

Praying in fear at Data Darbar

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HORE, July 21: The shrine of Hazrat Data Gunj Bakhsh has become unsafe for thousands of pilgrims who visit the place every day. It has structural flaws and its open doors are allowing criminal activities under the nose of the administration.

The structural flaws in the multi-million-rupee complex inaugurated hardly a year ago were listed by an army monitoring team during a raid last month. The flaws showed the need for cosmetic repairs to avoid further action.

Organized gangs indulge in criminal activities and their victims are unwary pilgrims. The criminals occupy the many courtyards and chase the pilgrims to strike at an opportune moment.

Gangs of swindlers loot pilgrims by tempting them to take intoxicating substances which at times be fatal.

The shrine is a favourite haunt of drug addicts, beggars and those who force children and women into beggary. Male and female prostitution as well as abduction of runaway children and young girls are some of the other crimes that these gangs commit.

A Dawn team visited Data Darbar on Tuesday and found the two corridors leading to the shrine from the main entrance on Lower Mall occupied by people of all ages. The same was the situation at other entrances and in front of the qawwali hall where two addicts were seen smoking heroin.

Hundreds of pilgrims were sleeping in rows in the corridor on the left, making it difficult to pass. In the corridor on the right which leads to the ladies section, scores of women were either sleeping or begging.

The corridors on both sides of

the huge mosque were also full of such people and pilgrims had to walk in the sun to go from one side to the other.

A young couple from Shahkot emerged from the women's wing and looked for police who were nowhere to be seen. At last they found an auqaf department guard and took him to the women's hall before returning in great confusion after a while.

People initially thought that someone had abducted their child. But the husband, Bashir Ahmad, said someone had removed his wallet from his wife's handbag. The pale looking woman said she was praying in front of the shrine when her purse was stolen.

"All our money and documents were in the wallet," the woman said wondering as to how they would return home. The guard was unable to help them. "Don't be surprised. This is an everyday affair." It often happens that mothers cry for the babies they lose here," a pilgrim said.

Lawyer Rana Tanvir who frequently visits the shrine was not surprised over the incident. He took the Dawn team to the corridor leading to the women's side, claiming that prostitutes disguised as beggars came there in the evening. "Bargains are struck openly. You can see it yourself," Rana claimed, saying even drugs were sold there.

The overall condition of the complex is far from satisfactory. The marble floor and walls are stained. Cracks were visible in the ceiling of the entrance to the qawwali hall and in the basement which serves as a parking lot.

A teenager carrying a broom appeared suddenly and said that he and others had been regularly sweeping the complex floors. But he could not explain why the grilled drains along the two entrances to the underground parking lot had been clogged.

The army monitoring team had raided the Rs620 million Data Darbar Complex and detected faults in its construction and irregularities in its affairs especially the collection and counting of donation money and the maintenance of the *langarkhana*.

It declared the construction of new Rs211 million portion, which was inaugurated by Mr Nawaz Sharif last year, dangerous for visitors.



THE front of the shrine of Data Gunj Bakhsh — Dawn

After finding that the complex was built by the Lahore Development Authority (LDA) and the auqaf department had not so far taken over control because of the structural flaws, the monitoring team stopped the payment of Rs100 million to a contractor.

It also took a serious view of the leaking of roofs despite an expenditure of Rs70 million on waterproofing. It constituted a committee to look after the donated money which is estimated at Rs72 million a year.

The monitoring team has held the committee formed under former commerce minister Ishaq Dar to supervise the project, responsible for the faulty construction and intends to send the case to the NAB for action.

The Punjab governor has also ordered an inquiry into the matter. A clearer picture will emerge after the inquiry by the

governor's inspection team which has engaged engineers to elicit expert opinion.

The complex administration admits that the complex has building flaws but puts the blame on the LDA or the committee headed by Mr Ishaq Dar. "We have not fully taken over control of the complex due to these flaws," he says.

Mr Ansari says teams of eight guards each work in three shifts to keep an eye on criminals and beggars. But he admits that these teams are too inadequate to look after the huge place.

Mr Ansari also links the unclean conditions at the shrine to the huge number of pilgrims who visit it daily. But he has no answer to the question as to why the auqaf department was cancelling the three-year Rs600 million contract given to a private firm if it was not able to keep the place clean.



THE leaking roof of the basement of the Data Darbar Complex — Dawn