

Punjab (Pakistan) : Land Rights Campaign begins

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Anjman Mozareen Punjab has once again started a campaign for land rights. 68000 acres of land is in possession of Military Farms and Army Welfare Trust. The land is located in Lahore, Okara and Pakpattan district of Punjab. The agricultural land is mainly cultivated by tenants.

The tenants were asked to become lessee in year 2000 by Musharraf dictatorship. The scheme was to hand over this land to multi national companies for corporate farming. The tenants resisted and formed Anjman Mozareen Punjab (Punjab tenant Association). The AMP became a vehicle of resistance with the help of progressive political and social organizations.

The resistance by AMP became one of the most militant movements of peasantry in Punjab history. Instead of becoming lessee, they refused to pay the share, they were paying as tenants. The women played the leading role. Seven were killed, scores injured and hundreds arrested during the peaceful but militant movement.

During the movement, Pakistan People Party and Muslim League Nawaz promised to give this land to the tenants when they will come to power. A year has passed while both in power. Not much is done to fulfill this promise.

On 17 April 2008, over 5000 tenants and peasants participated in a peasant conference held at Okara Military Farms on the international day of peasants. They reminded the both parties to do what they promised.

We heard that three member's federal cabinet committee is formed to solve this issue. Not a single meeting of this committee took place during one year.

In November 2008, we revealed in a press conference that some agriculture land in Renala Khurd belonging to tenants is been allotted to some military generals and officers in 2007 by the then Punjab government of Pervaiz Ilanhi. We made it clear that we are the occupants of this land and we will not hand over this land to the military officers.

In December 2008, I reminded Mian Nawaz Sharif in a meeting at his residence about his promise. He was very keen to do something. He asked my contact and promised that he will take initiative to have a meeting with the tenants. There are no developments until now in this regard either. I also told him that the land is owned by Punjab government and military is occupying the land without any legal documents.

On 19 January 2009, over 2000 tenants gathered at Renalkhurd in a public meeting by AMP demand the land rights. The police occupied the platform in the morning and asked the organizers to cancel this public meeting. They refused and later when the peasants started to arrive in the tractor trolleys, the police fled from the place and the meeting went ahead.

On 16 February 2009, the AMP leadership including Mehr Abdul Satar, Nadeem Asharaf, Shabir Choudry, Liaqat Ali alongside with Peoples Right Movement convener Asim Sajad addressed a press

conference in Islamabad. Daily Dawn reported the press conference in detail with the title « tillers of military farms seek ownership rights ». The report says, « When the state repression at Okara Military Farms was at its peak in 2002 and 2003, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif spoke out in favour of the tenants and promised that one of their first action upon coming to power would be to withdrawal all false criminal cases against the tenants and allot them the land they had been tilling over 100 years. The APM and PRM office bearers pointed out that a year's time was sufficient for the elected government to take the necessary measures to transform property rights to the tenants ».

The AMP leadership has decided to organise more public rallies during the next two months. On 29 February 2009, a public rally will be organized at Depalpur, On 12 March at Kulyana Estate Okara, on 29 March Lahore Pengali Military Farms and on 16 April, a peasant conference will be held at Okara Military Farms.

They have decided to print posters, leaflets and stickers to fly post all over the country. It is estimated that over 20,000 peasants will attend the Okara conference on 16 April 2009. The conference will be attended by the peasant representatives from all over the country and internationally, The AMP is part of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee. PKRC has decided to coordinate the campaign and work alongside with AMP in mobilization.