

Pakistan: Poor and landless peasants facing violence by landlords and the Military establishment

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PAKISTAN: Peasants continue to face violence by landlords and the Military establishment

The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) would like to draw the UN Human Rights Council's attention to the general status of the poor and landless peasants of Pakistan. Due to the injustice meted out to farmers across Pakistan, many clashes have occurred between peasants and landlords on various issues related to tenancy, share crops, eviction from lands and other related problems faced by the peasantry.

On the International Day of Peasant Struggles 2016, the peasants of Okara Military Farms, the only organized peasant's group, were not allowed to celebrate their day; instead, the Military vehicles were moved over there and it was warned the Military will not allow the celebration of April 17, the International Day. One day before April 17, the General Secretary of Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (AMP), the organization of Okara peasants, Mr. Abdul Sattar, was arrested on terrorist charges and booked in 150 cases. On April 17, local administration with the support of Military, did not allow peasants to observe the day; police used batons and tear shells to disperse the mob. Since late 2014, over 4,000 unarmed villagers across the district have also been charged with terrorism, with periodic arrests [1].

The Pakistani peasants' basic problems remain unchecked and ignored by successive governments. The issue of distribution of land remains at the top of the peasants' demands and requirements, particularly in the interior of Sindh and southern Punjab, where land distribution is highly inequitable. Bondage is still rife in agrarian regions, which involves the purchase and sale of peasants among landlords, the maintenance of private jails to discipline and punish peasants, the forcible transference of teachers who train peasants to maintain proper financial accounts, and the systematic rape of peasant women by landlords.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights calls for the right to form trade unions, which is very important in Pakistan's case where this right is largely denied. Article 17-A of the Constitution of Pakistan also extends this right to every citizen, but the actual situation does not permit this, to the detriment of labourers, particularly women.

The indebted peasants have time and again demanded amendments in the Sindh Tenancy Act, 1950.

The present practice is that the landlord takes up a large quantity of the harvest, claiming interest and repayment of the original loan, thereby keeping the peasants in a state of perpetual debt. The demand is to obtain equal status for the peasants while they share the harvest with the landlords, irrespective of the loan they have availed from the landlords for agriculture.

Despite the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act of 1992, forced labour continues to be practiced on a wide scale, mostly in agriculture, brick-kilns, fisheries, construction, and carpet industry and over domestic servants. In agriculture, it involves the purchase and sale of peasants, the maintenance of private jails, and a pattern of rape of peasant women by landlords and the police. The abuse of bonded laborers is rarely questioned in this context, as the power of prominent landlords is entrenched in Pakistan's political, economic, and social structure.

Landholding patterns vary from region to region, with the interior of Sindh and the Seraiki-speaking areas of Punjab being the most inequitable. It is in these regions that bonded labor is used most extensively. The Third Land Reform Act of 1977 sought to reduce the ceiling on individual land holdings to forty hectares of irrigated land or eighty hectares of un-irrigated land. But after the imposition of martial law in 1977, little was done to implement this act.

Pakistan's Tenancy Act, 1950, and the Bonded labor Act, 1992, are two pieces of legislation meant to alleviate the status of peasants. However, the State has made no attempt to effectively implement the laws, perhaps because the powerful feudal lobby is well represented in political parties and the administration, and this lobby knows how to protect its own interests. Though land reforms were initiated thrice, unfortunately they were not implemented. The provincial governments, who were responsible for their implementation, have been dominated by the same feudal lords who stand to lose out.

In Punjab Province, the issue of Okara Military farms represents a growing resentment over the army's monopolization of power, land and resources through land-grabbing and military feudalism. The Okara farmers have been facing harsh treatment by the Military since August 2002. More than 20,000 military personnel have cordoned off the area in an attempt to force the peasants to give up their demand for the "ownership" of the land they have tilled for decades, and to force them to agree to the dominance of the military.

Most of the leadership of Anjuman Mazarain Punjab (AMP), a representative organization of landless farmers, has been arrested under false anti-terrorist laws. Dozens of members are missing, while over 50 remain behind bars. All have been declared "terrorists" by the Okara district police, working hand in hand with the Military Farms administration, which mainly serves Military officers.

Since 2001, 11 farmers have lost their lives as a result of brutal force by the Military. The farmers aren't even allowed the constitutional right to peaceful protest. The Military has time and again used brute force to silence the voice of the peasants. No media coverage of the peasants is allowed in mainstream media. Several journalists who have dared to defy the order have been arrested under terrorism charges.

In view of the above, the ALRC requests the Human Rights Council to urge the Pakistani government to:

- a) Establish Peasant Courts without any delay to resolve the peasant disputes with regard to their loans, which never come to an end, even after many generations.
- b) The peasants must be allowed to form trade unions with constitutional legal protection.
- c) Contract system for hiring peasants must be abolished and share-cropping must be implemented

with the principle of “one who grows has the right to consume”.

d) The bondage system must be abolished and those landlords, brick kiln owners, and Military men involved in it must be prosecuted and punished.

e) All the peasants throughout the country must be released and cases against them including charges of terrorism must be withdrawn.

f) Compensate the families of those peasants killed during their protests.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/124587-Fear-and-dissent-in-Okara>