

A toothless tiger

EDITORIAL (November 30, 2012) : Too little too late - that perhaps is the only befitting description for the approval of an anti-terrorism draft bill by the federal cabinet on Wednesday. How soon will it become an act of parliament, it won't take long given the innocuous nature of the proposed law, which is more an expression of pious intentions than to putting in place a potent anti-terrorism mechanism to defeat the lingering curse of terrorism, which over the last 11 years, since the 9/11, has taken lives of some 35,000 Pakistanis, crippled the national economy and played havoc with public peace. That it took the government a good four years to produce a draft and is to be made law at the fag end of its term is a question whether there can be another definition of poor performance. And even when this proverbial first step towards the much-needed goal of evolving an institutional strategy has been taken doubts are being expressed - some from within the federal cabinet - about its potency and efficacy. To some, it's nothing more than giving another lease of life to so-called think-tank working in the ministry of interior. Mainly staffed by retired police officers it has been tasked to improve co-ordination between various concerned agencies and defeat terrorist mindset. Under the new law, it would be turned into National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to be headed by the prime minister as against the think-tank headed by Interior Minister Rehman Malik. To the extent that at long last the government has been able to finalise the draft bill it is indeed a success, but only that much; beyond it there are some formidable challenges. The forces on ground fighting terrorism are of myriad independent entities, some in the control of federal and provincial governments while others in army's. Not that their mind and heart are in the fight against terrorists; their successes are nominal because there is no such thing as strategy and a plan of action with them. Their tasks are time- and place-oriented like the job of fire-fighters which gets done as soon as the fire is put out. Had the proposed NACTA been in place when the present government took over it would have been some achievement but now that concerned agencies are stuck in their unconnected grooves securing a well-co-ordinated anti-terrorism operation by them is a difficult, if not problematic, proposition. That the apex court had to propose that the Rangers in Karachi should have their own police station because poor prosecution by the police tends to help the apprehended criminals and they get freed is a reality which speaks - loudly and clearly - about woeful missing links between the various agencies tasked to maintain law and order in the country. Instead of taking the high road of creating an umbrella outfit having no real powers a more mundane and pragmatic approach should augment capacity-building of the existing forces and agencies engaged in anti-terrorism operations by refurbishing their commitments to fight criminals by improving their service conditions, equipping them with efficient arms, strengthening forensics and updating procedural and penal laws. Unfortunately, however, this aspect of counter-terrorism hasn't been given due attention in the proposed legislation. If improving co-ordination between various forces and agencies engaged in counter-terrorism drive is a big challenge what appears to be almost impossible, at least in our given socio-economic ambience and in foreseeable future, is to defeat terrorism mindset by de-radicalising the young, impressionable mind. A federal minister from Karachi is absolutely right in saying that "The only way to stop a young mind from becoming a suicide-bomber is to educate him, to stop him from falling into the hands of

extremists, not by setting up these anti-terrorism organisations". But that is where the present political stakeholders have failed; they turned education into a dream for an orphan child by transferring it to the provinces that at least at the present have neither the required funds nor the administrative capacity to deliver on it. Nobody would have a beef with Information Minister Kaira's intention to undertake 'discussions' for introducing modern education in Madressahs; that's a need of the hour, but do we have enough resources, in terms of funds and manpower, to take on that responsibility. Not one or two the religious seminaries number in thousands spread far and wide in the country - in the Islamabad district alone there are more than two hundred Madressahs. Changing the extremist mindset is certainly the most urgent need but we don't have the capacity - with per capita allocation for education being one of the lowest in the world. Given the above backdrop while one would have no quarrel with the government's intention to augment its counter-terrorism capacity but the fact cannot be denied that the much-awaited anti-terrorism legislation will be nothing more than a toothless tiger despite its fierce looks and threatening posture.

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