

A costly & harmful project

House & Buildings

Down 8-2-05

By Roedad Khan

THE Margallah Hill, a gift of nature and an irreplaceable asset, is threatened by a new danger — a road tunnel through the hills to link Haripur to Islamabad. This strange project, floated by some powerful real estate agents, apart from being a menace to the ecology and environment of the region, raises many other questions which need answers. But let me first provide some background information for the benefit of readers.

Unfortunately, although the entire area was declared a National Park by the federal government in 1980, it has been disfigured, decimated and defiled as a result of activities which are prejudicial to its preservation, environmentally hazardous and incompatible with the objectives of a national park. A cement factory was established in 1984 in the green area. Its requirement of raw materials — lime stone — is quarried in the National Park. Consequently, the park's features, its rock, soil, fauna and flora are being destroyed. Besides, the factory is creating serious pollution.

Hundreds of stone-crushers were installed in some of the most beautiful valleys in the National Park and rock-mining allowed. This has totally destroyed the landscape, the natural geographical formations, archaeological features and native plants. An industrial atmosphere has been created in an otherwise pristine environment

incompatible with the objectives of the Park would be declared illegal. Nothing happened. The writ petition was dismissed. Who wants to antagonize the rich and the powerful in this country? The wonder is how we achieved some success, however limited, in the teeth of opposition from a powerful mafia. We succeeded in stopping quarrying in Shahdarra, Kalinjar, Sinyari and Shah Allah Ditta valleys.

The Capital Development Authority was set up to develop the city of Islamabad and the rural environs. Its responsibilities and authority are strictly limited to the area demarcated for the federal territory and to specified functions. It never had the resources or the authority to develop transport links between the capital and other parts of the country. The Lahore-Islamabad motorway is part of the National Highway network, built and managed by the Highway

agency or dire necessity justifies CDA appropriating to itself powers that vest in higher inter-governmental bodies?

Even for a small project, and much more so for a project likely to cost billions of rupees, it is essential to work out and compare the cost and benefits. Clearly, this has not been done in this case. The cost will certainly be in billions of rupees.

What will be the benefits? It is obvious that the benefits to the ordinary residents of Islamabad will be infinitesimal. Of course, real estate agents and landowners along the route and at the Haripur end of the tunnel will reap huge windfall gains if open season is declared for construction in the Margallah Wildlife Reserve and other adjoining areas. It may be noted that the proposed tunnel will not be opening a new area since Haripur is already connected by good roads to Islamabad via the Nicholson Monument.

It is obvious that the benefits to the ordinary residents of Islamabad will be infinitesimal. Of course, real estate agents and landowners along the route and at the Haripur end of the tunnel will reap huge windfall gains. It may be noted that the proposed tunnel will not be opening a new area since Haripur is already connected by good roads to Islamabad via the Nicholson Monument.

There will be some savings in time and money for some residents of Haripur who find the new route shorter. As traffic flows have not been worked out, it is not possible to specify exactly the size of benefits. However, even a superficial scrutiny shows that the disparity between the high cost and meagre benefits will be enormous.

Who will finance the project and meet the capital and recurring costs. At present, the recurring cost of managing Islamabad city is being largely met from a tax on property holders. The tax rates are the highest in the country but this is acceptable as the municipal services provided in Islamabad are better than elsewhere. There will be a substantial increase in tax rates if CDA throws even part of the bur-

wise pristine environment by the noise of motors and machinery, dynamite-blasting, heavy truck traffic, workers' camps and polluted streams.

Even Rawal Lake, a part of the National Park and the main source of drinking water for Rawalpindi, has not been spared and is threatened by pollution caused by human habitations in the catchment area and all around the lake.

The Margallah Hill Society has been campaigning, in the teeth of opposition from powerful political elements and vested interests against this deliberate degradation and decimation of the environment of the National Park. At this writer's request, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif issued a comprehensive Directive on preservation of the Margallah Hill National Park. "I have received", the directive reads, "disturbing reports that the Margallah Hill National Park has been exposed to activities prejudicial to its preservation and are environmentally hazardous for Islamabad".

The directive remains unimplemented. In desperation, I filed a writ petition in the High Court in the hope that activities

Authority of the federal government.

The Islamabad-Murree road was widened and improved by the Punjab government. How can suddenly and inexplicably the CDA decide that development of road links with adjoining areas in the NWFP is its responsibility? The tunnel project is clearly beyond its charter and a deviation from its proper tasks.

Press reports say that, on the directive of President Musharraf, technical details are being worked out and that construction will begin shortly. The country has a long established system under which procedures are laid down for appraisal of projects and which specify bodies empowered to sanction major projects. The system is intended to ensure that optimum use is made of public funds.

The tunnel project does not appear to have been cleared with the Planning Commission or sanctioned by ECNEC or approved by any higher authority, including the environment division and the environment protection agency. What emer-

throws even part of the burden of managing the tunnel on the local taxpayers. If the net cost of the tunnel is met by the federal budget or, in other words, by the taxpayer, should not the exact burden be disclosed out for public information.

Even if the project is justified as contributing to the welfare of a backward area, the question is whether this is the best use of public funds. Haripur has a population of about 6,92,000. This is 3.9 per cent of the population of the NWFP. While development indicators show that Haripur is better off than most districts of the NWFP, it is still a poor area with vast unmet needs. Surely, the people of Haripur will benefit more from expansion of social services and development of agriculture, industry and power availability, benefiting the public at large more than an additional road link with Islamabad.

Given the dangerous implications for the ecology and environment of the region and the enormous disparity between costs and benefits, the undertaking of the project borders on lunacy. Who will keep this insanity at bay?