

Preventing environmental disasters

By Omar R. Quraishi

WHEN it comes to the environment and its protection, there are some — the old traditionalists — who are of the view that such issues are perhaps fashionable and advocated only by those who work in foreign-funded NGOs in Pakistan.

The argument often used to deflate the environmental gooders goes something like this: a country like Pakistan, where up to a third of the population lives in poverty, where ensuring two square meals a day for the family is the *raison d'être* for living for a vast majority of its citizens, how can anyone possibly talk of things like protecting the environment, preventing the cutting of trees, or having a clean coastline, or wishing for sustainable development?

However, developments, or should one say catastrophes, in recent years on this front prove the hollowness of such arguments. Yes, those talking about protecting the environment or working towards sustainable development may be mostly those working at highly-paid jobs in the NGO sector and holding conferences in five-star hotels but the fact is that these issues now affect even ordinary Pakistanis all the time.

To divorce them from other key issues like access to health and education, the right to a decent living in a reasonably safe and clean environment and the right to breathe toxin-free air and to drink water that will not kill you or your children is to miss the point that protecting the environment has

sion that when it comes to such problems the government just doesn't want to change its ways.

First, in July 2003, Karachi's coastline was ravaged by an oil spill caused by the oil tanker, 'Tasman Spirit'. For over two weeks the ship remained grounded in the middle of Karachi harbour with the government agency responsible for the water channel, the Karachi Port Trust, claiming that everything was under control. The ship eventually broke into two discharging thousands of gallons of crude into the sea.

Faced with a public and media criticism, the KPT launched a somewhat half-hearted attempt to salvage the wreckage, as Karachi's most visited beach area, thronged by thousands every day, had to be closed to the public for reasons of health safety. Here too, an environmental disaster had a significant impact on the lives of people, not only on those who lived close to the coast-

The report, in effect, confirmed what the media and experts had been saying all along and contradicted the official version of events and their effects as they happened in July and August 2003.

Unfortunately, other than proving the KPT and other government agencies wrong, the report's release 16 months after the disaster happened does not do much else. No mention is made of any action taken by the federal government or its agencies against officials who showed negligence or failed to act promptly to transfer the oil from the vessel, which lay stuck in the sea for over two weeks.

It can hence be presumed that no action of any sort was taken against any official for this catastrophe, for the inept way in which the initial running aground of the ship was handled or for the way information was kept from the media and the public was misled into thinking that all was well.

And then, earlier this year, a more tragic disaster took place, this time in the Hyderabad region. Many people, including several children, lost their lives after drinking contaminated water. Initial reports suggested that the water's source was Manchar lake in Dadu district and that it had been contaminated because a canal, which flowed into it, was now bringing in industrial waste.

As usual, the response of local agencies and their officials was to ignore the incident itself but to constantly blame each other. Again, claims were made of relief camps being set up to administer medical care to the victims and various min-

imal life and going about doing the things they want to do.

In recent years, many cases of environmental degradation impinging on people's lives have been reported in the media. In one shocking case reported from the town of Manga Mandi on Lahore's outskirts, it was revealed that years of fluoride poisoning had contaminated the town's underground water to the extent that dozens of children had developed bone deformities, affecting their legs in particular.

The poisoning was linked to the presence of make-shift factories operating in the town which were discharging highly toxic effluent. The toxic liquid eventually found its way into the groundwater supply which the city's residents lifted through hand pumps and used for drinking and washing purposes. The story was reported in 2000 and there was great public uproar. Ministers and other senior officials visited the village and assured the townspeople that everyone would be treated at government expense.

According to reports at that time, 134 people required extensive treatment which was borne by the Punjab government. However, nothing was said about what action, if any, the government had taken against the factory owners. Clearly, the people of Manga Mandi did not have the resources or awareness to file a case in a court of law and even if they did, there was no forum for them to seek legal redress, given that environmental courts sanctioned under the Pakistan Environment Protection Act of 1997 have not yet been established in any province.

Four years have gone by and no one remembers that incident and the only place where one can find details will be in old newspaper files. Did the government or the Punjab environmental protection agency take any action against the polluters? Follow-up reports suggested that no action was taken at all, despite the fact that it had such a crippling effect on the health of several dozen people.

Two other, more recent, environmental catastrophes and the way the government (mis)handled them, reinforces the impres-

line or on the fishermen community, but also on thousands of families who could no longer visit the beach for recreational purposes.

The government agencies made much of the clean-up operation and tried to defend their mismanaged and belated response at various forums. Claims were made that the operation to clean up the sea was successful and that the version of the affected communities and their representatives (such as the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum which said that the disaster had a very bad effect on Sindh's fishing community) were wild exaggerations.

Though the beach was to be closed for at least a couple of months, it was opened in around half that time, the earlier-than-planned opening also being hailed as proof that everything was returning to normal and that the water was safe.

As for the impact on the health of thousands of people living along the coast, the damage to the fisheries sector and the key question of who would pay compensation for the spill, and how much, were all brushed under the carpet.

Again, most people (especially those not directly affected by it) would have almost forgotten about the Tasman Spirit were it not for the release late last month of a report by the federal environment ministry detailing the damage caused by the oil spill. The federal government's official view seemed to completely contradict what the KPT had been saying all along about the effects of the oil spill.

It said that a coastal population of 305,000 was affected by the fumes and that ecological damage was caused over a marine area in excess of 2,000 square kilometres. KPT's claim that the clean-up operation was similarly nullified by the report when it noted that of the oil that was spilt, less than one per cent was recovered.

It also said that the oil residue, which by now had settled on the sea floor, would stay for several years and would have further effects on the marine life that would come in contact with it.

deaths of many people, this disaster too was forgotten.

Then, on December 3, during the proceedings of the Senate, the federal environment ministry, in response to a question from a senator, finally gave its version of the whole affair. Its version only confirmed what had been originally believed regarding the source of contamination. In that sense, it contained nothing new.

Like the report on the Tasman Spirit oil spill, it too made no mention of any action taken against any official, something that is only to be expected given the number of fatalities involved. It made a general statement of intent that the issue of the contamination of Manchar lake (which was the source of the drinking water, and hence the crux of the problem) would be resolved once the Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD) project was completed. But doesn't the environment ministry know that the RBOD is nowhere near completion?

The Manga Mandi tragedy is long forgotten, though it happened only four years ago. It could well happen again, and could even be unfolding as one writes this (only to be revealed later and then, as usual, brushed under the carpet). As for the oil spill's report and the environment ministry's explanation of the Hyderabad deaths, they are not only belated but also incomplete.

They say nothing about any action taken at the administrative level to ensure that such tragedies either do not happen or that the response next time is prompt and more effective. In fact, they confirm the widely-held public belief that no government official is ever held responsible or punished when environmental or public health disasters happen.

This lack of accountability is especially disturbing given that in most cases there is enough evidence to the contrary, in the form of media reports or even eyewitness accounts, to assign blame and punish errant officials. Unless that happens and we learn from the past, such disasters will continue to happen with worrying regularity.

Environmental
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