**What s up in Gwadar?**

BY K H U R R A M H US A I N 2020-12-31

SOMETIME around the first week of December, the residents of Gwadar woke up to find work taking place to build a large metal fence that would stretch from just north of the old airport and extend westward along a road known as the Balochistan Broadway Avenue. The total length of the fence would be 24 kilometres, and according to what the locals were able to gather, it is planned to extend in a straight line along the central divider of Broadway Avenue and then cut straight south to the sea. Along the way, it will cut two habitations of 30 to 40 houses into two parts, one part inside the fence and one outside.

The master plan for Gwadar includes three special zones, known as the Gwadar Port Free Zone (2,280 acres), GIEDA Industrial Zone (3,000 acres) and EPZA export processing zone (1,000 acres). As part of the infrastructure development programme for these three zones, a series of projects are envisioned, including construction of roads, utilities, warehouses and security. In the project description, fencing is given as one of the elements of the security plan.

But the strange thingis that the fence is being built nowhere near any of these three zones.

Nobody seems to know who is building it since it does not feature in the provincial or federal development projects. Some press reports cite `sources` saying it is being built at the behest of the Chinese, who are keeping a wary eye on the security situation in the region since three separate militant groups came under one umbrella in November 2018, and then went on to launch a series of assaults starting with the attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, followed by the one on the Pakistan Stock Exchange building, and then a series of small ambushes on army and FC personnel in Kech, Turbat, Panjgur, Ormara, and so on.

However, it is not clear if the fence is indeed being built at the behest of the Chinese. Nowhere have the Chinese owned it themselves, and there is no public record of any Chinese demands for it, or references to it, in the recent past. But the following did happen.

Days after the construction of the fence was noted by locals, Senator Mir Kabir Mohammad Shahi of the National Party floated a sinister takeat a press conference in Quetta. He said the fence is part of an attempt to separate Gwadar from Balochistan. He invoked memories of an older attempt under the Musharraf regime to bring Gwadar under the control of the federal government, reminded his audience of the federal government`s attempt to seize the coastline and islands of Sindh and Balochistan via a presidential ordinance a few months ago, and said the fence will divide the city into two, with those who live on the outside requiring permits to be able to cross.

And then days after this press conference, anonline news agency that calls itself the `Independent News Pakistan` seemed to carry a response. Its report quoted the Gwadar Port Authority chairman describing the fence as `a long proposed desire that has come true now` that will enable `a transformation of Gwadar to become safer and more secure on modern age`s demand`. The report was carried by a number of Pakistani newspapers who treat the INP as a wire service.

That report aimed to distribute responsibility for the project widely, and locally. `In collaboration with the army, Makran Administration, Gwadar Development Authority, Gwadar Port Authority and Balochistan government, installation of iron fences will complete in phases,` it said.

The same report quoted `a senior GDA of ficial` whose words deserve to be scrutinised in full, so here they are reproduced exactly as they appeared in that INP report.

`Meanwhile, GDA senior of ficial said that since Chinese people came here and exerted their energies to many assignments did not venture out toenjoy routine life in the streets and markets of Gwadar due to security issues. `Recent terror attack at private hotel in Gwadar had further limited their foot movement,` he added. `They deserve a normal life free from all sorts of threats. After rigorous work, they need to go for outing and cherishing marvelous walk at boisterous beaches of Gwadar. They must have an environment in which they dine outside enjoying and feasting their eyes on traditional Gwadar cuisines. They seek leisure time besides shopping spree with their families, he added.

It is worthwhile to add that INP takes Chinese investments in Pakistan as a key focus and on its website claims `[t]he INP has bilateral news exchange arrangements with China`s State-run News Agency XINHUA and China Radio International (CRI)`.

The language of the INP report makes clear it has not been draf ted by a Pakistani, and that it is a directresponse totheconcerns aroundthefence such as those of Senator Shahi. So let us ask one more time: at whose behest is this fence being built, and for what purpose? In some places it is said that the fence is part of the Gwadar Smart Port Cities project. But nobody connected with that project has any inkling of it, neither the Makran Division bureaucracy, nor the GDA nor officials from relevant departments of the Balochistan government such as planning.

These are the people tasked with implementing the smart port cities project, and thus far none of them seem to know anything about this fence.

I have long maintained that we in Pakistan don`t have a clear idea of what exactly is being built in our country under the umbrella of CPEC. There are important gaps between what we are told is being built, and what we see coming up on the ground. The Balochistan Bar Association has filed a legal challenge before the Balochistan High Court in Quetta around the fence, and the first hearing will be held today. Let`s hope this legal action can shine a light on what is going on.  The writer is a member of staff.

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