For a regional approach

Pak-F. Relations

By Shada Islam

ANOTHER week, another crisis. Pakistan's already shaky international reputation took another beating this week as opposition leader Nawaz Sharif was barred from holding elected office, his brother Shahbaz Sharif stepped down as chief minister of Punjab and clashes between lawyers and the police once again erupted in parts of the country.

The latest episode of the long-running 'Pakistan in Turmoil' saga came as the rest of the world was struggling to make sense of the agreement for peace clinched by the government with the militants in the Swat Valley via the services of Sufi Mohammad of the Tehrik Nifaz-i-Shariat Muhammadi, and in the midst of international hand-wringing over deteriorating India-Pakistan relations following the Mumbai bombings.

Small wonder then that confusion over how best to tackle the many challenges facing Pakistan — insurgency, religious extremism, underdevelopment and poverty to name a few — continues to be the dominant theme among US and European Union diplomats and policymakers seeking to hammer out a coherent, workable strategy for stability in South Asia.

There is a general consensus that Pakistan is the most dangerous country in the world and the biggest challenge facing the US administration — although that dubious honour is shared with Afghanistan. As in the US, European governments now increasingly lump 'Afpak' in one basket.

Following the nomination of Richard Holbrooke as the US envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Britain, France, Germany and Sweden have also appointed their own special envoys for the two countries. The EU has its own political envoy in Afghanistan — but has yet to give him responsibility for Pakistan as well.

The focus on Afpak is certainly proof that America and the EU are not in a mood to isolate Pakistan. On the contrary, the talk on both sides of the Atlantic is on ways of shoring up the civilian government but also working with the Pakistani military and security services to crack down on militants and insurgents.

> Confusion over how best to tackle the challenges facing Pakistan remains the dominant theme among US and EU diplomats.

Nobody has any illusions, however, about the authority and credibility of the central governments in either Islamabad or Kabul. In fact, the reputation of both Messrs Karzai and Zardari is currently at its lowest in recent months.

There is also despair at Pakistan's failure to recognise the gravity of the threat it faces from the insurgency in the north. This week's court ruling against the Sharifs has added to concerns that the already weak Pakistani government will once again focus on party rivalry instead of battling the militants.

Despite such misgivings, however, the EU is planning to hold its first-ever summit talks with Pakistan this year and a long-delayed EU-Pakistan ministerial meeting (a so-called "troika") will be held in Prague on March 13.

While waiting for the US to complete its strategic review of relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, Nato foreign ministers will discuss the situation in both countries at a meeting to be held in Brussels next week. Afpak will also figure high on the agenda of Nato's 30th anniversary summit in Strasbourg and Kehl on April 3-4. Such attention is welcome and long overdue. Coordination and consultation among the EU, the US and Nato on policies to be followed in both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been in short supply. As a result, no clear strategic security goals for either country have emerged.

There is no shortage of dire warnings about the deteriorating situation in both countries, however. The latest by the influential Atlantic Council of the United States, is that "Pakistan faces dire economic and security threats that threaten both the existence of Pakistan as a democratic and stable state and the region as a whole".

The Council underlines that Pakistan is on a "rapid trajectory to-

many goals for either country have emerged.

There is no shortage of dire warnings about the deteriorating situation in both countries, however. The latest by the influential Atlantic Council of the United States, is that "Pakistan faces dire economic and security threats that threaten both the existence of Pakistan as a democratic and stable state and the region as a whole".

The Council underlines that Pakistan is on a "rapid trajectory towards becoming a failing or failed state", adding, "that trajectory must be reversed now". The Council urges the US and its "Atlantic partners" to provide increased aid to Pakistan to help the country "turn back from the brink". Interestingly, while insisting on the need for more aid for the economic and social sectors, the Atlantic Council also urges spending on security forces — both military and law enforcement.

However, the question of actually getting funds and development aid into the areas which need them most in both Pakistan and Afghanistan but are also the most insecure remains an overarching worry for donors. There is also continuing concern about corruption, aid utilisation and misuse of funds in both countries.

Increasingly, the focus is also on seeking a regional solution to the Afpak quagmire. In a surprise move, the Italian government has said that Foreign Minister Franco Frattini has been invited to Iran for talks expected to focus on Afghanistan and regional security issues.

Frattini is also considering whether to invite Iran to a June conference in Trieste on the stabilisation of Afghanistan as part of Italy's Group of Eight presidency. He is discussing the possibility with both Tehran and with Italy's allies, and will raise the issue during a visit to Washington.

Although they may agree on an analysis of what is wrong in Afghanistan and Pakistan, US and European governments are still at loggerheads over American demands for a stronger European military effort in Afghanistan.

President Obama's decision to send 17,000 extra troops to Afghanistan has put the spotlight on European governments which remain reluctant to increase the number of their soldiers in the country.

EU foreign ministers did, however, pledge this week to boost police and civil operations in Afghanistan. The 27-nation bloc contributes to a German-led policing mission to enhance the rule of law in Afghanistan — that force should number 400 officers by June — as well as to an Italian justice mission.

The need to beef up the EU police mission is considered especially urgent as security in Afghanistan is likely to be a bigger problem in the coming months in the run-up to presidential elections scheduled for August. ■

The writer is Dawn's correspondent in Brussels.