**Hutment inferno**

BY N O M A N A H M E D | 1/29/2020

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| SOME 150 dwellings were gutted in the tragic hutment fire on Jan 21 in Karachi`s Teen Hatti area, leaving many poor folks shelterless. Hutment fires have long been a common occurrence. Dwellings accommodating the most vulnerable and poor of ten catch fire, especially in winter when people need more warmth, and strong winds can cause flames from within to spread out of control.  In the aftermath, monetary compensation is announced and an inquiry ordered.  However, rather than conventional measures, such incidents need a focused approach and a scientific solution.  Hutment blazes, which directly impact the safety and security of the poor and working classes, are caused by many factors. Unsafe methods of cooking is one. Acts of mischief and crime cannot be ruled out, and need to be determined through a forensic inquiry. Also, the shacks are constructed with waste wood, discarded cement blocks, cardboard and other cheap but inflammable material, and the various defects they progressively develop are seldom repaired due to resource constraints. Fire and other disasters thus remain a looming possibility.  Karachi has many typologies of vulnerable settlements that need the attention of administrative agencies, professionals and even ordinary people. Squatters can be found living near high-tension wires, as well as along railway lines, highways, busy arterial roads, manufacturing units, godowns for hazardous material, oil depots, power stations, nullah banks, garbage dumps, etc.  Similarly, labourers can be spotted sleeping on pushcarts, footpaths and road medians, in parks and under flyovers.  Property owners have also increasingly taken to engaging families and individuals f rom low-income groups to set up shacks with temporary structures on their plots. It is a mutually advantageous arrangement where property owners obtain a safeguard against land-grabbers, whereas needy migrants to the city acquire af fordable means of shelter.  This option is especially useful for neoimmigrants as they latch on to opportunities of employment in the same localities.  One finds domestic servants originating from such type of settlement patterns from within the same location. Defence Housing Authority, Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Clifton, Gulistan-e-Jauhar, North Karachi, North Nazimabad, etc display this pattern of temporary occupation in the city.  It is also observed that when such settlers refuse to vacate a site, an invisible hand seems to start a fire to destroy the shelters.  There are cases where a muscleman involved in protecting a settlement dislocates the earlier inhabitants af ter accepting a higher dividend from the next clientele.The only solution is cooperative action and internal mobilisation of the communities concerned. The baseline task begins with correct and up-to-date information about such settlements. The National Population and Housing Census 2017 results can help map locations where the poor reside, and the information so gleaned can be used to support steps towards disaster protection. The Population Census Organisation may be advised to incorporate additional variables in fact-finding work pertinent to shelter characteristics for vulnerability assessment.  At the provincial level, the Sindh Katchi Abadis Authority is mandated to collect and update statistics and profiles of katchi abadis. With professional advice from notfor-profit institutions like the Orangi Pilot Project, Urban Resource Centre and Saiban, workable solutions can be devised.  Acknowledging that the poor do not have access to shelter should be the first step towards reform. Cities are inhabited by all types of income groups, but those that take care of only the rich and af fluent are boundtofail.  Various governments launched programmes to address shelter issues, but with little success. In the 1980s, the Junejo government announced the regularisation of katchiabadis in the hope of preventing the creation of new squatter settlements by declaring a cut-of f date. But the date had to be extended due to public pressure. Three marla (approx 75 square yards) and five marla (125 sq yds) schemes for plot delivery to the downtrodden were also launched. However, poor delivery mechanisms did not allow the bulk of the poor to benefit from these approaches to land distribution. Incompatibility of procedures adopted in such schemes enabled the rich and powerful to transform them into speculative enterprises.  Delayed occupancy, locational disadvantages, cumbersome paperwork, high prices, uncertain distribution of land and corruption were some of the reasons that led to the failure of public housing schemes in cities.  That more than half of Karachi`s population resides in katchi abadis even while there are more than 300,000 vacant residential plots is in fact proof of blatant contradiction in the housing scenario. The present federal government, which seems keen to provide shelter to the shelterless, can learn from past mistakes.  The writer is chairman, Department of Architecture & Planning, NED University, Karachi. |