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People of a lesser god

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On Saturday May 24, a 20-member strong delegation comprising of the media persons and some members of the Punjab Provincial Assembly went to the chak 5/4 L Okara military farms to see the condition of the tenants there which has been the subject matter of much of press reports recently.

The delegation could not follow the normal route to chak 5/4 as the Rangers had barricaded all the entrances to the villages, which are in a state of virtual siege. A circuitous route was therefore followed. While returning via the main route, however, the rangers and police led by an Army Major intercepted the convoy and detained the members at gunpoint. After some altercation and realizing that they were under the gaze of cameras the rangers allowed the delegation to leave but did not permit the members to address a scheduled press conference in the city.

The tenants of Okara military farm had harrowing tales to tell.

Starting with the recent murder of a sixty year old tenant Amir Ali on May 11 allegedly by a hail of bullets fired by the Rangers for stepping out of his house the frightened tenants took the visitors on a journey into the past to highlight the long nights of horror and terror endured by them.

The Rangers have claimed that Amir Ali was killed in cross fire between two rival groups of tenants in the village and refused to carry out the post mortem. The defiant and valiant tenants refused to buy the story and knocked the door of judiciary to have post mortem held. The result of the post mortem is awaited.

This is not the first time when the security agencies have sought to cover up evidence, which could incriminate them.

Remember the Tando Bahwal massacre in 1992 how an Army Major killed in cold blood nine villagers at the behest of a relatives of his who had a land dispute with the slain villagers. The local army command made a presentation to the then Prime Minister at the site claiming that the nine villagers were actually RAW agents. Arms bearing marks of Indian make were 'recovered' from them and shown to the Prime Minister. But the press and independent observers refused to buy the military's story and persisted in demanding an inquiry.

The guilty in Tando Bahawal mayhem were punished not because of the so called 'built in system' of accountability in the military but because of the tenacity and persistence of civil society insisting on unearthing the truth. Let the post mortem report of Amir Ali be made public. Who knows it may shed in-

valuable light on the murder of 18 tenants during the last two years.

The villagers recalled how in January 2002, tenant Bashir Ahmed was shot and killed on the orders of a serving army officer, how two more tenants were killed in Dipalpur and Pirowal, again on the orders of army officers in May that year and how the next month a man and woman in Pirowal died following their siege for several weeks. In August 2002, one tenant in Okara died allegedly due to torture while in custody, the villagers said.

The list is long and growing. In the past few months alone seven tenants have been killed in the ownership dispute between the tenants and the military. Most of these killings have remained uninvestigated, the tenants allege. Besides, a large number

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of tenants activists have been locked in jail without charge, many carry permanent wound and torture marks. Hundreds face criminal charges and are shuttling from court to court.

The villages are barricaded and neither the inmates are allowed to go out nor outsiders allowed to enter. The harassed children are afraid to go to schools in the nearby chaks. Their parents have been served notices that the absenting students will be struck off the rolls as a pressure tactic to force them sign on the dotted line. Tenants falling sick cannot leave their homes for hospitals in the city. Five deaths have occurred during the last months because of the non-availability of proper medical care in the villages, the villagers alleged. Even the relatives of the tenants living outside the farmlands are arrested and used to pressure their relative tenants into submitting before the rangers.

At the centre of the dispute is the demand of the

military that the peasants give up their right to tenancy and sign new contracts as rent payers. The tenants reject this saying that as tenants they cannot be ejected while as rent payers they will be at the mercy of the farm managers.

The Punjab government's board of revenue says that the land does no longer belong to the army, its lease period having already expired long ago. How can the military seek renegotiation of terms with tenants about a land, which does not belong to it, the board of revenue maintains.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has asked the administration of Okara military farms to place before it the complete record of how the harvest share received from the tenants been disposed of all these years that the land has been under its control. But what respect can the civilian board of revenue or the Public Accounts Committee attract from those who have shown scant respect to the country's supreme law, the constitution, itself?

"They are not making the record public because it would reveal how the poor peasants are exploited to provide fodder for their ponies and milk and dairy products for their children at our expense," the tenants say.

The tenants are represented by the Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) who have put up a valiant fight. They have been seeking the support of political parties, the civil society and the media in projecting their plight. Last week they came to my office as well.

Recounting the details of their meeting with the Rangers their leader recalled how at one such meeting late last year they were threatened by officers in uniform.

The AMP has been demanding that the owner of the land, which is the Punjab government, should be the arbitrator in the dispute. They also say that it is not possible to talk with the Rangers in an atmosphere of coercion, siege and threats and intimidation.

We must stop treating the tenants of military farms as people of a lesser god. Their persecution, torture, hounding and eviction attempts must be stopped forthwith. The civil society must condemn the tenants' bashing in Okara as state terrorism as much as it condemns state terrorism in Kashmir. Already the dispute has brought into focus the naked attempts at land grabbing by the country's most powerful landowners. Its persistence, apart from bringing untold miseries on hapless tenants, will only expose much worse.

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