

The brewing storm of discontent

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ON the potholed road from Gwadar airport to the city, scattered wall graffiti hails 'Pak-China' friendship. Much of this officially sanctioned bonhomie is reserved for the Harbour Engineering Company (HEC), one of China's largest state owned firms entrusted with the task of developing the Gwadar deep-sea port. Even for an outsider, the company's larger than life presence in the area is overwhelming.

For the desperately poor people of the area, however, the air-conditioned enclaves of our Chinese friends have become symbols of mass alienation. It is their unethical business practices that evoke much more bitter discontent though. On the rare occasions that local services are hired, salary payments can often take several months. The alleged high-handedness of the HEC staff often leads to strikes and protests by employees.

Like all official mega projects, the mainly Chinese financed Gwadar Deep Sea Port project, unveiled by the military-led regime in March 2002, promised unprecedented development and prosperity for the entire Makran coast. But promises of better lives, more jobs and modern civic services ring hollow in the face of pervasive unemployment, rampant poverty, and chronic water and electricity shortages. While port development is still in early stages, residents of Gwadar have ample reasons to be sceptical.

Beijing's interest in the area is mainly informed by a desire to expand its commer-

cial of the country often hire their own people. No doubt, technical skills are locally in short supply. But not much of the manual work involved requires complex techniques.

Besides, the federal and provincial governments have done precious little to upgrade the technical capacity of Gwadar's untapped manpower. Training institutes and polytechnic colleges remain a pipe dream so far.

The employment controversy is just the tip of the iceberg. While the provincial government has banned sale and purchase of land in Gwadar, thousands of acres have already been sold to outsiders in shady, often unauthorized deals. Allegations that the military authorities have bought most of the prime land at throw-away prices are rife. According to local officials, over 80 per cent of the plots in the Gwadar Singhar Housing Scheme have been arbitrarily allocated to outsiders, many of

in its old form. The secrecy surrounding what should be a public document has made matters even worse. The district assembly has rejected the plan after several requests that it be taken into confidence fell on deaf ears. Even the provincial assembly's motions have failed to elicit a response from the concerned authorities.

It is hardly surprising that deep nationalist resentment fuelled by what is largely perceived as the centre's attempts to appropriate provincial resources is growing. Shutdown strikes in Gwadar and throughout the Makran area are now common. Baloch nationalist parties are in the process of forging a broad new alliance to press for their demands. During a well-attended meeting in Khuzdar in late May, leaders from the BNM, BNP, PKMAP and others lambasted Islamabad for denying the people of Balochistan their due rights.

They had a valid point to make. If the people of Makran do not demand their rights now, who will pay heed to their protests once the Gwadar port has been completed?

The conflicts brewing in this serene coastal zone of Balochistan should not be taken lightly by Islamabad. For too long, have the country's myopic national security managers have dismissed regional tensions as 'fissiparous tendencies' and genuine regional demands and expectations ignored as products of narrow nationalist ambitions. Demands for provincial autonomy have been met with brute force rather than negotiation and accommodation.

But repeated bunglings of fragile inter-ethnic relations have only further exacerbated provincial fears of majoritarian rule. Gross neglect of their development needs,

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cial and possibly naval presence in the region, not out of any love for Pakistan or its people. Located on the tip of the Persian Gulf and across the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar's strategic importance to China in the region cannot be overstated. Already a naval base, its potential economic benefits for Pakistan can be enormous. The port can technically serve as a regional transshipment hub and a vital trade link to the Gulf and Central Asian republics.

For Gwadar's ills, one cannot find fault with the Chinese alone. They are only pursuing their strategic national interests. Nothing really wrong with that. And in disregarding the local population's needs and sentiments, Pakistani authorities fare no better. In the agreement signed with the Chinese, the government is believed to have ignored even the legitimate share of jobs that are reserved for locals.

The highway authority building the Gwadar-Karachi coastal highway has recruited hundreds from outside the area. The residents allege that the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) does not even consider their applications for jobs. Since most construction and development work is outsourced, contractors from Karachi, Lahore and other parts

them senior army and civilian officials.

Gwadar's woes do not stop there. The much-touted devolution of powers remains a farce in the face of centralized control over the area's resources. The Gwadar Port Authority (GPA), for instance, is run by a retired admiral based in Karachi. The city's Master Plan, prepared by the National Engineering Service of Pakistan (NESPAK), is another no-go area for local authorities; even provincial authorities were virtually bypassed in its formulation.

The controversial plan betrays NESPAK's complete disregard for local sensitivities or socioeconomic conditions. For one, locals fear that the under-estimation of present and future population may lead to their conversion into a minority in the future. The plan envisages the relocation of a large chunk of the old city's population but without any concrete, stated resettlement plan, lending credence to public fears of mass dislocation.

Despite promises from federal and provincial authorities that the plan will be amended to address local concerns, it remains largely unchanged. During Prime Minister Jamali's recent visit to the area, NESPAK presented the controversial plan

their development needs, denial of provincial autonomy and the lack of participatory institutions have encouraged resort to extreme means. Lest we forget, the last time regional demands for economic and political rights were ignored in East Pakistan, it culminated in a bloody civil war and the dismemberment of the country.

For all its flaws, and there were plenty, eleven years of "sham" democracy had helped partially integrate nationalist forces in the political mainstream. Centralized military rule, the failings of which are amply reflected in Gwadar's development plans, augurs ill for political stability and the health of the federation. Presumably, the situation in Gwadar is still manageable. If the federal government continues to ignore the apprehensions of its people, however, things can go awfully wrong. Is there any hope?

Yes. The people of Balochistan and their elected leaders must be taken into confidence on all issues that concern them. The centre must treat them with the respect all citizens of the federation deserve, not as a second rate minority. The decision to use their resources as Balochs see fit is simply not Islamabad's to make. The sooner it sheds its colonial hangover, the better.