

STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Pakistan: an estimated two hundred thousand fisher-folk risk losing their livelihoods to transnational bidders in ongoing fishing rights auction**

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Fifty-nine years since independence, the people of Pakistan are yet to experience true democracy and the rule of law. The Provincial Governors of Pakistan and their governments exploit the opportunity of lawlessness by awarding financial as well as other privileges to the people of their choice. A current example of this is the auctioning of fishing rights in Pakistan's Sindh Province. The auction, which started on 6 June, will continue until 30 June, 2006.

The auction is in direct contradiction of the Sindh government's promise made on 21 February, 2005, when it assured that inland fishing rights will not be auctioned to private contractors thereby depriving thousands of poor fishermen and family-members from their only source of livelihood. The action by the Provincial government is unchallengeable owing to the complete absence of a trustworthy judiciary in Pakistan. The judicial authority for review and revision, particularly of orders made by the Government and its various offices, has seen its effectiveness nullified by the destruction of the Constitutional authority of judges in Pakistan.

The Constitution of Pakistan was suspended for the fourth time in 1999 and the country is now ruled by a series of orders promulgated by the Executive President, which are otherwise referred to as Provisional Constitution Orders (PCO). Through the self-serving power bestowed upon the President, the suspended Constitution was subsequently amended in order to move the country towards absolute dictatorship, and then the Constitution was restored in 2003 incorporating these nefarious amendments. However, the Constitution of Pakistan currently derives its authority from the office of the President, the whims of Military Generals and the orders the President promulgates as and when he wishes, rather than from the people of Pakistan.

From 1999 until the present, the President has promulgated ten PCOs, which for all practical purposes are now the law of the land. These orders are nothing but written assertions of the unchallengeable authority of the President and the military he controls. Enormous power is conferred upon the Provincial Governors who take an oath of office swearing allegiance to the office of the President. The situation has resulted in an alarming increase of nepotism and corruption, the landmarks of lawlessness. The auction of fishing rights is one such example.

It is expected that some 1260 fishing spots, traditionally used by local and indigenous fisher folk, will be sold to private contractors during this auction. This will rule out the possibility for anyone other than the contractors to fish in these places for a period of one year. This also implies that a minimum of 200,000 people who depend on traditional fishing will find it impossible to fish and will

be forced out from their traditional occupation. It is also expected that many will suffer from acute starvation as a direct result of the poverty forced upon them. Most of these private contractors and their representatives hold no concern for the ordinary fisher-folk of Pakistan or the country's economy and its natural wealth.

In protest against the auction, the Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum, an association of the local fishermen, has started a movement including daily public demonstrations. However, the Sindh Government has refused all possibilities of a dialogue with the representatives of the Forum. It is unfortunate that there are no possibilities of a domestic solution to the issue, which is pushing thousands of poor Pakistanis towards extreme poverty. This also giving rise to a situation in which the affected population is likely to be forced into bonded labour.

In Pakistan, where the basic law is suspended and no legal or legislative remedies are ever possible, the ordinary people are left at the mercy of the ruling elite and their henchmen. The international community, while being aware about Pakistan's role in support of the war against terrorism, is oblivious about the plight of some two hundred thousand people in Pakistan who will now find it difficult to ensure a meal each day.

The AHRC condemns the attitude of the Provisional Government of Sindh, which is leading it to ignore the plight of some two hundred thousand of its people in favour of catering to the demands of a few rich corporations and individuals. The AHRC also calls upon concerned civil society groups and individuals to mark their protest against the Provisional Government of Sindh and also requests the Government of Pakistan to intervene in order to rectify this situation, which might make the difference between life and death for this large number of Pakistani citizens.

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\* AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984. <http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2006statements/579/>