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ATTACKS by militants in Balochistan continued even after the September 2008 ceasefire announced by three nationalist outfits. But the frequency of bomb blasts and rocket attacks did decrease post-September and there was less loss of life over the last four months of a particularly violent year. Earlier, in a gesture of goodwill by the new government, military operations in Balochistan were scaled down and some security checkpoints dismantled. The PPP's February 2008 public apology for the "the atrocities and injustices committed" in Balochistan was also a welcome development. Clearly, some gains were made in the troubled province but there is a danger now that these could be reversed in the absence of a lasting political solution. The Baloch Republican Army, which along with the Balochistan Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front was a party to the temporary truce, has reportedly pulled out of the ceasefire announced unilaterally by the three outlawed organisations. On Friday it claimed responsibility for an attack on a Quetta-bound train that left more than a dozen injured. Other incidents of violence also took place in the province the same day.

On Sept 3 last year the federal information minister told the media that "Our

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On Sept 3 last year the federal information minister told the media that “Our government has repeatedly stressed that violence is not the answer to the problems of Balochistan, which are essentially political in nature.” This assessment is spot on but pacific words alone will not deliver the goods. True, some federal funds have been released to Balochistan and the province’s overdraft with the State Bank has been converted into a soft loan, a move that will result in significant annual savings. But a lot more needs to be done. For instance, the government has failed to deliver on its promise to promote provincial autonomy and give the federating units greater control over their resources by abolishing the concurrent legislative list. Then there is the lingering question mark over the National Finance Commission award, which Balochistan feels should take into account factors other than population. Among other common grievances is the allegation that questionable domiciles allow individuals from other provinces to secure jobs that, in accordance with the provincial quotas in state-run organisations, should go to people who are genuinely from Balochistan.

Development work on a large scale remains the most pressing need, however. Balochistan cannot be pulled out of backwardness and grinding poverty without job creation and widespread infrastructure development. A more prosperous Balochistan could also keep outside forces at bay. The province needs schools, vocational training institutes, hospitals and basic healthcare facilities. Such investment is required on an urgent basis if the general discontent in the province, and the menace of militancy, is to be addressed meaningfully. Development projects were naturally difficult to initiate when the insurgency was raging but Balochistan is far more stable now. There is no time to waste.



Wrong politics

ON Friday, as Mian Nawaz Sharif was in Faisalabad to get political mileage out of protest demonstrations taking place there against electricity shutdowns, President Asif Zardari was hosting Sheikh Rashid Ahmed in Islamabad. The two events give us some idea of how politics in the country has moved since the PPP came to power after the February 2008 elections. The PPP has in these 10 months concentrated much of its energies on wooing the so-called power players. Meanwhile, the PML-N has ‘appeared’ to be a party that has taken up causes that link it directly or more strongly to the common man’s everyday aspirations. It is not difficult to predict that a pat on the back from Sheikh Rashid will not boost President Zardari’s and his party’s standing among Pakistanis at the moment. To the contrary, the frustration with the government is

likely to grow.

Until recently, the PML-N was considered to be a party of the so-called establishment. The party may be on its way to reclaiming its old position as a safer option for the establishment. In the meantime, it is missing no opportunity to side with the people on the streets, especially in the all-important Punjab province. Industrial workers in Faisalabad and lawyers marching in Lahore were once the PPP's strength. We don't need a poll to find out that they are disappointed with the performance of the government under Mr Zardari. If anything, the support base this time is narrowing much faster than was the case during the last two PPP governments. So entangled is the party in its effort to consolidate its hold on power and so unable is it to shrug off the legacy of Gen Pervez Musharraf that it appears to have totally run out of ideas of how to keep its pro-people image intact, or to react effectively to the doings of Mian Nawaz Sharif and his supporters. It may learn to its horror that securing a majority in the Senate is no guarantee for a firm hold on power once the battle for hearts and minds is lost. Mr Sharif's declaration of an all-out war on the PPP, something which could well be in the offing, would be another matter altogether. A crowd may be applauding him for his clever approach to politics. However, the din is drowning those voices that are advocating the current incumbents be allowed their full term in Islamabad if democracy is to be made strong and resilient.



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The human factor

PERHAPS in the absence of a transplant of the soul the next best thing would be impenetrable honesty in charity vis-à-vis impoverished renal patients. The federal health minister's recent claim of supporting cadaver transplantation initiatives with the establishment of a fund that will provide aid for transplant and post-transplant care to needy patients and help root out the 'kidney bazaar' heralds a new beginning for many beleaguered lives. If examples are in order then few can deny that the Karachi-based Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation is a model of altruism — the evidence lies in its efforts that have made the organ trade practically negligible in the city. The government would do well to emulate the SIUT's efforts in other parts of the country, especially in Punjab which is the hub of this nefarious trade.

While the proposal to set up a fund for impoverished renal patients is more than welcome, the government must also have in place monitoring mechanisms that curtail bribery and employ discreet means to judge the neediness of a candidate as human

dignity must be held supreme. So far the mantra of philanthropy that binds health institutions and the government to the human condition and its tender trappings has, perhaps inadvertently, done little to protect a person's dignity. How precisely does an individual 'prove' his destitution without stripping himself of all sense of integrity? Secondly, will the proposed fund take care of hidden charges, such as the bed fee, that exist despite pledges of free-of-cost, state-of-the-art treatment? This is where 'charity'-based institutions should be forced to take a softer line — provide free treatment, ban all hidden costs to prevent corruption in their staff and refrain from demanding 'proof' as a prerequisite for treatment. This is not to pour scorn on the intentions of the government and charity organisations but to emphasise that more than any law, it is aggressive campaigns that instil the idea of cadaver transfers, the promotion of voluntary donations and sensitive treatment of renal patients in our collective psyche. These will go a long way in making the organ trade a thing of the past.



OTHER VOICES - North American Press

Bush's healthcare legacy

The New York Times

THIS page has criticised the Bush administration's weak performance on many important healthcare matters: its failure to address the problem of millions of uninsured Americans or stem the rising costs of healthcare, its refusal to expand eligibility for the State Children's Health Insurance Programme, its devious manoeuvres to cut Medicaid spending, its support of unjustified subsidies for private health plans, to name a few.

It is only fair to note that President Bush can also lay claim to some signal achievements in healthcare — achievements that we urge president-elect Barack Obama to continue and develop further.

As we have argued in the past, Mr Bush deserves high praise for significantly increasing American support for the global effort to control Aids. We were pleased that Congress has now authorised even more money than Mr Bush proposed: almost \$50bn to fight Aids, malaria and tuberculosis around the world over the next five years. But there is little doubt that the president has played a key role in providing drug treatments or supportive care to millions of patients who would otherwise have gone untended.

It is a remarkable record for the leader of a party that had been reluctant in the Reagan era to deal with a disease whose victims at the time in this country were primarily gay men and injection drug users.

Equally remarkable was Mr Bush's decision to push through a costly new prescription drug benefit under the Medicare programme for older Americans despite stout opposition in his party to government-run healthcare. It was the largest expansion of Medicare in decades and it dragged the programme, at long last, into the modern medical era, in which drugs are a cornerstone of treatment.

... Less heralded was the Bush administration's willingness to grant Massachusetts a Medicaid waiver to redeploy federal funds to help start a universal health insurance programme. The programme took the controversial step of requiring all citizens to obtain health insurance or pay a penalty, precisely the sort of government mandate that drives many conservatives wild. By many measures it is off to a promising start and could become a model for other states or the federal government.

Another substantial health achievement came in the form of bricks and mortar, through the president's vigorous support of community health clinics.... [But] Mr Bush has done almost nothing to shore up the public insurance programmes, notably Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Programme, that provide the bulk of the clinics' funding through the patients they cover.

That is another reminder that despite these solid achievements, the country needs to do a lot more. It needs full-fledged healthcare reform that will improve the quality of medical care, reduce its overall cost and provide insurance for everyone, at affordable prices. — (Jan 3)



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The shoe is on the other foot

By Zafar Masud

CALL them Ducati 271 or Bush shoes, the choice is yours. What is really interesting is that ever since an Iraqi journalist hurled them at the American president during his press conference in Baghdad on Dec 14, the incident has caught the fancy of the European and American media with unprecedented passion for what would otherwise have simply been brushed aside as a mishap owing to ill humour, or bad manners, if you will

been brushed aside as a mishap owing to ill humour, or bad manners if you will.

Whether that turns Muntazer al-Zaidi into a hero remains arguable and many people, including ordinary folks like this writer, tend to believe that the now shoeless journalist had, during that gathering, needed neither to express the one nor the other in full public view and before television cameras.

The venerable New York Times was so thrilled at what it qualifies as the humiliation of its favourite enemy George W. Bush that it has run columns and columns since the incident, analysing the psychological, historical, religious and intellectual significance of shoe-throwing in the Arab and Muslim cultures. In a separate story the paper even suggested the occurrence could have inadvertently helped a flagging footwear industry in Turkey take the great leap forward to international commercial success.

According to NYT again the Turkish firm has employed an additional staff of 100 workers to cope with surging demands and sales are soaring with 95,000 pairs ordered by a European importer alone. The owner, the paper makes it a point to drive home the ponderous scientific detail, was amazed by the aerodynamics of his wares, albeit they failed to attain their objective. Which brings us to the intended target once again.

Footage (no pun, honest!) run again and again on important TV networks essentially shows a bemused and surprisingly agile President Bush, to give him credit, ducking twice and deftly, successfully avoiding the projectiles each time. Then he has the sense of humour to remark, "All I can report is that it is a size 10."

European and American intellectuals and journalists, those who are convinced shoe-throwing is a grave, though highly eloquent, affront in the eastern tradition, are not desisting from repeating the point in their writings and utterances ever since, and seem to believe the American president deserved this.

What on earth can explain, you wonder, the West's fascination with an alien phenomenon that totally escapes its comprehension?

Our infallibly trustworthy sage, Count André de la Roche, happens to be in Paris at the moment. All that remains to be done in his beloved Sancerrois countryside these bleak, brief winter days, he complains, is sit before a roaring fire and read, while listening to Haydn's string compositions. This is something he can do with greater pleasure in his Parisian flat with a view of the Eiffel Tower from his library window as bonus. He was glad to wax eloquent on this cothurnus tragi-comedy for the benefit of Dawn's readers:

"If you ask these people whether they themselves would throw shoes at someone they do not like, they won't answer you. But look deeper into their eyes and you have the answer all written large there. 'Throw my shoes at someone? Are you crazy? I am a

civilised person for heaven's sake! But if the Iraqi journalist did that, I understand him and I sympathise with him'.

“There you are! This sort of condescending is the key to the entire enigma. The western intellectual who is denying you the eye contact is, deep down, a neo-imperialist, although he doesn't know it. He has this paternalistic approach towards the people from the Middle East and Africa. Not towards the Asians, by the way, whom he considers his rivals and whom he fears.

“If two people are having an argument whether it is day or night and this same intellectual is asked to arbitrate, he will pull a curtain over the window to block the blazing sunshine from view and check out first which one of the adversaries is in his eye socially, economically and ethnically disadvantaged. Truth belongs to him and not to the other guy who thinks it is daytime, according to the lights of our arbitrator.

“This is called relativism. When the Americans turned this nonsense into their religion in the 1970s, we the Europeans, in our arrogance of being the inheritors of the legacies of Newton, Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo, Kant and Goethe, had made fun of them. Truth has no relatives, we had said, and two plus two makes four ... always has and always will.

“But then, we had rejected junk food, gay parades, baggy jeans, graffiti and rap music too. Today we are great consumers of all that as well as of relativism. The American tsunami will drown us all, until it runs down the gutter-hole where it belongs. For the moment, what Muntazer al-Zaidi did would be qualified as bad manners if we did that but from our US-imported relativist, patronising point of view, it is alright for an Iraqi to behave that way.

“The shoe is literally on the other foot!”

The writer is a journalist based in Paris.



Getting 'Bangalored'

By Keya Acharya

THE term 'getting Bangalored,' or having jobs outsourced from the West to this international IT hub, looks set to acquire another connotation — this time of professionals being fired right there.

The Union of Information Technology Enabled Services (UNITES) Professionals, India anticipates at least 50,000 job losses in the first half of the new year, owing to the global recession.

Ever since United States majors like General Electric and American Express shifted their back office processing operations to India in 1994-96, the world's major corporations, from the airlines to banking industries, resorted to business process outsourcing (BPO) to this country, raising jobs from 553,000 in 2007 to the current 1.6 million jobs.

Tight labour markets in the US and Europe, linguistic capabilities, reliable and cheaper telephonic communication and operational costs together with a government setup that encouraged foreign direct investment with tax sops, have been major factors in the growth of India's BPO sector.

India's information technology enabled services (ITES) sector has been growing at a steady 30 percent rate over the past few years and overall sales in 2007-2008 stood at \$52bn. But the slowdown in the US and European markets has led to sudden job losses that have raised new labour issues.

UNITES, created in 2005 with active support from the global Switzerland-based Union Network International (UNI), grew with this new and huge workforce and has been raising important questions about working conditions, gender discrimination, sexual harassment and employee rights.

Fifty per cent of UNITES members are from Bangalore, pointing to the city's large concentration of India's entire BPO sector, higher than the world's emerging BPO centres in South Africa, Philippines, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

But the industry's economic links to the US and Britain's recessions have played havoc on the local scene, with at least 10,000 jobs in the industry being lost between September 2008 and December 2008. Others, mostly junior level executives, have taken salary cuts ranging from 25 per cent to as high as 75 per cent.

UNITES general secretary, Karthik Shekhar, a computer engineer, says the prediction of another 50,000 job losses has been estimated from the uncertainty of US president-elect Barack Obama's new policy on outsourcing, the bail packages by the British government and financial institutions which may result in conditions being imposed on

local jobs.

Shekhar also says the country's lax laws and "the red carpet treatment extended by our government to foreign companies" are aiding these institutions to lay off workers without due benefits, and with insensitive handling.

UNITES members, Shekhar illustrates as example, have in some cases, discovered they had been 'sacked' when their entry-swipe cards stopped working abruptly or were given two hours' notice to leave their workplaces.

India lacks laws on severance rights for workers in the IT sector. "There is no talking between parties here in India... companies, including multinationals who behave differently elsewhere, just refuse here," says Shekhar.

UNITES faces opposition from the IT-industry's National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) which represents only the companies or 'employers' and sees UNITES as a potential threat, given India's history of confrontation between trade-unions and employer-companies.

A NASSCOM statement says that the association, after "research and interaction is not in favour" of the prediction of huge job losses in the wake of the downturn in the United States and other developed countries.

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