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September 24, 2009

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## Planned farmland sale to Saudis gives Pakistan jitters

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A proposed lease of 500,000 or more acres of land in Pakistan to Saudi Arabia for agricultural use has raised fears of adverse consequences for the country's scarce water resources and its food security, aside from possible implications for national sovereignty.

The transaction-in-the-making was first reported some three weeks ago from Dubai. Agriculture Secretary Tauqir Ahmed Faiq told Reuters that the Pakistan government was in talks with the Saudis on the issue. A process was on, he said, to identify leasable land in all four provinces of the country, and a Saudi team is to visit Pakistan soon for negotiations.

Saudi Arabia wants the land to grow grain and vegetables, which it will take back to the kingdom, hoping in this way to strengthen its own food security. With a projected food import bill of \$15 billion this year, outsourcing food production is one way for Saudi to keep its food bills down.

The proposal to invest in Pakistan seems to have come after an announcement by the Pakistan government in April offering foreign investors one million acres of land for lease or sale.

Investment Minister Waqar Ahmed Khan said in April the government would also spend \$2 billion to raise a security force of 100,000 men for the protection of the leased lands and the people who would work on it. He also spoke about tax exemptions for the import of machinery to work these lands.

But despite the much-vaunted "brotherly" relations between the two countries and the influence the Saudis wield in Pakistan, questions are being raised about the wisdom of such a move.

### WATER COMMITMENT

"We are already a water-stressed, water-deficit country. We even have a problem with India for getting our share of river waters. Committing land to anyone, especially for large-scale agriculture, means you will have to commit water. How can we commit any more water when our existing water is already committed 120 per cent?" asked Rabia Sultan, a south Punjab landholder and an office-bearer in the Farmers' Association of Pakistan.

"We are not Turkey that we can think of importing water," she said.

Instead of leasing out large tracts of land to Saudi, the Pakistan government would do better to improve national agricultural yield and export the surplus to those who need it, said Ms. Sultan, who holds 400 acres of land in Muzaffargarh, 100 kms from Multan.

As a "hands-on" farmer, said Ms. Sultan, she was "worried that this plan will affect the water that is committed to my lands."

The absence of details about the scheme has fuelled the fears. It is not clear yet if the proposal involves a lease, and if so, for how long, or if it would be an outright sale.



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It also remains unclear yet if the government proposes to lease the land that it owns — most of it arid, and uncultivable without the injection of huge amounts of capital for treatment of brackish ground water — or if it would encourage private landowners to enter into agreements with the investors.

Ayesha Siddiqi, a strategic and political analyst, said if the idea was to get individual landowners to lease to investors, the scheme would open the door to large-scale corporate farming, in the process marginalising the small farmers. It would also increase tensions between the feudal wealthy and the rural landless, and push much-needed land reforms further down the country's political agenda.

"Big landowners who are now renting out their land to small farmers will throw them out and put it up to the highest foreign bidder," said Ms Siddiqi, predicting that small landholders with 5-10 acres would be bought out, and "landlessness and rural poverty will increase."

With hundreds of thousands landless aspiring to own even a small square of land, big land acquisitions by foreign investors, pointed out Ms Siddiqi, would lead to political unrest.

The owner of 300 acres of farmland in the famed mango-growing area of Bahawalpur herself, Ms Siddiqi also raised concerns about the "cartelisation of agriculture" in which a few big landowners with political influence would join hands with foreign investors.

"You will have a situation where the cartels will be deciding the country's agricultural policy, deciding what should be grown and how much, in ways that will affect Pakistan's food security in the years to come," she said.

The issue of food security was centre-stage in recent weeks in Pakistan, as people reeled under sugar and wheat flour (atta) shortages during the entire month of Ramzan, artificially triggered by unscrupulous hoarders. The resultant high prices put the two basic commodities literally out of reach for many during the festive season.

Additionally, a food security index ranking Pakistan as the 11th most food insecure nation triggered more fears. The government contested the ranking and hastened to assure that it had enough stocks to feed everybody. But the deaths of 20 women and children in a stampede for free atta in Karachi some days ago led to the accusation that instead of making food more accessible to the poor of this country, the government was putting its land up for sale to foreigners.

"This is the time we should be thinking of cooperative farming to help our own people," said Ms Sultan, mentioning the Amul project in India, "instead of inviting in corporate farming investors."

Another concern is for national sovereignty. Already, there is discontent that large tracts of land in the Cholistan desert in southern Punjab have been virtually made over to some Gulf rulers who use it for hunting shoots every winter and have built virtual palaces in the area.

Ms Sultan said the entire scheme was a throwback to the time of the British colonialists who milked the sub-continent for its resources.

In an influential article in Dawn, I.A. Rehman, the eminent political commentator and human rights activist, urged the government to go no further with the "outlandish" farmland leasing project without consulting the people of the country through its legitimately elected Parliament.

Warning it could give the foreign investors undue influence in how Pakistan is run, Mr. Rehman said it may even strain relations with Saudi Arabia. He reminded the government that according to official theory in Pakistan, the government itself was a lessee as all land belonged to God under the Islamic faith, or to the state. "Both restrict the government's power to lease/sell land."

#### SPILL-OVER BENEFITS

But the project does not entirely lack supporters. There are those who feel that if the plan is to lease the vast swathes of uncultivable land owned by the government, it may bring benefits to Pakistan.

"Take Cholistan. Under the desert is a huge resource of water that is brackish, and investment can change the face of that region," said Chaudhary Anwar Aziz, a former Food Minister. He was opposed to the idea when it was floated some years ago, but, he said, "no longer. We have neither the capital nor the technical know-how to use this resource. So if a foreign investor is prepared to inject both, why not? I think we will stand to gain."

Corporate farming would generate employment for local populations, and Pakistan would learn from the technical know-how that the investors bring, said Mr. Aziz, even if the investors took away all the produce from the land.

"There will definitely be a spill-over effect for Pakistan," he said.

But the question is bound to arise: does the government have any business offering even wasteland to a foreign power? "Landless peasants have the first right on any land that is at the government's disposal," wrote Mr. Rehman.

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The Hindu

The government plan to raise a special security force to protect investors' lands has also raised suspicions. "If the Cholistan desert is what the investors are after, why should the government offer to raise a special security force to protect land that no Pakistani wants?" asked Ms Siddiqi. The government must immediately reveal all the details of the proposal, she said, so that "the stakeholders, the people of Pakistan, can see for themselves what this deal is all about."

Keywords: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, farmlands, lease, Farmers' Association of Pakistan

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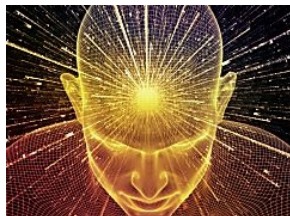
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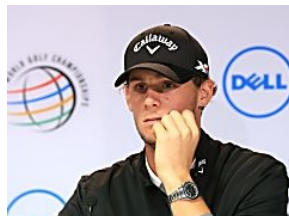
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Dear in Christ.

PLEASE ENDEAVOUR TO USE IT FOR THE CHILDREN OF GOD BECAUSE IT IS A VOW I MADE BEFORE GOD.

I am Mrs. Joannes Rosa. Miklos from Szentendre, Hungary I am married to Mr. Benedek Domonkos Miklos who worked with kuwait company in cote d'ivoire for nine years

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before he died last year.

We were married for eleven years without a child. He died after a brief illness that lasted for only four days. Before his death we were both born again Christians. Since his death I decided not to re-marry or get a child outside my matrimonial home which the Bible is against. When my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of (3.5 Million U.S. Dollars ) with a BANK here in Cotonou Benin Republic.

Presently, this money is still in the BANK. Recently, my Doctor told me that I would not last for the next three months due to cancer problem. Though what disturbs me most is my stroke. Having known my condition I decided to donate this fund to church or better still a christian individual that will utilize this fund the way I am going to instruct here in.

I want a church that will use this to fund churches, orphanages and widows propagating the word of God and to ensure that the house of God is maintained. The Bible made us to understand that Blessed is the hand that giveth. I took this decision because I don't have any child that will inherit this money and my husband relatives are not Christians and I don't want my husband's hard earned money to be misused by unbelievers. My desire to help in building churches, orphanage and spreading the Word of God, set up a Christian Fundation to support specific projects including also:

(1) the mission of Jesus for Jesus to evangelize in the Holy Land and among Jews and Arabs in western cities;

(2) medical missions to care for the poor in the inner city or in the 3rd world countries wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is needed e.g. supporting Christian medical students, nurses;

(3) Christian publishers that focus on the deeper and more profound messages of the cross of Christ in order to promote the unity among Christian churches;

(4) other projects that deem profitable by the leading of the Holy Spirit to hasten the return of our Lord.

I don't want a situation where this money will be used in an ungodly manner. Hence the reason for taking this bold decision. I am not afraid of death hence I know where I am going. I know that I am going to be in the bosom of the Lord. Exodus 14 VS 14 says that the lord will fight my case and I shall hold my peace.

I don't need any telephone communication in this regard because of my health and because of the presence of my husband's relatives around me always. I don't want them to know about this development. With God all things are possible.

As soon as I receive your reply I will give you the contact of the BANK in Benin Republic where the fund is deposited. I will also issue you a letter of authority that will empower you as the original- beneficiary of this fund. I want you and the church to always pray for me because the lord is my shephard. My happiness is that I lived a life of a worthy Christian.

Whoever that wants to serve the Lord must serve him in spirit and truth. Please always be prayerful all through your life. Any delay in your reply will give me room in searching for another church or christian individual for this same purpose.

Please assure me that you will act accordingly as I stated herein.

Hoping to hearing from you.

Remain blessed in the name of the Lord.

Yours in Christ.

Mrs. Joannes Rosa. Miklos

from: *Mrs. Joannes Rosa. Miklos*

Posted on: Oct 2, 2009 at 16:01 IST

It is not good for a country for lease its land to a foregin country for agriculture. first of all it will become the treat to the country's security and the second thing is that what ever money they are investing will not be properly used by the politicians. end result will be like "Letting the Camel's Nose Under the Tent"

from: *Arunprasad*

Posted on: Sep 28, 2009 at 13:53 IST

Absurd to lease land out to foreigners. The article clearly points to the malady of

wealth draining out. What was the purpose of fighting for our independence and then allowing foreign domination to re-enter? India should stand up and protest very strongly on two vital equations. One, primarily Pakistan was carved out of India for whatever silly argument it had over parliamentary representation in undivided India and it is her right to protect its lands for the people. Second, under the Indus water treaty signed between the two countries all distributable water from the rivers is well monitored as it has to be proportionately utilised between the two countries.

Pakistan Government better be warned that the Indian Government will not stand party to any deal made with foreigners and will treat this as null and void. All lands in both the countries are to be managed by their respective governments in the common interest of its citizens and particularly its peasantry.

from: *Ali Nazim Jafri*

Posted on: Sep 28, 2009 at 01:22 IST

Pakistan is callous in leasing out 500,000 acres to Saudi Arabia. Yes if you want to make necessary money produce goods - agricultural produce and then sell, after all according to Islam . Allah is the Lessor of the land to people and how the Lessee can sub-lease without Allah's dispensation. So the farmers should put of their fight against irrational policies of Pak government and revolt against them to rectify the situation. One fine morning Saudi Arabia will just colonize Pakistan and people of Pakistan again slaves. Better caution is needed so prudence and it appears from the report the wrongies in govt fail to appreciate the gravity please. Let wisdom prevail in Pak government circles. A stitch in time saves nine sirs.

from: *g balakrishnan*

Posted on: Sep 27, 2009 at 22:41 IST

Pakistan should not lease land to Saudi, rather, Pak should see this as a good opportunity to earn some money. There is good prospects for the PAK, since the population in Saudi is burgeoning

from: *bijoy*

Posted on: Sep 25, 2009 at 13:03 IST

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