

Mohammad Shehzad interviews Dr. Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University.

MS: What is the current situation in Okara?

PH: Having met with people who have returned from there just hours ago, it seems very similar to that on May 11, when I had gone to Okara along with a group of journalists from the Urdu press and concerned citizens. For over 3 months now, the Army Rangers have maintained a siege on several villages in the Okara area. Roadblocks are everywhere, manned by soldiers with automatic weapons as well the lighter-armed police. Everyone is stopped and searched, many are turned back. Four-wheelers with mounted machine-guns travel along the dirt roads next to the irrigation canals. People are not allowed out of or into the villages. Even medicine, food, or fuel is not permitted. Agricultural machinery has been confiscated. All schools are closed, and children are fearful of being kidnapped. We were told of a pregnant woman being taken to the local hospital who died because the Rangers would not let her through. For all practical purposes, several lakh Pakistanis are under military occupation – by the Pakistan Army. On the two occasions that I visited the area, people had been shot and killed.

MS: Was there any judicial inquiry as to who killed them?

PH: Not to my knowledge. A young man, Salman, belonging to Chak 10 had allegedly been tortured to death some days before my first visit. Then, on my second visit, I saw the dead body of Mohammed Amir who had been killed just hours earlier. When I requested the authorities to let us take the body to Islamabad for an autopsy, we were denied permission. They claim that all killings so far have been a result of intra-group clashes. But personally, I think this is quite implausible. First, I definitely saw the effect of light machine-gun bullets on the masonry in the village. You can even see where the bullets have hit the village mosque. The only people with such weaponry seem to be the Rangers. Secondly, the villagers deny the existence of any serious differences amongst themselves. Clearly, to get to the truth, an impartial judicial inquiry is essential.

MS: What created the present situation?

PH: The army wants the peasants to sign on a certain contract document and pay rent. The peasants are resisting because upon signing that document, a peasant surrenders his rights as a tenant and become a contract labourer. As such, he can be evicted at will by the authorities on the flimsiest of pretexts. The Okara peasants were brought into the area about a century ago by the British from other parts of Punjab and Sindh. For generations they have dug water canals, cleared brush, and tilled the land. So they feel that they should own the land. But various government agencies – the Army Welfare Trust, Punjab Seed Corporation, and the livestock department (which supplies the Pakistan Army with dairy products) – would like to own some 70,000 acres of this A-grade agricultural land. There is also the obvious fact that army officers are eyeing this land as retirement gifts. So, basically it is a conflict between the haves and have-nots of Pakistani society.

MS: You have met the Director General of the Rangers, General Hussain Mehdi, as well as local Ranger commanders in Okara. What do they say?

PH: They say that the peasant leaders are corrupt, have expensive mobile telephones, and are in the pay of NGOs and anti-national forces. But ordinary peasants, they claim, have happily and willingly signed the contract deed. General Mehdi gave me a copy of the minutes of a meeting held last year in his office to discuss the land issue. He wanted to convince me that the peasant leadership had initially agreed to the contract issue but subsequently had reneged on their promise. Interestingly, that document was in English. Even though the illiterate peasant leaders had affixed their thumbprints, one wonders if they had any clue as to what was in the document. Also, even if they did, would a humble peasant have dared to look an army general in the face, much less be audacious enough to object? To me, the question of whether the peasant leadership is corrupt or not is of secondary concern. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that they are indeed corrupt as alleged. But even so, there remains the question of who should own the land. Further, the army is clearly and visibly abusing its power.

MS: Many peasants have been killed, others tortured and maimed. Yet Okara is not big news. Why?

PH: Like other rural areas, Okara belongs to the backwaters. In a sense you find the same difference in news-worthiness as, say, between something that happens in New York and that which occurs in Mogadishu. It is therefore truly remarkable that, in spite of such a huge disadvantage, Okara has become a national symbol of resistance against the Pakistan Army's insatiable lust for land. Today a wide swathe of society across Pakistan has joined up in protest. It is unprecedented. In previous decades, vast areas in Sindh and Punjab of the best agricultural land were expropriated by the armed forces without so much as a whimper of protest from those dispossessed. But Okara may be different. It could well be the Army's Waterloo.

MS: Do you think the media, and civil society and human rights organizations are following up on the Okara issue seriously?

Not so far. The media is only just becoming aware, and just a handful of organizations have sent their people to even see what goes on there. True, there are some dedicated people in these organizations. But the credit of resistance goes squarely to the peasants. They are the ones who have faced the bullets and organized a heroic resistance to oppression. You can also understand why this is so – they have their backs to the wall. Peasants have no political agenda – land is about livelihood and physical survival. Take land away from a peasant and he knows he is done for. They guess – probably correctly – that their reduction to contract labour is the first step to eviction, and then a life in filthy city slums where to stay alive is a constant battle. So, their reasons for fighting are purely selfish, not altruistic. Should that disappoint us? Not really, survival is fundamental to the human species. You and I would fight for our lives bravely too.

MS: Are Pakistan's religious parties interested in the cause of Okara peasants?

I wish that is where they would put their energies, rather than force us to grow beards and deface billboards with women. Qazi Hussain Ahmad and company are a real disappointment. So far we have had only some rather weak statements. There are individuals, however, who belong to religious parties and who are very brave. We recently visited Sarwar Mujahid, a reporter from Nawa-i-Waqt and a member of the Ahl-i-Hadith. He is in Okara jail, locked up under trumped up charges of terrorism. But the fact is that he has spoken out courageously against the horrible acts of violence perpetrated by the army. Even in jail he leads prayers and speaks about the vile oppression of the people. I find it appalling that our politicians – whether secular or religious – are fixated on the LFO but never get around to the real issue, which is the usurpation of the rights of our people. This is really why the people of Pakistan have no respect for politicians. They talk about everything except that which really matters.

MS: Is “death or ownership” a legitimate demand of Okara peasants?

This is entirely for them to decide upon. It is they who have to pay the price of resistance – not outsiders like me who do no more than make an occasional visit to see the situation. The demand for ownership is unquestionably legitimate – after all to whom does the Pakistan’s land belong? Its people, of course! But, having said that, I think that serious thought needs to be given whether this is a wise slogan given that the peasants face a powerful, modern army with firepower enough to kill every man, woman, and child. A mass slaughter must be avoided at all costs.

MS: How could the Okara issue be peacefully resolved to the satisfaction of all the parties?

General Pervez Musharraf should appoint a commission that draws upon the senior judiciary, the political leadership, and leaders of civil society. The commission should examine the issue and decide what is just. If ownership is to be granted, then what should be the necessary conditions? Who should qualify? To what extent should the state be compensated, i.e. should there be some fixed land price as well? After all, the state did invest in creating infrastructure in the area. Clearly individuals have rights as well as obligations, and the quantum of the latter needs to be decided upon. In any case, land ownership issues should be decided by the courts through a process that gives a proper hearing to all sides. The Rangers, or the Army, do not have the moral or legal authority to decide upon such issues. The use of force is not legitimate in these circumstances. That is why we need strong democratic institutions capable of withstanding pressures from powerful groups such as the Army.

MS: Given the size of peasant movement and the importance it has for the country, don’t you think that a debate on TV at this occasion will be helpful on this issue?

PAH: Absolutely! But it will need a miracle to persuade PTV. Unfortunately, while the print media in Pakistan is reasonably fair and open, television is very strongly constrained. This is an enormous handicap for establishing democracy because valid information is vital for making sensible decisions. But on TV all we get is propaganda. Every government – civil or military – has used television for its narrow self-interests rather than a means of moving society forward. I wish that private television channels – which claim to be free of government control – would like look at an issue that means life and death for about a million people.

MS: What could happen if Okara is not resolved soon and the siege prolonged?

PH: For one, it will lay to rest any pretence of democracy. Democracy is not about voting people in and out of office. It is about a rational and equitable sharing of power and resources, educating people into pluralism and tolerance, and providing equality of opportunity. If democracy allows the poor – like those of Okara – to be crushed under the boots of the army, then we are better off without democracy. Or even Pakistan as a state. How can a state that unleashes the firepower of its army against its own people ever achieve legitimacy? There is another danger as well – the peasants have chosen passive resistance until now, but if the army begins mass expulsions of Okara peasants to waterless Cholistan or elsewhere, an armed resistance may develop at some stage. It would be tragic if Pakistan's leadership permits the situation to deteriorate to that point.