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Procuring zakat becomes an ordeal for many because of the cumbersome procedure

Charity News

By Shahzada Irfan

zakat

Distribution of zakat among the deserving has always been a sensitive matter and the onus of finding genuine recipients lies mostly with the state. Keeping this obligation in view, different governments have introduced different systems over the years to ensure 'transparency and efficiency' in the system but experimentation is not yet over. Every time, reports of misappropriation of funds, bias on the part of zakat distribution machinery and other irregularities are received by the concerned quarters.

The present government has also taken some steps to streamline the system. However, on the contrary, some of these steps have led to creation of complexities even higher in number and gravity as compared to the ones experienced previously. Distribution of zakat, which was mainly in the hands of the armed forces personnel last year, is now the responsibility of the district government. It has to distribute it through district zakat committees and local zakat committees at grassroots level. Local committees being under the political influence of the district government, many believe the zakat distribution system needs revamping in order to function independently and address genuine public complaints.

Unlike in the past, this year the government decided to make zakat payments through pay orders or cross cheques. This decision was reportedly taken after receiving repeated complaints that some zakat office clerks or members of committees used to retain their 'share' in the funds while handing over approved amounts in cash to the recipients.

"On certain occasions the recipients were asked to sign receipts mentioning higher amounts than those actually given to them," said Rizwan Fareed Khan, union council member from Sanda area. He said by transferring amounts through banks, the government had put an end to bribes and extortion which were crippling the whole system.

However, there are others who feel they have been made to suffer because of this decision. Rasheeda Bibi, a recipient of Rs 5,000 under rehabilitation allowance, told TNS she had to pass through nerve-breaking moments to get an account opened with the bank. "I am the first one in my family to open a bank account and nobody was willing to introduce me to the bank manager," she said.

Rasheeda went on to say that many applicants are too old and most of them do not have identity cards. Opening a bank account is something next to impossible for them, she added. Rasheeda complained the bank managers were also reluctant to open such accounts as they were well aware of the fact that such accounts were a liability for them.

Similarly, the procedure to approve and distribute *Jahez* Fund (Dowry allowance) from zakat money has been revised by the government. Previously, a father seeking help for the marriage of his daughter had to apply for the allowance which is at present fixed at Rs 10,000 maximum per successful applicant. But under the revised scheme, the girl has to apply herself for the allowance and appear in person before the chairman of the local zakat committee. As dowry allowance cases are approved after extra-ordinary delays, sometimes the girl has to continue visiting zakat committee offices even after her marriage with her *nikah nama* (marriage certificate) to receive the approved amount.

"This leads to many problems and sometimes conflicts arise between spouses or between their families," observed Mujahid Musa, a social worker in Shadbagh area. Mujahid cited case in his locality where a husband had threatened to divorce his wife when he learnt that she had been to the office of the chairman of the local zakat committee. The woman had applied for *jahez* fund before her marriage and had hidden the fact from her husband.

Mujahid said in our society, it was impossible for a married girl to live with her in-laws once they came to know that she had received zakat to meet her marriage expenditures. Mujahid lamented that in Lahore there were 1282 local zakat committees but the number of sanctioned cases for each year was only 350. "The number needs to be revised to at least one case per committee in the city," he opined.

An indepth study of the issue reveals that all the powers rest with the local zakat committees consisting of seven general members and at least two women from the locality. Every year, people of the area apply for zakat and the committee approves cases of a selected few. The committee has the authority either to approve *Guzara* allowance (sustenance allowance) worth Rs 500 per month per person or one-time *Bahaali* allowance (Rehabilitation Package) ranging from Rs 5,000 to Rs 50,000 per person.

Kaneez Begum, an unsuccessful applicant said the zakat chairman in her area had

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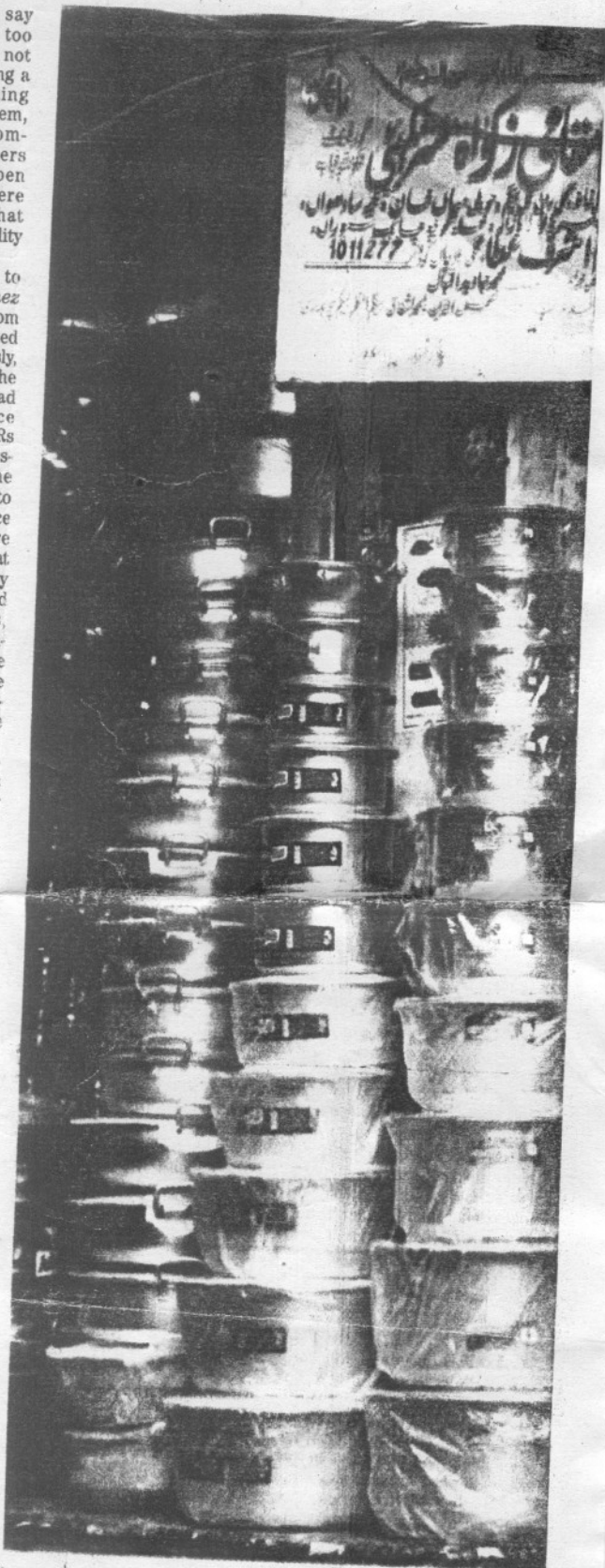
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handpicked his courtiers and personal employees to receive sustenance allowance on regular basis. She said there was no one to check this irregularity. Some of these recipients already had other sources of income. Kaneez complained that there were cases where rehabilitation packages worth Rs 5,000 to Rs 50,000 had been approved for people col-

lecting maximum number of votes in local bodies and general elections.
On a visit to a zakat committee office, TNS found out that there was unnecessary delay in clearing zakat approval cases. Sometimes, applications that could be processed in a week lay unattended for almost a year. A perturbed councillor informed

the fact that under Shariah, zakat money could not lapse or be utilised for any other purpose than the welfare of the poor.

Students of *deeni madaris* (religious institutions) have been affected the most by the revision in zakat application and approval process. Previously, students in a *madrasah* had to get his or her zakat application form endorsed by the head of the institution they were studying in and this was enough. However, now the students have been asked to get approval from their native town's concerned local zakat committees' all nine members.

Mufti Sarfraz Naeemi, head of Jamia Naeemia, told TNS that students had to travel to their cities as far as Abbottabad in the north and Karachi in the south and hunt for all the members of the local zakat committees to get their forms endorsed. He said as the poor students could not afford to travel every other day and find all the members under one roof, not even a single case of his institution had been approved in the current year.

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It was also learnt that the current members of Lahore District's Zakat Committee who belong to different walks of life, were interviewed at 10 Div last year. One member per town, besides chairman and two women members, was inducted in the district committee to head the affairs of 1,282 local zakat committees in all the six towns of the city.

On the other hand, these 1,282 committees were formed in the mosques under show-of-hand formula amid charges of government patronage, boycotts and politicisation of the whole system.

During the preparation of this report, various visits were paid to the District Zakat Office located at Sham Nagar but hardly any competent authority was available to comment on the issue. However, Prof Siddique Akbar, district committee member from Ravi Town, who also holds additional charge of Shalimar Town temporarily, was approached on a public complaints hearing day.

Talking to TNS, Siddique said the district committee was aware of the public complaints and was looking into them on merit. He said it was strange that people were never happy and were mostly complaining against whatever decision was taken by the government.

He said the cheque system was introduced to curb the practice adopted by clerks and committee members of demanding cash from recipients on different pretexts. "There were even complaints that some zakat committees charged stationery and processing fee charges from recipients," he added.

Siddique said the district committee reacted to the complaints and allocated Rs 1,800 per month per committee under stationery allowance and started paying money through cheques to ensure that not even a single penny goes to the undeserving people.

Furthermore, he said that local committees should give large amounts under rehabilitation packages on equal liking. Siddique said it was a foolproof system to check whether the amount used for the purpose was sanctioned or not. He, however, admitted that only 1 per cent of such cases were probed on random basis due to lack of time and resources.

On complications involved in zakat allocation for *deeni madaris*, he said the intent was that the locals of an applicant's native town were more aware of his or her financial status than the head of the institution where they were studying. Previously, the approval of the head of the institution was enough for the purpose but now we see whether the applicant is a deserving one or not.

Similarly, the committee also checks whether the said institution is imparting genuine education or fanning sectarianism or religious extremism, he said. "The religious institutes of the second type have been put on negative list and are not eligible to receive zakat money at all," he concluded.