[**Living on rubble**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770915/living-on-rubble)

[Zofeen T. Ebrahim](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1702/zofeen-t-ebrahim) Published August 19, 2023

The writer is a Karachi-based independent journalist.

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WOULD former chief minister of Sindh Syed Murad Ali Shah be able to live in a house that has been sliced and has no boundary wall at the back, exposing the house completely? Would he be able to live in one for two years? I know I would feel very unsafe.

But that is exactly how thousands of people living next to three nullahs feel. Since 2021, they have been [living like the homeless](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632855) in their own homes after the Sindh government [bulldozed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621477) 6,932 houses situated along three of Karachi’s biggest water channels — the Orangi, Gujjar and Mehmoodabad nullahs — on the orders of the Supreme Court.

The dust emerging from the nullah wall and road construction and the noise of the dredgers and bulldozers cleaning the nullahs must not have been easy for those living on the site. Roshan Sajid, along with her family of eight, living in the informal settlement of Thorani Goth, Sector 15-D, in Orangi, said that living on a pile of rubble for two years has been agonising.

Not only has the demolished wall exposed the kitchen to the elements of nature, rodents from the stormwater drain, and stray dogs and cats, too, come and go at will.

The family’s only bathroom, draped with a blanket to cover the gaping hole which was once a wall, is keeping Roshan “forever anxious for our safety and privacy” and the newly built bedroom of her married son, on the first floor, is in ruins, with the staircase in a fragile state.

Cleaning nullahs has come at a heavy price for Karachi’s residents.

After August 2020’s [record-breaking rains](https://www.dawn.com/news/1576214) of up to 484 millimetres, which submerged a large part of the city, the common refrain was that Karachi had flooded because of the encroachments throttling the waterways.

The former chief minister, while on a round inspecting the various choked arteries of the city, reportedly censured the residents saying the “city is sinking because of your encroachments”.

“Why would anyone want to live close to filthy nullahs and get their homes flooded at the slightest rainfall, if one could afford better neighbourhoods?” countered Roshan. Karachi faces an acute shortage of affordable housing with an estimated 50 per cent of its residents living in informal settlements.

The provincial government’s disparaging attitude towards informal settlements was seen to have influenced the court’s decisions.

Faisal Siddiqi, counsel for the affected families, says that former chief justice of Pakistan, Gulzar Ahmed, had “labelled the affected encroachers and land grabbers” and regretted that Article 184(3) of the Constitution that aimed at protecting fundamental rights, such as dignity, property, a fair judicial process, and livelihoods, was “misapplied”, leading to far-reaching consequences for the people who had lost their homes, jobs and peace due to the “hasty order by the then-CJP, who was unwilling to listen to reason or reflect on the consequences or … to explore alternative solutions”.

The Orangi drain had been used as a garbage dump and the exercise continues in the absence of a proper solid waste management system. However, after the drain was cleaned, most admitted that 2022 was the first good year when their homes did not flood with nullah sludge.

But the affected residents have certainly been given short shrift in the process. The paltry sum of Rs180,000 paid in the last two years, which was half the promised temporary compensation till the government resettles the affected families, was not even enough to carry out repair work on their homes. Today, most say they are living in debt.

The three constitutional petitions [filed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647454) by over 40 civil society organisations against the Sindh government’s contempt of court, at various points back in 2021, had failed to shake off the latter’s stupor.

Another petition filed against the former CM for not complying with the court’s earlier directives and for not honouring his pledges was [heard](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770485/sc-summons-murad-today-on-contempt-plea-by-displaced-families) by the Supreme Court this week. Swift [orders were given](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770719/sc-sets-timeframe-for-payment-to-demolition-drive-victims) for the release of the unpaid amount within the next 30 days.

As for resettlement, the court was told the government was mulling over two proposals. It had been mulling over this for some time now and nobody knows what the hitch is.

But in either scenario — whether the affected get land and a house or land and money to build a house — the lives of thousands will be turned topsy-turvy because of job losses, longer commutes, which would mean paying a higher fare, and the discontinuation or interruption in studies for many.

In addition, they will get a much smaller unit than most are living in right now, in an unfamiliar neighbourhood without old friends and neighbours. It is indeed a heavy price to pay for getting three of Karachi’s water channels cleaned.

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