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Sunday



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ANALYSIS: Buy land — they're not making it anymore —Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur



Instead of using the begged \$ 2 billion to create another repressive and trigger-happy force, a better option would be giving these million acres to landless peasants and use this money to help them

Mark Twain, American humourist (1835-1910), rightly said: "buy land — they're not making it anymore". The Gulf State rulers heed his advice while our nincompoops and jesters who pass off as rulers (civilian and military), politicians and bureaucrats either have not heard about it or are ignoring it because their loyalties lie with their pockets. They care not a whit for the people as they retire to farmhouses here or mansions abroad with all the looted money, leaving us to suffer the consequences.

Shah Mehmood Qureshi recently said that Pakistan would press ahead with plans to lease or sell farmland to foreign investors. He said, "Many people misunderstood these deals, and we are now trying to explain to them that the land we want to sell is not land that belongs to anyone or even has any existing agriculture activity." It should be noted that the UN has expressed serious concern over all such deals.

The original Pakistani offer of "one million acres of farmland, protected by a special security force, for lease or sale to countries seeking to secure their food supplies" was given by Waqar Ahmed Khan, the Federal Minister for Investment on April 29, 2009. He said, "Pakistan's government is now in talks with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and other Arab states." He added that parliament would provide investors with legislative cover to protect them from changes in government.

More significantly he added, "It (the ministry) will also hire a new security force of 100,000 men to be split among the country's provinces to help stabilise the investment environment" and "this will cost us about \$ 2 billion to pay the salaries and train these people who will be from local towns and provinces". This sum he said they were seeking from donors. Still more loans for a still newer force is a sure recipe for an unmitigated disaster. This is extraordinary economics!

This envisaged policy has annoyed the Baloch and Sindhi people because of the implications it carries. They expect to be victims due to the geographic and demographic realities. Sindh is 140,914 square kilometres with a population of 216 individuals per square kilometre and very fertile, while Balochistan is 347,190 square kilometres with a population of only 18.9 individuals per square kilometre. These factors make them prime candidates for implementation of this policy of making a quick buck for the rulers and at the same time undermining their existing economic, social and demographic balance.

NWFP is 74,521 square kilometres with a population density of 238.1 individuals per square kilometre. In the prevailing situation no investor, regardless of the profits involved, will risk his neck there. Punjab is 205,345 square kilometres with a population density of 358.5 individuals per square kilometre. Moreover, its agriculture minister confirmed that 600,000 acres offered in Cholistan were rejected due to brackish water.

In Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy, Dr Ayesha Siddiqi says, "The military was given 10 percent of the approximately nine million

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acres of land reclaimed due to the construction of the Kotri, Guddu and Ghulam Mohammad barrages in Sindh. The government also gave land to some senior civil bureaucrats, who were the military regime's partners. After the military's takeover in October 1958, more land was allotted to army officers in the Guddu Barrage area."

What is even more important, however, is the fact that the land allotted to military officers was developed with US aid. Reportedly, the then finance minister of Punjab, Nawab Iftikhar Hussain Mamdot, justified the use of foreign aid for land development because the money was meant for the army. It was done under the Alienation of Land Act, which specifically stipulated an allocation of 10 percent of colonised land to the armed forces. The land development clause was incorporated later in a new law, the Colonisation of Land Act, 1912.

Reports indicate that the Gulf States have acquired more than 150,000 hectares of land in Balochistan near Mirani Dam to begin mechanised farming. The UAE was on a buying spree even before the policy announcement. This is not a conjecture because the Balochistan government decided to block direct deals between the UAE-based private investors and farmers. The then Balochistan Chief Secretary Nasir Khosa had said, "We are seeing more and more UAE investors coming to this region looking to buy farms directly from the local farmer, which is not legal because it has to be approved by a government body."

The buying however has continued with front men. The Windar Dam and other small dam projects, though ostensibly for the welfare of the local people, are part of the strategy to bring about demographic changes, as a fixed percentage of reclaimed land is allotted to the armed forces and to entice Gulf State Emirs to buy land; who come annually on hunting sprees to eliminate the already endangered Houbara Bustard.

The Sindhis expect an equally raw deal. Kijani Energy Canada has already bought large tracts of land, 200,000 acres in Thar for Jatropha cultivation. The Tharis have protested against the violation of their centuries-old livestock grazing rights, claiming they are being deprived of a primary source of livelihood due to restrictions.

The Baloch and Sindhis are gravely concerned because this policy will have incalculably adverse social, demographic and economic consequences for them. A million acres equals 4,046.872,6267 square kilometres. Interestingly, Luxembourg's size is only 2,586 square kilometres. The landscape in Balochistan and Sindh is dotted with villages even in the remotest areas and perchance if these come within the ambit of leased land, then their fate is sealed. The avaricious and soulless corporate landowners tolerate no obstacles, human or historical, to their plans. Wherever these agro-settlements are created, the locals will suffer immeasurably.

Extreme discontent over chronic water shortage already exists. Where will the excess water for a million acres come from? Diversion of already scarce water will make local farmers' subsistence even more tenuous, create more hatred and lead to serious social unrest and upheaval. Sindh and Balochistan are lower riparians and resent the IRSA rulings favouring Punjab. Aquifer exploitation will lead to other severe environmental problems. The perennial fertiliser and electricity shortages will certainly be exacerbated. These new agro-settlements will only compound all the existing problems.

Those oases of prosperity, protected by legislation and armed goons, will be out of bounds to the local population for all means and purposes. Their rights over the 'commons' for cattle grazing and their 'freedom to roam' or "Allemensraetten" as it is known in Scandinavia, will be grossly violated. This will have devastating economic and social effects on the lives of people. These agro-villes will if left to increase uninhibitedly, which certainly will be the case, make Sindh and Balochistan the new West Bank with Gulf State agro-settlements mimicking the Israeli settlements.

He who pays the piper calls the tune so the \$ 2 billion priced 100,000 strong security force in all likelihood will be answerable to the investors. In the case of conflict between the locals and the investors, I wonder how much force they will be allowed to employ to guarantee the safety and satisfaction of the investors. The fate of muzairin at army farms is well known.

Equally important is the question whose laws and conventions will prevail in the settlements: the investor countries or the host? These settlements for all means and purposes will be autonomous states within the state, further undermining and fragmenting its already waning authority. These autonomous areas with their security force will have all the advantages and none of the obligations and thereby create an even deeper split between the people and the rulers.

Instead of using the begged \$ 2 billion to create another repressive and trigger-happy force, a better option would be giving these million acres to landless peasants and use this money to help them. They could produce enough to fulfil the needs of the investor countries without the rights of people being bartered away.

But then it would be expecting too much of a government that is willingly forfeiting rights over a commodity whose production stopped billions of years ago and is being progressively lost to degradation and urbanisation. Selling something as precious as land for returning favours and making a quick buck is not only bad economics but also a fail-safe method for creating social and economic turmoil of immeasurable proportions and ensuring that the anticipated failed state scenario

becomes a grim reality.

Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur has an association with the Baloch rights movement going back to the early 1970s. He can be contacted at mmatalpur@gmail.com

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