

Fire at the Board of Revenue

A few days ago a fire destroyed most of the land record at the Board of Revenue. Whether accidental or intentional, this fire has cleared the way for the *qabza* groups in Lahore to grab commercial properties at prime locations like The Mall, Beadon Road, Abbot Road and the walled city, worth trillions. When the Hindus and Sikhs left Lahore in 1947, their properties were allotted mostly to Muslim refugees from India by the bureau meant for their rehabilitation, namely the Settlement Department. The recent fire burnt to ashes nearly all this record of the settlement of land. It has given a free hand to the corrupt elements and opened many more avenues of corruption.

Insiders have reportedly stated that attributing the fire to short-circuiting does not stand scrutiny, as after switching off the main supply of the record room, it was impossible for fire to break out in any room due to electricity. They maintain that the record has been deliberately burnt to give free rein to the mafia which was keen since a long time to grab commercial properties at the most prized sites in the city. They added that hundreds of settlement cases were still pending with the courts, and a mafia which was controlling the Settlement Department had achieved its goals, as they can now

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carry out their nefarious activities more effectively.

In the past this record used to be with the Deputy Settlement Commissioner. However, due to ever-increasing complaints of forgery, the same was shifted to the present site about 17 years ago under the supervision of senior officers of the Board of Revenue. Even a photocopy and certified copy of the record was not issued, so that the mafia could not utilise it in its own interest. If a person asked for a copy, a three-member committee consisting of the secretaries of revenue, settlement and consolidation had to examine the application before a Permanent Transfer Deed could be issued. Actually, this speaks volumes about the state of affairs in the country.

To issue a routine document three heads of provincial departments have to get together and sanction the issuance of the certificate. This reminds one of the situation in some of our nationalised banks. In the past when you deposited cash with the bank, the processing clerk issued you a receipt and that was the end of the matter. Today a notice in red letters on the deposit slip warns you that unless not one but two officers have signed this slip, it will be of no use to you if

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reclaiming the amount. This shows the utter lack of confidence and trust in our country in anybody and everybody.

Insiders further say it is impossible to reconstruct the files and the land record. No photocopy of the record was available with any of the Board's offices. After the burning of the office of the Deputy Commissioner Lahore some years ago, the record of all the evacuee properties was kept in the present record room. Now, therefore, the *qabza* groups are free to undertake any land deal with any person.

The record room was a strictly prohibited area as no private persons other than *bona fide* employees of the Settlement Department were allowed to enter into the room. Further, after working hours the electricity supply to both the record rooms was switched off for the safety of the record. Therefore, the question of short-circuiting of electricity during the evening does not arise.

It is not difficult to see the way we are headed. There is complete and total anarchy in the country. Every institution is being demolished or torched. The fire at the Board of Revenue falls in this category. For some time the whole country has been quite ungovernable. Teachers, lawyers, police of-

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ficers, journalists, even judges have been killed for no fault other than doing their job. The *goondas* who feel frustrated or threatened by the former's lawful activities think nothing of assassinating them to get them out of their way. If an examiner fails a student for not being upto the mark, the latter kills him. If a reporter describes an illegal prison, the *wadera* gets him killed. If a judge convicts an accused to death by hanging, he is murdered by the latter's relatives. The question is: how can civilised society continue to exist as such in the face of such anarchy. The reason why things do not improve over a period of time is that although the killers are in most instances well-known, no one is punished. In the present case land record, which could have prevented misappropriation by the *qabza* groups has been burnt down. One does not know where this will end.

Ultimately ours will be a country with no record pertaining to any thing. Any record that is not to anyone's liking will be burnt down. The police, not even knowing how to take down finger prints, will continue to be helpless spectators to the anarchy. In cases, where they know the culprits, they will be their associates. God help us!

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Provincial transport department officials now want the people to believe that the government of Sindh has decided to hire a private firm to work on the "feasibility" of the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR). No one in this city would claim to be wise enough to tell whether this "decision" is a step forward in the direction of an earnest revival of the KCR, or actually designed to drift in the opposite direction. When intentions remain in doubt, as is the case about the KCR, the misgiving persists that powerful lobbies are bent upon strangulating this service.

It is a mystery why the government persists in refusing to see the obvious — that for a modern city of the size of Karachi only railway can be the mainstay of a viable urban transport system. Once this axiom is honestly accepted, the rest follows as naturally as fresh leaves to trees in spring. During the Ayub era, Karachi got its circular railway. It was functioning. Now if it went into decline, the only sensible line for the government was to investigate the causes of failure and punish those who were responsible for the failure. Since that sensible action was not taken, there is absolutely no escape from the conclusion that the KCR was sabotaged by the minions of the government.

Who exactly were the people, or what exactly was the interest that spelled the demise of a functioning Karachi Circular Railway? The interests that prosper as a result of the dysfunctioning of the KCR would be the people behind this tragedy. Make no mistake it is a conspiracy and it is no different from what has been the bane of Pakistan Railway. It was during the reign of the Nawab of Kalabagh that the road transport Mafia was born. First, it tried to unsettle the Pakistan Railway and rob its clientele. There was time when Babu Trains would

bring thousands of day workers from cities like Sialkot and Lyallpur to Lahore in the morning and take them back home in the evenings. The road Mafia bribed the railway officials into upsetting the timings of these trains. That conspiracy gained ground and had the Pakistan Railways' efficiency mortally compromised. Up to the mid-sixties, Pakistan's railway system could show a candle to best in Europe. Travelling by the Tez Gam express was a pleasure.

It is essentially the same lobby, the road transport Mafia, that is at work. Nobody in the government is prepared to face and answer the simplest of all simple questions: when urban railway systems in all major cities round the world are doing splendidly, why not in Pakistan and in Karachi? Even cities much smaller than Karachi like Pyongyang have an efficiently maintained urban railway network, most of it also underground. Calcutta has an underground rail network, so have Cairo, Beijing. Bulk of Bombay's commuters move by rail. But in Karachi they are still playing ducks and drakes with an urban railway system that is very much there and can be made to work, given nothing more than an honest inclination to do the needful. Nobody can deny that the infrastructure exists.

It needs to be done up. Billions of rupees have been spent on the construction of flyovers and overhead bridges all over the city. If needed, more can be put in place. Building roads and bridges in the 21st century does not need much of expertise. These facilities are always well worth the money spent on them. Imagine the bonus in terms of time and fuel saved if an overhead bridge speeds up the traffic and reduces distance. In this city of more than 13 million working

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people, on the move round the clock, transport is simply the stuff of life itself. But at present public transport is a standing scandal. One could say it is Karachi's worst shame.

For years the administrators of the Sindh government and the brass in Pakistan Railway have been going round and round the KCR and inevitably getting nowhere. Some weeks ago, the Sindh government released a report that the development department, or some other outfit, was being commanded to prepare the P1 document regarding the KCR. This is one of the more notorious of the bureaucratic devices to put things in the cold storage. All right, if that document was to be prepared, why it is not seeing the light of day? Where is it? If it is not ready yet, why not?

So, now we have this red herring of a "feasibility." It is said that a private firm is to be invited to prepare the study. Why this "feasibility" was not thought of earlier? It was also said earlier in the year that the KCR will be fully commissioned on May 1. Nobody knows for certain why that date was chosen. But once that was the set deadline why it was not adhered to?

In London you can get a map of the underground network almost everywhere. You can get it on the size of a playing card. There is no way a citizen in Karachi can obtain a map of the modest KCR network which is not really much of network to write home about. There is no way you can get a list of stations or halts on the KCR. Nowhere in this sprawling city would you find a sign indicating a KCR station in the neighbourhood. Time and again newspapers have raised such questions. But nobody is listening. And those who may be are laughing with their long tongues in the cheek.

If all this calculated and well organ-

ized neglect of the KCR is not a blatant conspiracy to sabotage this service, in aid of the road transporters, what on earth is this pray? One must point out that road transport in its present hideous shape is a standing shame for this city. No bus transporter can claim that all the units in his fleet are truly road-worthy. Except for the absolutely new ones, most buses have no rear lights. But all of them have pressure horns that are supposed to be banned. Few, if any, bus drivers care for road signs and traffic signals. No one would respect the pedestrian's right of way on the zebra crossings. There are few regular bus stops. Bus drivers stop at will to collect passengers, supremely unmindful of the dangers of such reckless attitudes. All this in full view of the smart chaps in white.

If this city is given a proper urban rail system, it will be a boon for the millions who have to commute over long distances. This, mind you, is a very big industrial city. Factory labour runs into hundreds of thousands and several big industrial estates are miles outside the city. Hundreds of thousand of tons of food items are brought into the city every morning. If factory labour is given the facility of a monthly ticket and similar facility extended to others (specially school children) the KCR will get millions of rupees in cash and all of it in advance, too.

All this talk of "feasibility" study is just so much of bureaucratic balderdash. The saving in fuel that an efficient urban railway system will give will by itself be a major plus factor in favour of not only reviving but expanding the KCR. It will be investment that will promise definite return. Above all, it will contribute to a definite qualitative improvement in the life of Karachi's systematically tormented citizens. Is anybody listening in Islamabad?

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