

Gwadar: prospects and apprehensions

By Saleem Shahid

GWADAR: The Chinese are working ahead of schedule for the construction of the Gwadar deep-water port and have completed more than 25 per cent of the work.

A team of journalists that visited the port site recently was informed that the Chinese, who are working 16 hours a day, will complete the first phase of the project by December 2004, fully six months ahead of schedule. China has provided a loan of \$298 million for the port while the remaining cost of \$50 million will be borne by the Pakistan government.

In the first phase, there will be three berths, each 734 metres long. The Chinese are reclaiming the land by desilting the navigational channel, which is linked with the Koh-i-Batil, giving natural protection to the infrastructure of the port as a breakwater. But there is no record that the experts have collected basic data about tides, low or high. Presumably data was collected randomly and particularly in the low tide season of November and December. Building a breakwater at a later stage will be expensive.

Experts believe that the second phase should start immediately. Allied facilities and services needed for the port are missing. There is no arrangement for fresh water for commercial or industrial use. The international donor agencies helped build the Akra Kaur Dam with the specific condition that its water reserves would be used for domestic purposes and drinking water only and not for commercial or industrial purposes.

However, the Chinese have established three desalination plants to meet their day-to-day needs. QESCO brought a transmission line from Pasni to Gwadar, a project implemented in more than a decade. Now work is going on to build a grid station for Gwadar, ensuring round-the-clock power supply to the port. The fish harbour also has a 10-megawatt power station which has not been used since the harbour was built more than two decades ago.

There is no plan available for the industrial area, export processing zone or the free trade area earmarked for international trade and commerce. However,

the Balochistan chief minister recently directed the Lasbela Industrial Estate Development Authority (LIEDA) to prepare a plan for an industrial estate for Gwadar.

Apparently, the first phase of the coastal highway is near completion, and the president or prime minister might inaugurate it in a couple of months. The Gwadar-Pasni and Ormara-Pasni sections have been completed in the stipulated period, but there are serious doubts about the remaining sections.

LAND CONTROVERSY: The biggest controversy at present is over land, its scheduled acquisition or buying and selling. It looks like a big scandal in which people from the patwari level to senior officials of the Board of Revenue are alleged to be involved. There has allegedly been unauthorized buying and selling or transfer of land. Some of the public functionaries, it is said, purchased land in advance, knowing that Gwadar Port was being built. Many such functionaries belong to agencies or departments that have had a presence in Gwadar and on the



Mekran coast for a long time.

They are the real beneficiaries who purchased the land and got it transferred in the names of close relatives. Interestingly, known political figures of Gwadar opened estate agencies to share windfall profits in buying and selling land.

"If you have some extra money you should invest it in buying land in Gwadar which will benefit you very soon," an estate agent advised a journalist while recounting the land story in Gwadar. "Most of the lands in Gwadar and its surrounding area belong to private parties who purchased these lands when the Gwadar port project had not yet been launched," Abdul Malik, a local resident, told *Dawn*.

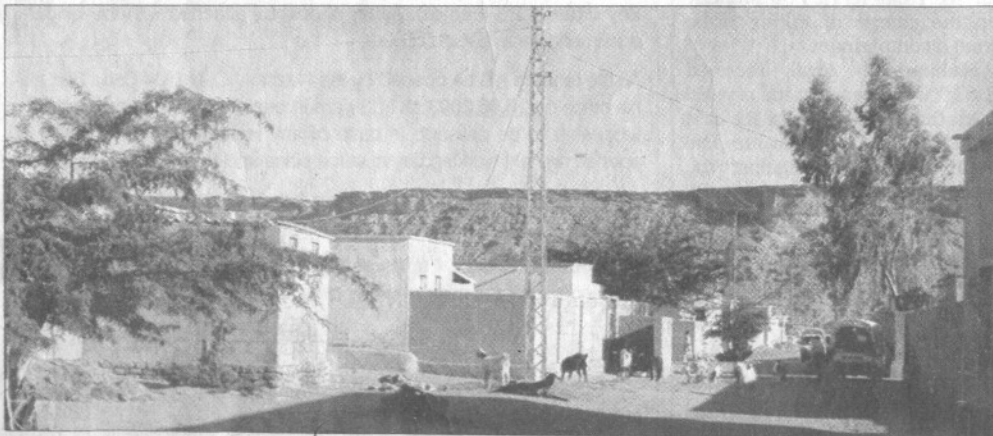
According to reports, the Gwadar Port Authority is reportedly demanding control and possession of the entire land in East Bay. The people of Gwadar are against this. "They want to control even land that is not in their (the port authority's) use or is not needed for any purpose," says Ghaffar Hot, a central leader of the Balochistan

National Movement (BNM). "They simply want to oust the local people from the present Gwadar townships."

Saner elements among the local population do not object to handing over land for building the main access road to the port. But they insist that the remaining land should be owned by and be in possession of local people.

The Balochistan government has put a ban on the sale and purchase of land in Gwadar, but the decision came too late. People had already purchased thousands of acres. Influential people and the land mafia transferred government lands in their names, bribing government officials. One person said: "There is no land owned by the government in the whole of Gwadar township. Where will the industrial and commercial zones be built?"

It is learnt that after banning the sale and purchase of lands in Gwadar, the Balochistan government had sent a team comprising officials of the Board of Revenue and other experts for conducting a survey of government land so



that it could be allotted for the industrial zone and other allied establishments required for a modern port.

The immediate controversy is over land in a locality called Mulla Bund, overlooking the Fish Harbour. The area's population is entirely composed of fishermen. They are settled on an area of around 25 acres. It is prime land. Abdul Rehman, Naib Nazim, Mulla Bund, says if the land is taken, the affected people should be given compensation and alternate housing close to the coastline.

However, one Mohammad Yousuf, an old man, put a high price for displacement. The price of land should match the price paid for land acquired for the construction of the port plus royalty on land used by the port authorities. "I am a fisherman. I cannot go away from the sea and government must provide alternate land close to the sea," he said.

The people of Gwadar have formed an alliance under the name of 'People's Unity', which is pleading the case of the Mulla Bund people. The residents of the area had earlier refused to

even think about shifting from their land, but after some time they considered the government's request and decided to hand over the whole locality on condition that the government should pay them compensation, alternative land of their own choice and construction of their colony with all basic and modern facilities.

The area's people, including former ministers and MPAs of the area, explained their point of view in a candid manner. Mr Hussain Ashraf, a former minister for fisheries and livestock, expressed his fears about unjust treatment of the local people. "We are not against the construction of a modern port in Gwadar," he said, but at the same time charged that the Gwadar master plan was prepared without taking representatives of the locals into confidence.

The master plan should have been a local government responsibility, says Abul Hasan, an economist, and the district government should have undertaken it on its own or in collaboration with the provincial government. In no way should the fed-

eral government have been in the picture.

Abul Hasan pointed out the then provincial Governor, Lt-General Abdul Qadir, and the chief minister during a visit to Gwadar had assured the local people that there would be no mass dislocation from the township and there would be minor adjustments in the master plan. But when the federal ministers for finance and industries came with their high-power teams to Gwadar, they repeated the old master plan, implicitly indicating massive uprooting of people from the six-square-kilometres area of Gwadar Township.

Mohammad Hayatan, Nazim of the Gwadar Union Council, echoes the fear and confusion over the issue, expressing his doubts as to whether fishermen would get legitimate compensation and alternate plots or housing. "Only the government can remove this confusion and satisfy the people," he said. The government is said to be planning to build some 70,000 housing units under the Greater Gwadar Port City Development Plan.

"We are sitting on a volcano which can explode any time if the government will not remove the apprehensions of the people about their future in Gwadar," says Abid Surabi, a political activist.

The common man is not against the construction of the port or other development activities. The people only want assurances of jobs in the port and other allied establishments. "I am not a political man. In my opinion, Gwadar should be developed, but the government must provide jobs to our youths who are educated," says Dil Murad, a small trader running a business in the coastal town.

