

ANYONE out to make a quick buck should form an NGO. But that is nothing new. The fresh piece of advice is: form an NGO in Balochistan, preferably in some area close to the Chaman border, stretching up to Pishin, Muslim Bagh, Qilla Saifullah, Qilla Abdullah and Wana. Donor money is flowing in at a pretty enthusiastic pace, and, even better, the accountability factor is unimaginably low.

Since the government is unable to manage the huge Afghan refugee population crossing into Pakistan, a multitude of donor and UN agencies seem to have taken over, foremost among them being UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and other donor agencies.

Working with them are NGOs and CBOs operating from the provincial capital of Quetta and other towns. These have become one of the most visible entities in the institutional respect. Their visibility is second only to the men in khaki who have a forceful presence in every nook and corner of the terrain.

NGOs in Balochistan became prominent during the 1980s when concern about the underdevelopment in the province was cited by various international agencies. Initially, quite a few enlightened citizens stepped forward to contribute their bit, but as donor-dollars continued to pour, the number of NGOs increased, which is only natural and understandable.

The recent renewal of support to the NGOs in

By Noman Ahmed

Balochistan by the donors is based on a self-derived logic. Most of the Western institutions perceive that the areas earmarked as 'dens of terrorism' are extremely poor. It is also believed that government efforts to improve the overall conditions are extremely limited, ill-timed and infested with corruption.

Besides, these peripheral areas also happen to be a stronghold of zealots who are constantly accused of flaring up popular resentment against the West — hence the terrorism. The present regime is claiming to have curbed the so-called terrorist activities and groups in such areas, and, on the part of the Western donors, it makes sense to dole out large sums of grants/donations to help uplift the living conditions of the local people in the hope that reasonable living conditions will curb the menace of terrorism.

The flow of money is steady and from a great variety of sources without almost any worthwhile accountability. The result is what should never have been in doubt, with the existing NGOs churning out one feasibility after another. What they have achieved in terms of projects remains debatable, but what is beyond debate is their shining, twin-cab four-wheelers, latest computer gadgetry, immaculate office premises and furnishings, and an overall lavish lifestyle.

No wonder, then, that a lot of people got motivated before long and have since set up a string of NGOs in an

effort not to miss out on such a grand opportunity. The whole scenario is infested with intellectual, white-collar corruption to which the government seems to be no more than a bystander.

The formation and working of NGOs in these areas of Balochistan is highly unconventional. There are hardly any issue-based, sector-specific NGO here. They are general-purpose entities, undertaking all kinds of assignments that guarantee a lucrative funding contract. It is, therefore, common that an NGO dealing with Family Planning issues suddenly starts extending low-cost infrastructure, or a primary education centre launches a micro credit programme, or an agriculture working group converts itself into some conservation consultancy. It all depends on the announcements made by one donor or the other. Simply, you see!

Relief and rehabilitation happen to be the most recent fads in the donor sector, and the NGOs, new and old, are making due adjustments.

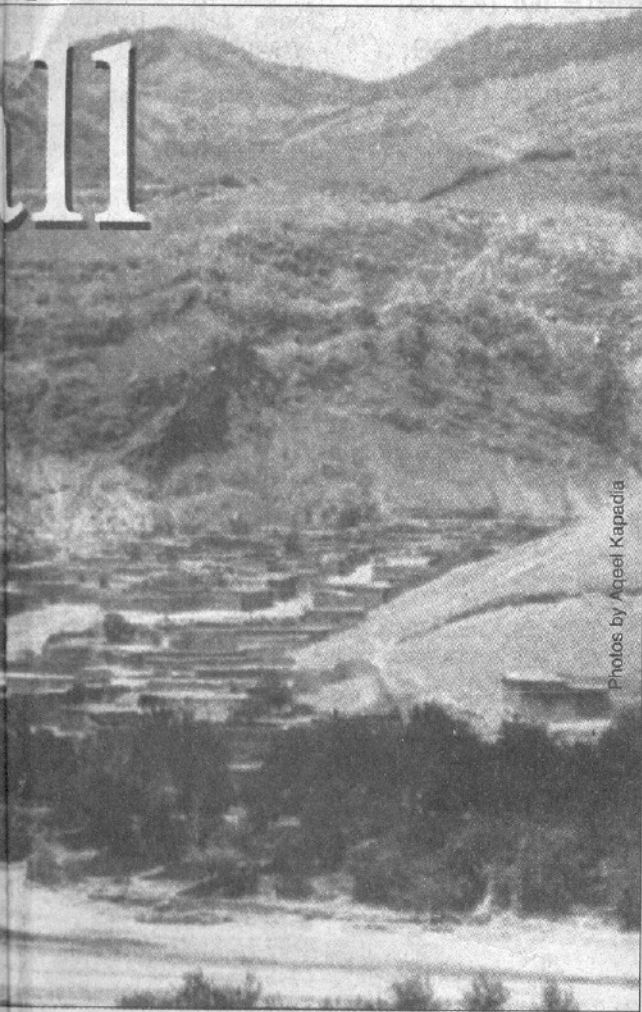
A tidal wave of refugees had crossed the border to find safe haven during the US-led war on terror in 2001-02. It is claimed by the UNHCR that a sizable number of these refugees has returned home. However, pockets of urban and peri-urban settlements in north-western Balochistan are still inhabited by refugees that closely mingle with the natives. NGOs of different brands and shades are actively claiming doles in the name of serving these refugees one

way or the other.

Besides, during the recent draughts, the government and aid agencies made a great deal of use of such NGOs involving them in the distribution of food items, medicine etc.

NGO is an enterprise that evolves with very little initial investment, especially in the current context of Balochistan. All that is needed is the 'right' kind of information. Types of donors operating in the region, their identified priorities, locations selected for formulating projects, institutional composition desired by the donors — normally keeping a few female staff members to satisfy the gender requirements — registration as an NGO under Social Welfare, Societies or Trust acts, a chief executive who can speak good English and is presentable (being a female would do no harm at all), knowledge of the NGO-sector jargon, capacity to give 'effective' presentations on a multimedia device (no matter if the contents are entirely borrowed or plagiarized), a few staff members with military background or spouses of serving officers. And voila! If you have all this at your disposal, you indeed have a lethal combination to start and run an NGO.

Since these are times of Good Governance and Accountability, it is often desirable to constitute an advisory board as well, comprising high-profile souls depending on the stretch of social contacts of the operator running the show. Ex-bureaucrats, retired servicemen, former members of the superior judiciary and even



Photos by Aqeel Kapadia

...come a fertile ground for NGOs in recent times

police make the right choices.

These noble folks are chosen to provide guidance and direction to the working of the NGO concerned. But this is only the public face of it.

In effect, these heavyweights are kept on the board to safeguard against any state-sponsored crackdown, or to use them to fetch more funding for the NGO. In reward for their 'unparalleled' service to humanity in general and the province in particular, these folks are often sent to attend foreign meetings, seminars and symposia — of course at donor's

expense.

Coming to the donor profile found operating in Balochistan these days, they include international finance institutions; UN and its various outfits; bilateral agencies of a number of developed countries; some foreign missions that have a budget slot for development; international NGOs that bring with them large-scale funding/budget heads; religious and missionary organizations; internationally created endowment funds; disaster and relief organizations; and sectoral trusts.

The style of working, nature of operations and approach to development or social work of each category is different and depends upon their ideology and working norms. Some donors are strict about their operations and very closely monitor the manner in which the funds are utilized. They adopt strict monitoring procedures to see whether the money is properly used according to the project protocol.

A few donors get carried away by the mock profile and appearance of some NGOs. If they find that the essential phases of the task are intact, then they do not bother to investigate the field performance.

Still others bring with them some hidden agenda. By enacting a facade of development or humanitarian work and associating partner NGOs into their folds, such donors soon unleash their actual motives. Intelligence gathering, attempting to mould the public opinion around a particular issue, attempting to buy the intellectual honesty of important professionals, professing alien social norms and even preaching other religions are few such activities.

Donors representing their national governments are only concerned with showing the record of disbursement of funds. They call an expression of interest from the NGOs around the theme stipulated by their governments, and then allocate funds without assessing the past performance of the NGOs concerned. The case of under-developed regions in Balochistan makes a very strong point as lenient funding guidelines are fixed for such areas.

Some donors are even found to be funding in very difficult domains, such as women emancipation and liberalization campaigns, human trafficking, crop swapping from poppy to alternatives, and even reformation of orthodox seminaries.

The local society places the working and existence of NGOs in varied perspectives. Clerics consider NGOs as profane outfits designed by the West to undermine their influence on the masses. They also consider NGOs as the major barrier in the 'purification' of society.

Liberals, who are few in Balochistan, term NGOs the

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Donor prudence is the key

AFTER having worked for several NGOs and development organizations, Babar Shah set up his own venture, Participatory Integrated Development Society, a decade ago. He has been associated with projects in Quetta and its environs, Killa Abdullah, Loralai, Turbat, Lasbella, Mastung, Ketch and several other locations.

According to Babar, NGO is a very tough enterprise to run if financial transparency and managerial efficiency are taken as prerequisites. The temptation of easy gains apparently attached to the donor money are too attractive to be ignored, he admits and agrees that the magnitude of funds being pumped into the province these days through the NGOs is sizable, and that has attracted a number of non-professionals into the domain.

However, Babar also blames the donors who have failed to adopt proper scrutiny mechanisms to assess NGO performance, institutional capacity and financial management procedures. In his view, unchecked flow of funds to NGOs is an "alarming phenomenon" that may well lead to "corruption of monumental scale". — N.A. ■