta, which is supposed to be the nation’s premier CT body. This cannot be achieved without addressing the deficiencies of the provincial CTDs. The departments must be revamped so that they can defeat the terrorist threat. The lacunae that experts have highlighted – shortcomings in training, procedural issues, funding bottlenecks, etc – need to be addressed. The CTDs should be able to block funding sources of terrorist groups, and bust cells through intel operations before militants can strike. The current wave of terrorism that gained momentum after the collapse of the ceasefire with the banned TTP, has resulted in a high toll amongst the security forces, with the militant threat particularly acute in KP and Balochistan. Before these threats transform into a full-blown insurgency, requiring military operations to quell, the state must empower the CTDs with the tools, training and funds needed to stop militants in their tracks. We cannot afford to neglect our civilian CT bodies.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 16, 2024

No to Cyberbullying

DR SYED KALEEM IMAM



Human instinct triggers a ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ reaction when faced with bullying, harassment and abuse. The internet has allowed bullying to metastasize into new, more persistent and sinister forms. Cyberbullying has devastating effects on its victims because it is so challenging to confront the bully. In the worst cases, victims can resort to self-harm and drug use. Many often fall into despondency, living lives of despair.

Cyberbullying is a significant and growing issue, and incidents have escalated considerably due to an increase in online activity following the COVID-19 pandemic. Key statistics for 2024 show that 85% of Indian children have both experienced and committed cyberbullying – more than twice the global average. In the US, 73% of students have been bullied, with 44% reporting facing it in the past month. Meanwhile, 36.7% of female students said they had experienced online abuse at least once. Other countries with significant reporting rates include Belgium (25%), South Africa (26%), Sweden (23%), Canada (20%), Australia (19%), Great Britain (18%), and China (17%), underscoring the pervasive and worldwide impact of this issue.

Cyberbullying impacts all ages and demographics: South Korean singer Goo Hara faced severe online abuse after her ex-boyfriend’s threats. In the UK, former TV presenter Caroline Flack

died by suicide after relentless harassment. Similarly, in the US, 15-year-old Thomas Mullaney and in Australia, 14-year-old Amy Everett took their lives after being targeted online. Celebrities like Meghan Markle and Swara Bhasker have highlighted its impacts on mental health, while actress Alia Bhatt and others advocate for children's protection online.

Several high-profile cases of cyberbullying in Pakistan have drawn our attention. Fatima Aamir endured four years of rape and murder threats from an online stalker before she went public and the authorities arrested the perpetrator. Singer Meesha Shafi faced severe harassment online after speaking up about sexual abuse. Author Bina Shah was targeted in 2014 when someone created a fake Twitter profile using her photos to harass her contacts.

Research reveals that nine out of 10 female journalists in Pakistan have faced cyber harassment, affecting their personal and professional lives. Additionally, 40% of women using the internet in Pakistan have reported experiencing cyber harassment across platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, and email. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying thrives on anonymity, providing perpetrators a shield that makes their actions difficult to trace, thus enabling ongoing abuse.

From 2018 to March 2024, female harassment cases reported under Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 show a clear upward trend. A total of 27,867 complaints were lodged, leading to 8,808 enquiries and 1,717 official cases. Authorities arrested 1,689 individuals and charged 1,174, resulting in 67 convictions. Between January 2021 and 2023, 312 FIRs were filed for child pornography cases, including 150 local complaints and 184 reports from foreign sources. These led to 225 arrests, 23 convictions, and 31 acquittals. While complaints and arrests have risen sharply, the number of convictions remains relatively low, enunciate the challenges in securing judicial outcomes for harassment cases.

Overall, in 2023 134,669 online harassment complaints were registered in Pakistan. There were some stark gender disparities. Men filed 108,667 complaints, while women reported 25,998 incidents. Only four complaints were registered by transgender individuals. These trends, compared to the actual prevalence of crimes against women and transgender individuals, suggest considerable underreporting.

Many countries are now combating cyberbullying through a coordinated approach that covers detection, prevention, victim support, and legal action. Advanced AI models like XLNet and deep Bi-LSTM have helped identify and curb cyberbullying, with hybrid models enhancing detection by combining autoregressive and autoencoding techniques. On the preventive side, brands like Apple and Nike have supported anti-bullying initiatives, advocating for open parent-child communication and responsible internet use. Victim support strategies, such as helping them save evidence, block bullies and seek help from trusted friends, family, or counsellors, can prove useful.

Legal frameworks like Pakistan's PECA have criminalized cyberbullying, while the government has recently established a new, independent cybercrime authority, the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, after earlier delegating the responsibility to the FIA. Despite these efforts,

stronger laws and proactive measures by social media companies are still needed to prevent and penalize online harassment.

Bullies must not go unpunished; proper prosecution is essential. Like all crimes, cybercrime is often underreported due to mistrust and the nature of the abuse. Law enforcement must enhance its capabilities with increased awareness, better-trained officers, and the use of AI and modern technology. Alongside the relevant investigating agency, local police, civil society, and administration must also take charge. Staying informed and vigilant about online safety can protect vulnerable minds. Establishing dedicated desks to maintain the confidentiality of complaints and encouraging victims to come forward is crucial.

It is heartening to see that the students at the university where I teach recognize cyberbullying for what it truly is: a cowardly act. They're prepared to expose it and challenge it head-on. It would be another thing if law enforcers could also act swiftly and decisively, aiding victims with urgency, empathy, and a commitment to holding perpetrators accountable. The abuse must be addressed, or we will just end up with a new crop of emboldened bullies.

Kids YouTube star Ms. Rachel is the latest to be bullied after launching a fundraiser for children in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine. Kundos! As despite the backlash, her dedication remains strong.

SOURCE: EN.WENEWS.PK, MAY 20, 2024

Out of the abyss

ENFORCED disappearances remain a persistent blight on fundamental human rights in the country. Recent exchanges between the judiciary and government during Islamabad High Court hearings have once again brought the issue to the forefront, highlighting the need for accountability and reform. On Monday, Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani delivered a stern rebuke to intelligence agencies for their alleged involvement in the abductions of individuals such as Kashmiri poet Ahmed Farhad Shah. Justice Kayani's insistence that intelligence agencies shed the perception of culpability in such 'disappearances' underscores the judiciary's frustration with the practice. Following Monday's hearing, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar described the remarks as "inappropriate", arguing that courts should dispense justice in accordance with the law and the Constitution without "sensationalising" issues. Mr Tarar's argument reflects a broader reluctance within the government to hold state institutions accountable. This attitude not only undermines the rule of law but also perpetuates a culture of impunity.

Regrettably, political parties in Pakistan exhibit a Janus-faced approach to enforced disappearances. When in opposition, they vocally support the families of the missing, visiting protest camps and promising justice. Yet, once in power, they make excuses like "the issue is complex" and "cannot be resolved overnight". This duplicity perpetuates the cycle of impunity and suffering. The case of Mr Shah is a stark example. Despite assurances from intel services and the defence ministry, Mr Shah remains unaccounted for, with his family left in anguish. Justice Kayani's call for clear working procedures for intelligence agencies and his insistence on their adherence to legal boundaries are steps in the right direction. However, these steps must be backed by concrete actions and genuine political will. This includes ignoring a section of hawkish politicians who insist that missing persons are "terrorists". If individuals are suspected of wrongdoing, they should be tried in accordance with the law. Enforced disappearances not only inflict immense suffering on the families of the victims but also erode public trust in state institutions. The judiciary's recent observations are a reminder that the state's duty is to protect its citizens, not to instil fear through unlawful abductions. The authorities must shed this dark legacy of enforced disappearances and help the country emerge from the abyss. The agony has lingered for far too long.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 22, 2024

29 terrorists killed along Afghan border

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Army has said 29 terrorists have been killed in a series of operations along the Pak-Afghan border over the past month, amid a surge in terrorism originating from Afghan soil.

“In addition to other areas along Pakistan-Afghanistan border, security forces are conducting operations in general area Sambaza in Zhob district of Balochistan, since April 21, 2024. As a result of effective engagements, 29 terrorists have been successfully neutralised by the security forces in past one month,” said the military’s media wing, Inter-Services Public Relations, in a statement issued here on Wednesday.

These actions were part of a broader effort to curb the infiltration of terrorists targeting both security forces and civilians.

The ISPR noted a surge in attempts by Afghanistan based terrorists to infiltrate the border and carry out attacks on the Pakistani side.

It also noted the martyrdom of Maj Babar Khan in an intelligence-based operation on May 14. “Pakistan’s security forces are determined and remain committed to secure the borders and ensure safety of its citizens against the scourge of terrorism,” it added.

The military’s media wing recalled Pakistan had on multiple occasions in the past had asked Taliban administration to ensure effective border management on their side of border.

“Interim Afghan government is expected to fulfill its obligations and deny the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for perpetuating acts of terrorism against Pakistan,” the ISPR maintained.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 23, 2024

Russia says Islamic State behind deadly Moscow concert hall attack

Russia said for the first time that the Islamic State group coordinated the March concert hall assault in Moscow, the country's deadliest terror attack in two decades.

IS has claimed responsibility on multiple occasions for the March 22 attack which killed over 140 people, but Moscow has repeatedly tried to link Ukraine and the West to the attack.

FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov was quoted as saying by the RIA Novosti news agency that "preparations, the financing, the attack and the retreat of the terrorists were coordinated via the internet by members of Khorasan Province (IS-K)," an IS branch active in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Bortnikov did not discard the Ukrainian angle in his statements on Friday, saying that "upon completing the attack, the terrorists received clear instructions to move toward the Ukrainian border, where from the other side a 'window' had been prepared for them".

"The investigation continues, but it can already be said with certainty that Ukrainian military intelligence is directly implicated in the attack", he said. Ukraine has repeatedly denied involvement.

Gunmen in camouflage stormed the Crocus City Hall venue on the outskirts of Moscow before setting the building on fire.

More than a dozen suspects have been arrested including the four assailants, who are all from the Central Asian nation of Tajikistan, an impoverished former Soviet republic on Afghanistan's northern border.

The United States has said it had publicly and privately warned Russia in early March that extremists were planning an attack on a concert hall in Moscow.

Unnamed US intelligence officials told American media outlets after the massacre that they had told Moscow it was the Crocus City Hall specifically that IS was planning to attack.

Russia dismissed those warnings.

Just three days before the attack, President Vladimir Putin accused Washington of "blackmail" and trying to "intimidate" Russians.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 24, 2024

Afghan puzzle

WHEN it comes to counterterrorism cooperation with the Afghan Taliban, we are moving in circles. While the authorities say that anti-Pakistan terrorists have havens in Afghanistan – particularly the banned TTP – Kabul’s de facto rulers insist this is not the case.

The Taliban position, however, is difficult to believe in the face of evidence that various militant groups are indeed active in Afghanistan. Once more, the state has raised the issue of cross-border militancy, with the interior minister and Nacta chief telling a presser on Sunday that the TTP, backed by “enemy intelligence agencies”, were responsible for the deadly March attack in Bisham in which five Chinese workers and one local were killed. The military had issued a similar statement a few weeks ago. Mohsin Naqvi called on the Afghan Taliban to prosecute the suspected terrorists, “or hand them to us”. The interior czar did not rule out unilateral action if Kabul failed to act. Several attempts have been made to take up the TTP issue with the Afghan Taliban, but the results have not been positive. For example, the matter has been discussed using official channels, while delegations of ulema and tribal elders have been dispatched to Kabul to communicate Pakistan’s concerns. The state has also taken cross-border armed action after TTP terrorist attacks targeted Pakistani troops. Yet, none of these measures has resulted in a cessation of terrorist violence. Therefore, different approaches are required. Unfortunately, there are few good options, and the authorities will have to work with the Afghan Taliban.

Expecting the Afghans to crush the TTP is an unrealistic expectation, as Kabul’s rulers are not likely to take armed action against their ideological comrades, particularly if the Kandahar-based Taliban leadership has anything to say about it. Pakistan should, instead, demand that TTP fighters be relocated far from the border, and insist that the Taliban should take full responsibility to ensure no terrorist group is able to stage cross-border attacks.

Moreover, the Central Asian states have aired similar concerns about Afghanistan-based terrorist groups. Pakistan should work with these states, as well as China, Russia, and Iran, to pressure the Taliban into taking effective CT moves. The Taliban are particularly keen to attract Chinese investment due to their global isolation. Islamabad should coordinate with Beijing to ensure that investments are made only if the Taliban take concrete CT steps.

While the Taliban should do more to prevent cross-border terrorism, Pakistan must also ensure that internally, no space is available to the militants and their sympathisers. In the recent presser, the Nacta head listed numerous Pakistani suspects who had played a key role in the Bisham attack. Unless these elements are neutralised, it will not be possible to have the upper hand over terrorist groups.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 28, 2024

Conviction rate for drug cases drop in Punjab



LAHORE: The conviction rates under the Control of Narcotics Substances Act (1997) in Punjab have dramatically declined, falling from 16% in 2022 to just 2% in 2023.

Major cities such as Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, and Multan have also experienced this downward trend, prompting urgent calls for enhanced state interventions.

This alarming statistic was revealed in a report titled "Prevalence of Drug Abuse in Pakistan: An Overview of Criminal Justice System's Response to Drug Traffickers in Punjab," prepared by the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO).

The report highlighted significant deficiencies in both the investigation and prosecution processes.

In response to these findings, the Punjab government has appointed specialised investigation officers and prosecutors and has recommended training and certification from globally accredited institutions.

The report underscores the escalating issue of drug abuse and the inadequacies of Punjab's criminal justice system in effectively combating drug trafficking.

It calls for substantial reforms and improvements to address these challenges.

The research also indicated a dramatic global increase in drug users, rising from 240 million in 2011 to 296 million in 2021, which reflects the expansion of the global drug economy.

Pakistan, due to its proximity to Afghanistan, the largest producer of illicit opium, faces significant drug-related challenges.

A 2013 UNODC report revealed that approximately 6.7 million people in Pakistan used controlled substances, including prescription drugs, in 2012.

To address these issues, SSDO has proposed several policy recommendations. These include establishing dedicated courts for drug trafficking cases staffed by internationally trained personnel, aligning evidence collection and adjudication processes with international standards, and collaborating with the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) of the US Department of State and UNODC for training and certification.

SSDO also suggests implementing public education programs on drug use prevention, introducing school-based prevention programs, improving access to rehabilitation services, and encouraging ongoing research and data collection on drug use patterns to inform policy development.

Executive Director Syed Kausar Abbas emphasized SSDO's commitment to promoting social development and policy advocacy in Pakistan, focusing on key issues such as the prevalence of drug abuse and trafficking, human trafficking, and protecting citizens, especially marginalised communities, from becoming victims of organised crime.

In major cities across Punjab, data on cases registered under the Control of Narcotics Substances Act (CNSA) (1997) for Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, and Multan reveal a significant decline in conviction rates in 2023 compared to 2022.

The conviction rates dropped from 8% to less than 1% in Lahore, 16% to less than 1% in Gujranwala, 17% to 3.5% in Rawalpindi, 8% to 2.5% in Faisalabad, and 3% to 1% in Multan.

In 2022, Punjab saw 12,892 cases registered under the CNSA (1997), involving 13,946 accused individuals.

Of these, 2,080 were convicted, resulting in a 16% conviction rate. However, in 2023, the number of cases rose to 16,839, with 16,403 accused individuals, but only 437 were convicted, translating to a mere 2% conviction rate.

This significant drop indicates severe deficiencies in the investigation and prosecution processes, which benefit the accused, allowing them to evade the consequences typically associated with drug trafficking.

The report by the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO) highlights these alarming statistics, indicating that the criminal justice system in Punjab is struggling to effectively combat drug trafficking.

It underscores the urgent need for reforms to address these growing challenges.

The global number of drug users has been steadily increasing, rising from 240 million in 2011 to 296 million in 2021, according to the World Drug Report (WDR) 2023. This growth is accompanied by an expansion in the global drug economy. For instance, in 2008, the value of heroin trafficked through Iran and Central Asian states was estimated at \$33 billion, while the value of cocaine trafficked to North America and the European Union during the same period was estimated at \$88 billion, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Governments worldwide are grappling with various challenges, including the expanding drug markets in terms of both harm and scope, the use of social media platforms for illicit drug transactions, and the localized manufacturing of cheap and easily accessible synthetic drugs.

Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan, the world's largest producer of illicit opium, makes it particularly vulnerable to various drug-related challenges. The UNODC Report (2013) revealed that approximately 6.7 million people in Pakistan had used some form of controlled substance, including prescription drugs, in 2012.

The SSDO's report emphasizes the need for significant reforms and improvements in Punjab's criminal justice system to address the rising issue of drug abuse. It recommends appointing specialized investigation officers and prosecutors, training and certification from globally accredited institutions, and establishing dedicated courts for drug trafficking cases staffed by internationally trained personnel. It also suggests aligning evidence collection and adjudication processes with international standards and collaborating with the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and UNODC for training and certification.

Furthermore, the SSDO advocates for public education programs on drug use prevention, school-based prevention programs, improved access to rehabilitation services, and ongoing research and data collection on drug use patterns to inform policy development.

The declining conviction rates under the CNSA (1997) in Punjab's major cities highlight the urgent need for enhanced state interventions and reforms to combat the growing drug trafficking issue effectively.

SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, MAY 30, 2024.

Pakistan, UK sign letter of intent to combat illegal migration, drugs



Pakistan's interior minister Mohsin Naqvi (left) meets British Home Secretary James Cleverly in London on May 31, 2024.

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and the United Kingdom have signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) to improve coordination between their law enforcement agencies in fighting illegal migration and drugs, state-run broadcaster Radio Pakistan said.

The South Asian nation's security czar Mohsin Naqvi is currently on an official visit to the United Kingdom.

"The LoI was signed in the presence of Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and British Home Secretary James Cleverly in London," Radio Pakistan said on Friday. "The initiative will help combat illegal migration in addition to fostering cooperation in drug prevention and crime investigations on serious matters."

The initiative will also help improve cooperation in combating illicit financial threats and tracking crimes along air and sea borders.

The report said it would be the responsibility of a Joint Steering Committee to implement the LoI. The body will include representatives from the Ministry of Interior, National Police Bureau and the British High Commission.

The interior minister will also visit Italy and Vatican City early next month.

The UK signed a major deal with Pakistan in 2022 under which foreign criminals and immigration offenders from the UK can be returned to Pakistan.

Under the new plan, Pakistani nationals with no legal right to remain in the UK, including criminals, failed asylum seekers and immigration offenders, can be removed.

Pakistan nationals make up the seventh largest number of foreign criminals in prisons in England and Wales, totaling nearly 3 percent of the foreign national offender population.

SOURCE: ARABNEWS.COM, MAY 31, 2024

Forces kill 2 'terrorists' in Hassan Khel operation

PESHAWAR: Two terrorists were killed and two others wounded in an intelligence-based operation in Hassan Khel, on the outskirts of Peshawar, days after two personnel were martyred during a similar operation in the same area.

Meanwhile, four security personnel were martyred in a bomb attack on a security forces vehicle in Bannu.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations, security forces had engaged the terrorists during the IBO conducted on late Thursday evening and killed ringleader Ayaz alias Muhammad and Ahmedey alias Koochi, and wounded their two accomplices. Weapons, am--munition, and explosives were recovered from their possession, it added.

The statement said that locals appreciated the operation, as sanitisation was being conducted to eliminate any other terrorists found in the area. Security forces are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country, ISPR stated.

Last Sunday, two military personnel had laid down their lives during a similar operation in the Hassan Khel area, while the military claimed to have killed six terrorists in a gun battle.

Bannu blast

On Friday, official sources told Dawn that a security vehicle was hit by a bomb planted on the roadside in Bannu district, resulting in the martyrdom of four military personnel and injuries to three others. Sources said that the bodies and the injured security personnel were shifted to the Combined Military Hospital.

Later, the security forces cordoned off the area and launched a search for the perpetrators of the terror act.

However, ISPR had not issued an official statement about the incident until the time of going to press.

Ghulam Mursaleen Marwat in Lakki Marwat also contributed to this report

SOURCE: DAWN, JUNE 1, 2024