**Karachi agenda**

BY N O M A N A H M E D 2021-12-09

THESE past few weeks have been eventful ones for Karachi`s denizens. Several fires broke out in commercial establishments, production facilities, residential locations and hutments. Families of owners and staf f were traumatised due to the loss of assets and the sudden blow to their finances in an already difficult economic situation.

Evictions along nullahs, rail and road corridors, and remote locations are continuing.

With promises of resettlement unfulfilled, most of the affected have been left without hope. Videos of desperate individuals attempting suicide have gone viral. There is no counselling available and the gloom is spreading fast.

On the political and administrative front, things aren`t any better. Sindh has promulgated amendments to the local government statute in a bid to outfox its opponents and retain as much power and privilege as possible. Builders and developers have been protesting against the judiciary`s unprecedented orders for the demolition of publicsale projects. The builders were joined by some political parties on the grounds that thousands of people would lose their homes if the demolitions continued. A law is being discussed to extend cover to such structures that may be judicially tagged as illegal.

Confusion surrounds this state of affairs.

Karachi has many groups affected by poor governance and debatable judicial actions. Residents of katchi abadis and those living in hutments and other vulnerable spots are especially apprehensive. The manner in which random buildings and locations are targeted for eviction is creating uncertainty. There are laws that lay down the procedure for examining every squatter settlement before options of regularisation or eviction are finalised. But there has been no update on the status of such settlements. Similarly, those already uprooted are running from pillar to post to convince the officials to give them alternative settlement options. But the administration has not responded as it should.

Addressing the need for shelter cannot be delayed and there are choices. L and is available in different locations in Karachi and its peripheries. The political leadership must take quick action as every minute counts for the homeless. In addition, informal modes of livelihoods have to be protected for hundreds of thousands of workers. It is the only option for sustaining poor households. The timing of the socalled anti-encroachment drive is problematic as is the fact that court orders are applied to the weak and not the powerful.

Selective justice is not what this city deserves.

Builders, developers and real estateenterprises were up in arms when a prominent building on Sharea Faisal was being demolished. They questioned the status of the building permits approved and later set aside by the courts. It is a common observation that a non-controversial land title, hindrance-free building permits, transparent real estate sales, dependable construction and compatible mortgage and financial arrangements are crucial to a healthy property market. But for many years, such clean land titles were in short supply.

Builders and developers would do well to jointly demand a credible mechanism for ensuring land for housing and real estate development through a regional urban framework protected by the law. While Karachi has benefited from several planning outputs, none was given legal cover.

This was done deliberately to create uncertainty which could go in favour of vested interests. It is also vital to remember that land is a precious social asset which must be accessible to all urban dwellers. The right to shelter is a basic human considerationwhich cannot be ignored. Land-supply arrangements for housing must benefit the actual poor. If the urban poor have legitimate access to land for housing, katchi abadis will not emerge.

The provincial gov-ernment cannot ignore Karachi`s political status. It has diversity and plurality. Its relationship with the province is also unique.

Karachi accounts for one-third of Sindh`s population. No other city in Pakistan has such a relationship with its province. Thus it requires a dif ferent equation where governance is concerned. It has many unique federal entities responsible for national services such as the management and operation of ports. The city, which is now a greater urban region, requires an effective platform where administrative and operational stakeholders can come together to deliberate. The provincial government, which styles itself as harbinger of democracy, is required to establish such a platform.

Various city plans prepared for Karachi have advocated the need for a broad-based steering committee with a mandate to review all urban affairs and chalk out solutions. Consensus can be reached on core issues if such an ef fort is made in the larger interest of Karachi`s residents who deserve a better deal.  The writer is an academic and researcher based in Karachi.