**Stoning the environment to death**

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June 24, 2021

The stone crushing mafia appears to think it is more powerful than any court of law. Indeed, it certainly appears to have some influential backers.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Power Crushers (Installation, Operation and Regulation) Act was promulgated on January 3, 2020. Yet by March of the same year, the Supreme Court had directed provincial governments both in KP and the Punjab to take swift action against stone crushing at the Margalla Hills due to the environmental fallout. In September 2020, the apex court passed an order towards this end. It also directed the authorities to “to ensure tree plantation at the areas affected from stone crushing at Margalla Hills besides issuing directives to ensure tree plantation on the roadsides of Express Highway as well as Kashmir Highway”.

Nevertheless, the KP Assembly, seemingly under pressure from vested interests — there are rumours that many provincial parliamentarians own stone crushing plants — amended the existing legislation to reduce the distance between the stone crushing unit and residential areas from 1 kilometre to 300 metres.

On June 15, 2021, the apex court decided to flex its own muscles. While hearing an appeal by the provincial government against the nullifying of stone crushing laws — the SC directed the KP government to file a report on the aforementioned amendments. It is unfathomable that a provincial set-up would knowingly violate SC directives. Equally audacious was the fact that the PPP’s Aitzaz Ahsan, both a veteran politician and lawyer, appeared before the court to represent the stone crushers. Maybe Mr Ahsan would like to explain how defending a party that has and continues to violate SC orders does not amount to contempt of court.

The SC has reminded all concerned that legislation regarding stone crushing must be scrapped in order to prioritise natural resources. After all, stones may constitute a free commodity for the crushers but the cost to the environment and human health is irreparable

The apex court also asked the Environment Department to submit a report on the estimated local consumption of the crushed stones, while outlining the extent of smuggling to other provinces and neighbouring countries. As well as detailing the effects of large-scale stone crushing by power-machines.

Dr M Qasim, Dean of Chemical and Environmental Sciences at the University of Swat, told this scribe that his department conducted a study last year and found 157 sites along the Swat river belt which were being used for stone excavation. Naturally, the heavy machinery has destroyed the entire riverside greenbelt, as well as trees, while wiping out many natural habitats and riverside ecosystems. Inevitable dust pollution is another hazard affecting all living and breathing species. The researchers, unfortunately, don’t want to be named due to fear of reprisals from those involved in this environmentally hazardous business.

Implementation of court orders and legal frameworks in KP province poses a bigger challenge than in other parts of the country. This is because of the traditional power hierarchy. Every Khan has his own ‘empire’, declared or undeclared, with its own set of ‘laws’.

Nevertheless, residents approached the SC for relief but only focused on noise and dust pollution. Whereas prevailing issues go beyond these to include depletion of habitats and ecosystems that risk changing the entire ecology of the region not least by accelerating the impact of climate change on the local population. Human health, biological diversity and water resources would be affected the most. The SC has reminded all concerned that legislation regarding stone crushing must be scrapped in order to prioritise these resources while curbing the greed that is gobbling them up. After all, stones may constitute a free commodity for the crushers but the cost to the environment and human health is irreparable.

I have one question for Mr Ahsan, if I may be so bold. How do you sleep at night? Or do you not care about the environment and what future generations will inherit? And as for the KP Assembly, which has illegally been flouting court directives and encouraging environmentally hazardous legislation, it must remember that it is there to represent the people’s interests and not those of certain mafias.

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