

# Opening the Bugti-Sui road and beyond

THE RULING MUSLIM LEAGUE AND NAWAB AKBAR BUGTI agreed Saturday to open the road between Dera Bugti and the Sui gas fields after a new round of talks between the PML president, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, and the PML secretary general, Mushahid Hussain, on the one hand, and Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, chief of the Bugti tribe and Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP), on the other. The government has issued a statement to that effect, naming a go-between, namely Sher Ali Mazari, a relative of Mr Bugti, as a participant in the deliberations. But Mr Bugti insists that Mr Mazari is not his nominee or spokesman.

Traffic has been suspended between Dera Bugti and Sui since March 17 when security forces and Bugti tribesmen clashed, resulting in the deaths of many people. The clash took place after Bugti tribesmen took up positions and set up roadblocks between Dera Bugti and Sui. The clash caused the political cauldron in Balochistan to boil over once again, providing opportunity to the opposition to fill the air with more grievances against the PML government and its patron, President Pervez Musharraf. So we may expect a reduction of tension in the short term.

The statement also revealed that important decisions on matters regarding the long-term protection of Pakistan's national assets in the Bugti area and steps to normalise the situation in Dera Bugti were also agreed upon in principle. There was reference to provincial autonomy and "other issues" which the parliamentary committee set up for the purpose is mandated to address "as soon as possible". Unfortunately, the immediate reaction of Nawab Bugti to the statement by Mushahid Hussain about the "agreement" was that it was not an "agreed" document but an expression of views by the government. The only concession he made to the well-publicised Shujaat-Mushahid "trouble-shooting" trip to Dera Bugti was that he had no objection to the "words" of the statement. So it is too early to expect that significant progress will be made in the short run on resolving the many issues raised by Mr Bugti.

As for reference to the broader problems of Balochistan province, a lot of opinion has floated around, but no clarity has so far been achieved about the modalities of the "autonomy" the government might be willing to grant and the real aspirations of the people and nationalist leaders of Balochistan. The parliamentary committee under Senator Wasim Sajjad, which was tasked with figuring out the "constitutional possibilities", has stalled because a number of opposition figures have walked out of it. But the PML party chief has been saying that the government would not mind changing the Constitution to give Balochistan the sort of autonomy it needs. However, from the various remarks Mr Wasim Sajjad has made, it is clear that any autonomy envisaged for Balochistan would have to be in line with federal norms and the practice in states similar in status to Pakistan. This may not be what the Baloch nationalists have in mind. So problems are likely to persist on this score.

Additionally, there is the immediate and isolated problem of peacekeeping in the Bugti territory. The moment the government decides to consider Nawab Bugti's broader political concerns, it will be required to take along other parties in the province — which outnumber the nationalists — as well as the parliament in Islamabad which will finally have to pass the constitutional amendments. Indeed, at some point the awarding of an extraordinary

measure of autonomy to the provinces would have to be made conditional to the acceptance of the writ of the state by the provinces. Awarding any far-reaching autonomy (barring foreign policy, currency, defence) without extending the writ of the state could be construed as a prelude to separatism or simply giving away a part of Pakistan to provincial forces that may not necessarily agree with one another on what to do with "independence".

Under the circumstances, we are inclined to suspect that the government might decide to let the problem fester rather than grasp the nettle and resolve it once and for all. Matters requiring fundamental changes in the federal structure are better handled either by a party that has a two-thirds majority in parliament and significant influence in the provinces or is working in an environment of general agreement. But the ruling party doesn't have the required majority; and there is not even minimal agreement on any important matter between the government and an opposition that is united on a single-item agenda of unseating the government but has its own fissures on other matters. So the outlook doesn't look good. ■

## Political engineering in Hyderabad

THE SINDH GOVERNMENT HAS STARTED TINKERING WITH THE administrative boundaries of the province on the eve of the local elections, and if one doesn't cry foul, what else should one do? The Hyderabad district has been divided into four districts, namely, Hyderabad, Tando Allahyar, Tando Mohammad Khan, and Matiari. The chief minister simply read out a fiat and appeared ready to face the consequences of taking this decision without consultation. Predictably, the opposition has protested across the board. Ask anyone outside Pakistan and you will find universal approval of the revival of the local bodies and devolution through the creation of smaller administrative units. But since 2000, when we began doing all these 'good' things, we have experienced nothing but aches and pains and general dissension.

Judging from what the chief minister, Arbab Ghulam Rahim, has been saying in his blunt TV interviews, the PPPP, the big party in the Sindh Assembly, has to give way and the MQM has to make a comeback at the expense of the PPPP and the MMA. This redounds to his leverage in Islamabad but is not good for Sindh in the long run. Already he has aroused suspicion by carving out three districts last year from Larkana, Dadu and Jacobabad. This is gerrymandering and crass political engineering and there is no excuse for doing it just because people have done it before (the PPPP itself had asked in the past that Tando Allahyar be made a separate district). Therefore we should expect the Sindh Assembly to become more unruly and the province to be run dangerously in opposition to the wishes of a bulk of population aligned behind the opposition parties. That the new Hyderabad districts are not expected to get off to a flying start will compound the crisis. ■