**Making light of an elephant**

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Just over four decades ago, as I was driving my VW Beetle in Islamabad, a street dog standing aimlessly on the edge of the road suddenly decided to cross directly in my path. I applied the brakes, swerved a little, but a corner of the front bumper of the car collided with his head. With me in the car was a major of the Pakistan army who, noting my feeling of anguish, said: “Don’t feel too bad, he was leading a dog’s life anyway.”

If this were to happen now, he might have substituted “elephant” or perhaps “Kaavan”, for “dog”. Though the tale of Kaavan the elephant has a happy ending, his tormented life in Islamabad Zoo has been reported throughout the world. As a year-old cub, he had been gifted to the Pakistani president in 1985 by his Sri Lankan counterpart as a gesture of friendship between the two countries.

Kaavan should have considered himself lucky being the beneficiary of such highest-level favour and to be lodged in a zoo in “Islamabad the Beautiful”, as we like to call our capital city. But that was not to be. A few weeks ago, as a result of an international humane intervention, the distressed animal was rescued from the zoo and transported to a sanctuary in Cambodia.

Pakistan has thus made light of an elephant, both physically and in a manner of speaking. It should be a matter of national shame, but few Pakistanis have batted an eyelid over the fact that a country with the world’s 5 th largest population and 6 th largest army, a proud nuclear power and a boastful champion of Islam, has failed to care for the centre-piece animal in the only zoo in their capital city. With the departure of its sole elephant and the wretched condition of its remaining live exhibits, the zoo has now been closed. “Islamabad the Beautiful” is now without a zoo.

There are strong indications that some zoo animals, mainly black bucks, were being sold for a price to influential and rich people to add variety and prestige to their barbecue parties.

Prime Minister Imran Khan, who surveys world affairs with a majestic sweep and maintains a robust presence on social media, has not said a word about Kaavan or about the zoo closure, to the best of my knowledge. To give the tale a touch of irony or, should I say, add insult to Kaavan’s injury (which was both physical and mental), and even before the miserable elephant vanished from the news cycle, he thought fit to post videos of himself being playful with his two lovely, sturdy dogs.

Pakistan’s zoos, mired in apathy, corruption and incompetence, would be a study in absolute misery for its captive animals. Of course, there are good people too. A group of volunteers called the Friends of Islamabad Zoo (FIZ), following periodic surveys, raised questions over the fluctuating number of animals in the zoo. When they pointed out these anomalies, the vanished animals soon (re)appeared in their enclosures.

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Karachi Zoo, established in 1878 during British colonial rule, has a history of unnatural animal deaths. A pair of Arabian Oryx, classified as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), gave birth to a female in 2007 and to a male and a female the following year, both of which died shortly after. The first-born Oryx gave birth in 2010 to another calf, which died the following day.

Four days later, the mother of the calf also died. The female of the original pair from 2007 met the same fate in 2010 from a foot injury.

In 2016, a 16-year-old Bengal tiger named Alex died in the zoo from kidney failure.

Around the same time, the zoo lost three young blackbucks in a fight within the enclosure during the night, for there is no monitoring of animals during those hours.

Three newborn puma cubs have also died in the zoo.

Lahore Zoo, established in 1872, and Pakistan’s best by far, is not doing much better. In 2004, three female black-footed grey langurs died from exposure to cold. The next year, a mandrill and a puma died inexplicably, as did an Asian black bear in 2006. The same year, some animals at the zoo were diagnosed with tuberculosis, but early detection and treatment averted a major catastrophe.

Earlier, in 2004, a four-year-old male chimpanzee was reported to have died in Lahore zoo. Three years later, two stray dogs entered an Indian peafowl pen through a hole in the fence and killed 28 of the birds. Two Bengal tigers, one of which had given the zoo 19 cubs, died from trypanosomiasis the same year.

About the same time, a new-born macaw was reported to have been stolen from the zoo. In 2008, a chimpanzee died from a prolonged unidentified illness. A female giraffe was attacked by a plains zebra and died from its injuries. A 3-year-old female Bengal tiger died after a caesarean section. Two Asian black bear cubs went missing from the zoo in 2010.

That same year, Lahore Zoo received 53 falcons which were seized from Islamabad Airport when being illegally smuggled to Qatar. It wasn’t long before 16 of them died from heat stroke and other causes. But they did not die in vain! As a result of their deaths, the remaining falcons were given to the wildlife department to be set free.

By any standard or yardstick, Pakistan’s zoos are pathetic places, poorly funded, filthy dens of corruption. They lack adequate facilities, trained staff and qualified vets, and are bereft of compassion, both from staff and visitors, who poke the captive animals with sticks and throw stones at them for a laugh.

Public attitude towards animals is woeful. Malnourished cows, buffalos, donkeys, mules, horses and camels with open sores carry or pull loads far above their capacity; poultry, tightly packed in small cages, are held or transported on open trucks in wind, cold and rain. And street dogs? Well, for them the proverbial dog’s life.

In a country whose prisons are horrible places where human captives are treated like animals, what can captive animals, beasts of burden and street dogs expect!

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