

The neglect of the agricultural sector for over three decades by successive governments has created serious problems. It has adversely affected sustained production of primary agricultural commodities, i.e. wheat, rice, cotton and sugar cane. Water shortage is now a major constraint affecting food self-sufficiency. Besides natural factors like an inadequate amount of rainfall, mismanagement of water resources is a major reason for adverse agricultural production. High prices of inputs i.e. fertilizers, pesticides, quality seeds, diesel, tractors, and agricultural machinery and implements, has caused low yield per acre.

The yield of crops per acre is dismally low as compared to India. Punjab was the granary of undivided India. East Punjab continues to be India's food granary. But in Punjab (Pakistan), which is Pakistan's food granary, wheat and rice production is woefully low as compared to India, China, Australia, America, Argentina, and other wheat producing countries. And this is because of the high price of inputs, shortage of water and lack of interest in agriculture on the part of the national leadership.

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Need for a food policy

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BY AIR MARSHAL (RETD) AYAZ AHMED KHAN

He Nadeem

by unqualified and uninterested people. Corruption in the food, revenue, irrigation and police, and nepotism and inefficiency in the "Nazim Shahi" system, the so called new system of local government, has added to the rot. The new system has not benefited the small land holder. It is a bonanza for the feudal influentials and politicians, who are busy grabbing land with the help of district, tehsil and union Nazims. The tiller farmer works 365 days a year from 6 in the morning till midnight in scorching summer heat as well as in the chill of winter. There are no holidays for him. Even after such toil, he does not break even, is always in debt and lives from hand to mouth. The landless hari is always on the verge of starvation.

Sugar cane was an exception last year. The sugar cane surplus was on account of large scale sugar cane sowing in 2003 because of low wheat procurement prices. Truth dawned on the growers when sugar mills did not accept the heavy supply of sugar cane. Sugar mills could not handle the flood

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of sugar cane because it was surplus to their requirements and was beyond the crushing capacity of the mills. Besides, they were unable to sell surplus sugar stocks. Presently, wheat is being sowed all over the country. But the acreage and yield is unlikely to improve because of the reasons stated above.

In 1998, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had announced the wheat procurement price of Rs 300 per maund. This price was not changed till 2004. During this period of six years the price of diesel, fertilizers and pesticides had nearly doubled. The lack of sympathy for the Kissan, absence of political will and lack of bureaucratic commitment to seriously address the

problems of the farmers, has caused the present grave situation. The government must explain why prices of fertilizers, pesticides, tractors and diesel continue to be sky high.

One remedy is that agricultural (wheat, cotton, and sugar cane) pricing policy should be made transparent. There is a strong suspicion of the involvement of the mafia in the manipulation of farm pricing policies. The sugar mill mafia would not like the price of sugar cane to be increased because it cuts into the billions they make. The powerful cotton cartel of ginning and textile mill industrialists forces down the price of raw cotton, depriving the farmer of his rightful earnings. The cotton price crisis hits the cotton grower every year. The flour mills and the food bureaucracy are hand in glove, and this cartel is responsible for the short fall in wheat production.

I have been told that there is not a single wheat silo in Pakistan to ensure wheat storage in a hygienic manner. And this provides evidence of low

priority given to the food sector by all successive governments, including the present government. Silos are a basic requirement for wheat storage. One reason could be that open space for wheat storage is rented by the food departments from "own parties-mafias". The matter needs to be investigated.

Acute water shortage is becoming chronic. Besides less rain and snow, man made water shortage, i.e. neglectful mismanagement by irrigation departments is a major factor for low crop production. Once driving along the Chashma barrage, I noticed that it was full to the brim, while farmers in Sind and lower Punjab were starved of water urgently required for new grown wheat. Water is made available when it not needed and made scarce when urgently needed. The feudal influentials do not make noise about water shortage because special channels, and minor drains have been built to supply water to their huge farms. Irrigation officials want bribes from small farmers for timely water supply, and steal water of small land holders for the benefit of the rich and the influential. The Prime Minister is requested to issue a government White Paper as to the causes of acute water shortage and formulate a policy to redress the acute water crisis.