

Biodiversity: To please Arab royalties Pakistan can do anything

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Enchanted by the muse of war and belligerence, jingoists install a legendary image of a 'warrior Muslim' and 'Muslim soldier' who carries mythical qualities by the very property of being a Muslim. To them Pakistan is an empire of Islam, and each Muslim is a superhuman or better say a *mard-e-momin*.

Despite strong opposition by the Environment Ministry, the Foreign Affair Ministry, on the directions of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, has granted 27 permits to various Arab dignitaries to hunt the endangered houbara bustard for 2010-11 winter season. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, President of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi, has been allotted hunting areas in three provinces. In Punjab he has been granted Rahimyar Khan, Rajanpur and D.G. Khan districts, in Sindh Sukkur, Ghotki, Nawabshah and Sanghar districts and in Balochistan his areas comprise Zhob, Ormara, Gwadar, Pasni, Panjgur and Washuk districts.

Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Crown prince of Abu Dhabi, can hunt in Lehri Tehsil of Sibi district, Balochistan. Deputy prime minister of UAE, Sheikh Sultan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, has been permitted to hunt in Khairpur district, including Kot Diji. Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the vice-president of UAE and ruler of Dubai, has been permitted to hunt in Khuzdar and Lasbela districts of Balochistan and Muzaffargarh district in Punjab. Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud has been allotted Chagai and Nushki districts of Balochistan.

Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz, interior minister and brother of King Abdullah, has been permitted to hunt in Dera Bugti, Dera Murad Jamali, Nasirabad and Awaran districts of Balochistan. In Punjab his territory comprises Khushab, Jhang, Mianwali and Sargodha districts. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the amir of Qatar, has been allotted Bahawalnagar district in Punjab.

According to the code of conduct, the hunting period is restricted to 10 days with a bag limit of 100 birds. The officials of Ministry of Environment admit that Arab dignitaries never follow the code of conduct. "They never respect code of conduct. What can the Wildlife Department do if the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the president of the UAE or Amir of Qatar go into a region that is prohibited for hunting and cross their bag limit?" said an official of Ministry of Environment. According to them, the Arab dignitaries come to hunt houbara bustard armed with computers, infrared spotlights, radar, hundreds of servants and falcons, customised vehicles and mobile palaces.

"The bird is on the verge of extinction at least in Pakistan because of our friends who have not been disturbing only the ecosystem but also physical infrastructure in our deserts. The movement of heavy hunting vehicles sometimes causes severe damage to small earth-filled dams that are used for storing irrigation water, slowing rapid runoff, and recharging ground-water resources," the official said.

During a meeting of Inter-Provincial Coordination Committee (IPCC) in April this year, the

representatives from Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan complained that foreigners were hunting migratory birds without any check and balance. Birds protected under international laws were also being hunted, especially houbara bustard.

According to them, the Foreign Ministry issued licences to these foreigners but did not check or monitor their period of stay and hunting procedures. At the meeting, a five-member committee, headed by federal environment minister, was constituted to look into complaints of the provinces, suggest mechanisms for implementation of rules, and evolve a strategy to monitor the hunting process.

“No suggestion of the provinces has been looked into while granting permits,” says an official of Sindh Wildlife Department. According to him even the negative areas and National Parks are not excluded from the hunting areas. “Our government should, at least, make it sure that Arab hunters respect the code of conduct. The permit is granted to one person only for a specified time period but our Arab friends, their family and friends keep on hunting the bird for three months. Local wildlife officials do not have capacity or authority to check or monitor them,” he says. “There are only 500 game watchers in Sindh Wildlife Department to police the whole province and amazingly they do not have the facility of transportation.”

In Pakistan there are two types of species of houbara bustard—one indigenous and other is migratory. Nag Rakshan Valley in district Washuk in Balochistan is only place in Pakistan where residential houbara bustard is found. The number of residential bird has been reduced drastically in the area due to over hunting even in the protected area by our ‘Arab friends’. Overwhelming majority of Houbara bustard migrates every winter from its breeding grounds in Central Asia, China and Mongolia, and heads to its wintering habitats in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. At one time, the Arabian Peninsula itself had healthy resident breeding population, but it had been hunted almost to extinction.

“Unlike Pakistan, various Indian states have not allowed the Arab princes to hunt the bird in their regions” said Nematullah, chief executive Balochistan Conservation Society, who belongs to Nag Valley, Balochistan. According to him two decades back there used to be hundreds of hundreds of resident houbara found in the area but now one can hardly find more than a dozen in an area of 50 kilometer radius in the valley. “A breeding and rehabilitation center of Houbara bustard is established in Nag valley but it has not been doing enough to save the bird. Last year it released only 22 birds while the hunters hunted at least 2,000 birds. The population of the bird both migratory and residential have decreased around 80 percent in our area during last two decades” he said.

Houbara bustard is a highly protected species both under national law and international conventions. It is protected under the Provincial Wildlife Acts/Ordinance of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan. Pakistan is also a signatory to various international conservation conventions, including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora, Convention on Migratory Bird Species, the Bonn Convention, etc, and is morally bound to protect the houbara. It is also placed in CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Appendix I, which bans commercial trade in live or dead animals and animal parts. It is also listed in CMS (Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals). But the officials concerned have done little to implement the country’s international commitments.

A former environment minister, who does not want to be named, says that the bird is on the verge of extinction mainly because of hunting by our ‘friends’. “Environment is the relevant ministry to grant such permits, but when it comes to grant permits to Arab friends, Ministry of Foreign Affairs work under directions of the president and prime minister. Unofficially, officials of Wildlife Departments

are not allowed to check or monitor them while hunting. The Foreign Affairs Ministry is pressurised by these Arab dignitaries to get the permits." The former minister says that Arab countries, with the help of some local NGOs, have also started breeding centres for the bird in Balochistan and Punjab. "They release only 10 to 20 birds a year but make a lot of noise to remain in limelight."

Until late 1970s, the Arab royals used to go to Iran and Afghanistan as well for hunting this bird. But since the fall of Shah of Iran and Afghanistan war, Pakistan became the sole destination for the bird hunters. In 1912, the British government banned the hunting of houbara on the subcontinent. Pakistan also imposed a permanent ban on hunting of the bird in 1972. But nothing worked in front of our royal guests from Arab states because they believe the meat of this bird has mythical aphrodisiac qualities.

Ecologists believe that houbara's hunting in Pakistan is nowhere near sustainable. Out of the total 15,000 to 20,000 birds that come to the country in winters, a minimum of five to six thousand are hunted. In 2007, when 31 licensees were allowed a limit of 200 hunts, it can be estimated safely that a minimum of 6,200 birds were killed. These birds are also trapped for use in training falcons to hunt. An estimated 5,000 birds are lost this way each year for supply to falconers on the Arabian Peninsula alone. It is estimated that around half of them die while being smuggled out.

The indiscriminate killing of houbara and falcons may result in unbalanced ecosystem. The massive elimination of houbara increases the populations of harmful organisms lying at lower trophic levels and decreases the population of organisms lying at higher trophic levels. "The elimination of insectivore houbara bustard and raptorial falcons has probably resulted in increases in the populations of insects and rodents in the northeastern part of Balochistan and hence increased damage to agricultural crops or water channels.

"The falconry also has the potential of physically destroying the habitat through crushing of the slow-growing plants, denuding the camping sites through movement of men and materials, dumping of non-degradable wastes and woodcutting for camp fires," says Dr Muhammad Sajid Nadeem, Assistant Professor Department of Zoology at Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi, who has done extensive research on the houbara bustard.

Dr Nadeem says that hunting is done with such a sophistication that majority of birds in the area cannot survive. "Before coming for hunt, the Arabs deploy local people for a survey of the birds' population in different pockets and then they hunt them with the help of latest technology under the guidance of locals. Ironically, locals are not allowed to hunt the bird as it is a protected bird in Pakistan."

The provincial governments, at the behest of the federal government, exclude houbara bustard from the list of banned species for a period of three months every year to allow hunting in the designated areas. "The dignitaries also hunt it in the protected areas like National Parks and sanctuaries as authorities cannot stop them doing so."

Officials of ministry of environment say that an area of more than 500,000 square kilometer in more than 60 districts of the country is allocated for this purpose every year. "It makes almost half of the total area of the country. Each sheikh has his own favourite areas and if any other sheikh is allocated 'his area', intense displeasure is conveyed to the government" say official.

Since 2008 the present government has been allocating some areas traditionally kept for Saudi Arabia for hunting to the Sheikhs of UAE. The government has offered alternate hunting zones to Saudi dignitaries, but the latter insisted that their original areas be allocated to them. "This appointed Saudis to an extent that they have been ignoring a number of requests for assistance

made by Pakistan, including one for oil supply on deferred payment. They have not supported Pakistan generously after the floods," they say. "Last year National Council for Conservation of Wildlife (NCCW) that works under the environment ministry recommended putting a three-year ban on hunting of houbara bustard to save the bird. The summary was forwarded to Prime Minister for his approval who denied doing so and instead direct foreign ministry to grant permits" they conclude.

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