

Okara farms: the lull before the storm

Agriculture

By Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

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DURING the past month or so, reports about the conflict between the authorities and landless tenants on state land in Punjab have been fewer than they were in the previous two months. The pressure on more than 150,000 residents of Okara military farm finally abated recently when the authorities backed off, withdrawing the Pakistan Rangers from the area.

Since January 2002, at least 11 tenants have been killed in Okara, Renala, and Pirowal (Khanewal). Dozens have been jailed, and literally thousands face criminal cases. The army seems to have become wise, realizing that since the tenants across the province have collectively put up genuine resistance, force cannot compel them into accepting the contract system that the authorities want to impose on them. The tenants, on their part, have tried to return to normal life, resuming contact with the outside world and assuming that the worst is behind them.

Unfortunately, it seems as if there is much worse to come in the not-too-distant future. The Punjab Board of Revenue (BoR), which is the government agency that has proprietary rights over the 17,000 acres of land in Okara and the 70,000 acres of disputed land in 10 districts across the province, has disclosed that the ministry of defence, having had earlier requests for transfer of 23,699 acres of land on Okara military farm, Bengali military farm and Lahore military farm from the government of Punjab to the army free of cost turned down, is now making preparations to purchase the land at market price.

According to the valuation process that is regularly undertaken by the BoR, the land in Okara is being offered to the army for Rs. 300,000 per acre. As such, the total cost of land in Okara will amount to Rs. 5.1 billion. Add Lahore and Bengali farms to it and the total amount shoots up to Rs. 7.12 billion.

There has been much self-adulation by government high-ups in recent times about the fact that the budget for poverty-related expenditures is more or less the same as that for defence expenditures. To be precise, the defence budget this year is Rs. 161 billion. Rs 7.1 billion is equivalent to about 4.5% of the total defence budget, a fairly large percentage. It is a fact that the budget for social sectors is the first that is slashed whenever "unexpected contingencies" arise. Meanwhile, one wonders what the actual defence budget looks like given the fact that Rs. 7.1 billion is being raised to acquire, which, in the ultimate scheme of things, is a fairly negligible amount of land, the purpose for which is seriously disputed.

The army claims that the land in

Okara is used to grow fodder for farm animals that then provide dairy products to the armed forces. BoR officials, along with just about everyone else who has visited Okara military farm, can testify to the fact that the 5,000 acres of the 17,000 acres that the army has under self-cultivation more than suffices in meeting the stated need, and that the remaining 12,000 acres being cultivated by tenants is, in military-speak, "surplus to requirements".

Given the multitude of examples of the army grabbing land all over the country, it is not difficult to conceive of the possible uses that might be made of the rich agricultural land in Okara and Lahore by the colonels, brigadiers, and generals that have access to it. That is, of course, if the tenants accede to the demands of the army at all. The BoR has also confirmed that the army formally fulfilled its tenancy obligations to the government of Punjab only up till 1943, after which no lease money has been paid.

It has also been disclosed that the British imperial army agreed to pay Rs. 15,000 per annum to the provincial government in 1913 when the initial 30-year lease was executed. The BoR is now demanding that the arrears owed to it by the army for 60 years of, as such, illegal occupation, be paid up, or else the offer to sell the land will also be null and void.

It could be the case that the army will cough up the arrears as well (which will be adjusted to inflationary trends after 1913), or rather, the citizens of the country will cough up the money which the army will then use. And what of the hundreds of thousands of people who are effectively sub-tenants of the army, the people who made the land arable, the people who serviced the army and its "needs" for almost a century, and the people who over the past three years have been running an extremely brave movement against the abuse of power and for their own freedom? Apparently, they have no say in anything at all.

The BoR admits that the tenants' moral claims are valid, and that in a world in which basic principles of fair play existed, these moral claims would be sufficient to secure the land. However, not only is there no real way of penalizing the army for sitting on the land for 60 years without a valid lease, there is also no way of accommodating the tenants because, apparently, the army was not allowed to sub-let the land in the first place, and as such there is no provision for the tenants.

At the end of the day, it will hardly be surprising if the army does succeed in making the land its own, as it seems to be doing with little difficulty whenever and wherever it feels like. But in this case, the political battle of the past three years is also a telling factor. ■

Agri sector ready to face WTO challenges

BY OUR STAFF REPORTER

LAHORE—Provincial Minister for Agriculture Muhammad Arshad Khan Lodhi has said the government is giving special attention to promote education, health and agriculture sectors. As many as Rs 16 billion have been allocated for annual development projects and it would help reduce unemployment in the province.

While addressing at The Nation forum, the provincial Minister said the government has achieved wheat procurement target during the current season. He said it is for the first time that the wheat growers have secured above support price at their fields due to strategy chalked out under the directions of the Punjab Chief Minister Chaudhry Pervez Elahi. The Minister anticipated

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Good production of rice and cotton and said current rains will give boost to the agricultural crops.

The Minister said agriculture sector is fully prepared to take up the challenges of WTO. A WTO Cell has been established in the agriculture department to create awareness among the growers, he added.

He said there is vast potential to boost export of agricultural products.

"We are already in export market of rice, mango and citrus and soon cotton would be added in this list as the government is focusing to increase production of contamination-free cotton."

He underlined the need to improve marketing and research of agricultural products so that the growers can get due share of their produce.

The Minister said agriculture is the backbone of national economy. It is contributing 24.7 per cent in GDP and engaged 44 per cent of people in work. He said about 75 per cent of population is directly or indirectly associated with the agriculture sector.

Speaking on law and order situation in the province, he said the

The Nation Forum

government fully realises its responsibility and using all resources to maintain peace and stability.

He said it is prime responsibility of elected representatives to secure life and property of people.

Referring to Sialkot jail tragic incident, he said the government took stern action against police

official of DIG rank on the issue of law and order.

"Those responsible for the Sialkot tragedy will be dealt with iron hand and they will be given exemplary punishment," the Minister maintained.

About ongoing national politics, he said all issues can be resolved through dialogues.

"All the national issues will be settled through discussions and it is the demand of democracy to keep the doors open for parleys," he observed.

"The democratic process is on its way due to efforts of Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali and the PML (Q) President Ch Shujat Hussain," he added.

"We are thankful to President Gen Pervez Musharraf for restoring democracy in the country as per roadmap given to the

Supreme Court of Pakistan".

He said the restructuring process of PML is underway throughout the province.

"We would soon start membership process after which party elections would be held," he revealed.

On the core issue of price-hike and unemployment, he said that the government was fully aware of the grave situation.

"The government has adopted appropriate measures to check price-hike and they would deliver positive results within a year," he claimed.

About the flood situation, he said the situation is under control in Punjab.

There is nothing serious so far and all concerned departments have been put on alert and ready to serve people in any unexpected situation, he added.