**Bulldozed in the capital**

BY U S A M A K H I L J l 2023-05-06

OVER 50 activists and working-class community members, including senior citizens and students, were arrested in Islamabad`s D-13 sector recently for protesting against the forced eviction of working-class people from their homes and the demolition of their houses by the Capital Development Authority (CDA).

This raises a lot of questions and concerns regarding housing, elitism, state attitudes towards protesters, and the role of public officials whose job it is to safeguard the interests of allcitizens,notjustthe rich.

Areas surrounding the parts of Islamabad that have been `developed` and planned by the CDA include scores of sprawling settlements with lowcost as well as informal housing. Most are owned by influential locals who are politically connected and own large swathes of land. In order to meet the housing needs of the tens of thousands of working-class people that service the elite sectors of Islamabad through domestic work, cleaning, plumbing, electrical services, driving, cooking and other work, small plots have been sold over time.

Working-class families living in sectors G-12, F-12, E-12, D-13, etc, have generally sold their properties in their villages in order to afford housing in Islamabad where they can find jobs. A larger number of them live in rented houses.

Those affected also include locals who have inhabited these lands for generations.

While these land transfers, rental contracts and sale of houses have been taking place here for decades, public officials have been absent.

The CDA has not taken any action against local influential families who also have palatial houses on these lands. Most action is taken against the poor. There are defective sewerage systems, and electricity connections are shared by up to 10 families using `check meter` that divides electricity bills, and there are no gas connections.

In the face of Pakistan`s current economic crisis, with unprecedented inflation rates and ris-ing poverty, under what moral authority can the CDA go ahead and bulldoze the homes of working-class people and evict them from their homes? Is it not the state`s responsibility to ensure housing access to its citizens? Is the working class so dispensable that they will be underpaid in the homes of elite Pakistanis, including bureaucrats, but their homes will be demolished mercilessly in the name of the `law`? Is it illegal to be poor in Pakistan? Why does the state not make an equally enthusiastic effort to enforce the legal minimum wage in the country for the working class? The fundamental rights of citizens need to be protected by the state. Article 9 of the Constitution guarantees the right to life, which has been interpreted by the superior judiciary to mean a life with dignity, with access to essential amenities such as housing. Article 14 guarantees the dignity of man and privacy of the home as inviolable rights. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Pakistan has ratified, says: `Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.

Further, the Shehla Zia vs Wapda case of 1992 led to a Supreme Court judgement which cited an Indian supreme court verdict asserting that the right to life cannot be restricted merely to physical existence and must be understood to include adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter.

Import antly, in a case file d by the Awami Workers Party before the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2015 after the Sector I-11 katchi abadi demolitions, the court ordered the government to stop demolishing katchi abadis and come up with a policy for affordable housing. The Senate human rights committee was also briefed on this issue by activist Ismat Shahjahan who was arrested and later released in this operation.

Sindh and Punjab already have katchi abadi policies, but the capital city still does not. With a high rate of rural-to-urban migration and grow-ing employment opportunities in Islamabad, there is a pressing need for parliament to legislate on a katchi abadi law so that the housing needs of the working class can be met in a dignified way rather than having people face the threat of a bulldozer demolishing their homes.

What is also alarming is the constant violation of the right to protest guaranteed by the right to freedom of speech, right to freedom of association and the right to freedom of movement in the Constitution. How can protesters, who are demonstrating for their right to dignity, right to life and right to housing,be arrested and putin jail for `obstructing the work of a civil servant`? Are civil servants not responsible for protecting the interests of the working-class population? The bureaucracy needs an overhaul in attitude where they need to stop acting like the same class that worked for the colonial government before partition. Such attitudes do not behove tax-funded officials whose job is to serve all citizensregardless ofclass.

There needs to be swift action to prioritise the housing needs of the poor. The previous government had started affordable housing projects.

Initiatives for the benefit of the poor must not be scrapped because of political differences. Action must be taken against those who initially grab land and sell or rent it to the poor, and officials who take advantage of such land transfers.

The PDM government must take back the cases against those who demonstrated against such illegal demolitions, release detainees from Adiala jail, and ensure that there are no forced evictions without compensation and resettlement of the inhabitants of these lands. A judicial inquiry and fact finding by a parliamentary committee is essential to set matters right.

Housing is the right of every Pakistani and must be protected.  The wúter is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital ághts.

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