

FACTS & FIGURES

Worth of a life

HOW much is a human life worth in Pakistan? Not more than peanuts, given the impunity with which people are being killed in this benighted country of ours. The state's failure — or lack of will — to protect the life of its citizens is at the root of this tragedy.

In this context, I am reminded of two women — one dead, the other on death row. One was a dear friend. The other is a stranger whose community has been my benefactor. I owe my education to Christian missionaries who gave me knowledge and taught me, by example, to respect and be tolerant of all faiths.

Perween Rahman and Asiya Bibi have nothing in common except that they are symbols of our quest for justice and sanctity of life in a society that thrives on hate and violence.

Perween, director of the Orangi Pilot Project, Research and Training Institute, was shot dead on March 13, 2013, as she was returning home from work. Her killers have yet to be apprehended. The case filed in the Supreme Court is dragging on. But even in her death she continues to remind us that oppression must be resisted. That is what she was doing when she took up the cases of the wretched dwellers of the urban goths which skirt Karachi. Perween managed to get 1,063 of them regularised which gave title to the land to those living on it. She had filed 1,000 more applications that are pending as the regularisation process has been halted. It is not known why and no one asks.

The Sindh police, true to its wont, has not been very helpful. With some 'wanted men' killed in strange circumstances, the case is being described as a blind one and difficult to solve. It would have been closed had the Supreme Court not persisted. At its initiative, a joint investigation team has been set up though it has yet to make headway. At times diversionary tactics are used to take away the focus from the land mafia and its political backers who, many believe, were irked by Perween's work. The court has mercifully kept the pressure on the investigators.

Asiya Bibi's case is different from Perween's but it is just as important. She is one of the 37 prisoners who are on death row in Pakistan on charges of blasphemy which she denies. Is Asiya Bibi really guilty? The laws are such that the miscarriage of justice in blasphemy cases is quite common in the country.

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Karachi: a goldmine for land 'developers'

A land grab of monumental proportions is under way not far from the prime strip of real estate along Gizri Creek that constitutes the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), Karachi, Phase 7 (extension) and Phase 8. If all goes according to plan, 490 acres of mangroves across the creek will be incorporated into DHA's ever-expanding boundaries, following which they will be chopped down, and the area used for the major portion of a lavish waterfront project.

Known as Waterfront Developments, the project has been devised to make huge fortunes for a select few, enormously powerful individuals, while giving short shrift to citizens' rights and further decimating one of Karachi's most valuable natural assets, its mangrove forests.

According to a petition filed against it in the Sindh High Court by advocate Mahfooz Yar Khan, the waterfront project involves a deal according to which some of the area will be acquired by DHA on payment while part of the remainder is to be developed by DHA and returned to the owner/s and the rest retained by DHA.

The parcelling out among political and military heavyweights of what should be protected land, and the manner in which the story has unfolded shows an astounding contempt for the law by all concerned.

For one, about 342 acres within the 490 earmarked for the waterfront project have been in litigation since 1996, and the entire saga is one of shady benami contracts, manipulation of land records and under-the-table deals involving hundreds of millions of rupees.

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Roti, Kapra aur dukaan: Govt schemes to give builders katchi abadi land

The government and builders are eying slums because they are located on valuable land.

In the story, a city decides to throw out its prostitutes and take over their houses in the red light area because everyone thought their presence was corrupting society. The women are relocated to an abandoned spot outside the city. But when the women build new lives there, an entire city springs up around it. Twenty years down the line, this new city, Anandi, decides it has to demolish the red light area downtown because it is corrupting society. The city council throws the women out to an abandoned spot outside the city. History repeats itself.

As an Urdu short story writer Ghulam Abbas was no urban planner but *Anandi* seems to have eerily foretold something we are seeing in Karachi today: the desire to get rid of settlements that are deemed unsightly, unwanted and a source of iniquity. In this case it is called the Sindh Special Development Board Bill 2014.

The new law says: All katchi abadis and slums will be rehabilitated. Each household will be given an alternative space to live in, 600 square feet (one bedroom and lounge) “preferably” (but not necessarily) in the same area. Meanwhile, the builder will construct free units for them on the land they have vacated and which is going to be bulldozed. In return, the builder gets 25% of the katchi abadi land for free where he can build a commercial project to sell. The Special Development board can pick a member of ABAD to do the work. ABAD is a private association of builders and developers in Pakistan. Its 660 members include the likes of Bahria Town Pvt. Ltd, Saima Real Estate, Chapal Builders.

This all may sound very noble but why has the government decided to pursue this new law? This has not made sense to Tasneem Siddiqui, an expert on low-income housing for Hyderabad’s Khuda ki Basti scheme that won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1995. “I don’t understand the rationale or justification,” he tells *The Express Tribune*. We already have laws and institutions that do low-income housing. If they weren’t doing it, then either those laws needed changes or the institutions needed hauling up.

Is the Sindh Katchi Abadi Authority (SKAA) with its Act of 1987 deficient? It did at least four sasti bastis, to name a few. The Malir Development Authority balloted hundreds of thousands of plots during Pervez Musharraf’s tenure. What about the Sindh Gothabad (Housing Scheme) Act, 1987 under which Karachi’s 2,173 settlements have been documented (by the Orangi Pilot Project)? Did it fall short somewhere? And what about the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Housing Cell? When the Pakistan Peoples Party came to power in 2008, Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah formed the cell and said it would give shelter to the poor in all district headquarters. Since then it has helped people build 6,000 units and has entered a second phase of building 6,000 more. “It is at the chief minister’s discretion,” said an officer at the cell. So, technically, if he wanted to put more money into it he could. So why is the CM heading this new board?

Barely any debate has taken place on why this board is needed given the institutions that already exist. On October 24, the bill was passed with the opposition protesting that they had not been given a draft. It effectively created an entirely new government body in the shape of the Sindh Special Development Board. But, “[p]lanning is not something boards can do,” points out Karachi’s most eminent historian, planner and architect Arif Hasan. That is the job of a master plan department as it is the overarching city planning agency. Technically, the master plan department sits on top of the Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA) and decides these policies. The only problem is that last year, the SBCA was given control of the Master Plan department. This has been challenged in court, possibly affecting how the Sindh government can empower the SBCA on this new board. It is in light of this that Prof. Noman Ahmed of NED University says: “I do not think that the insertion of [the SBCA] in its proposed role as per proviso of this [new] law shall hold good legally and administratively.”

These legal nuances aside, Prof. Noman also sees this law as the outcome of an ongoing rift between the two major parties in the Sindh Assembly. By pushing it through, the government has taken more power away from local government. “Many functions and operational privileges that have been lawfully enjoyed by the local bodies, are now vested in a provincially constituted institutional arrangement,” he says. The Sindh Solid Waste Management Board Bill, passed some months ago, is also a case in point. It sets up a centralized provincial authority to run solid waste management in major urban centres while taking these powers back from

the municipal bodies. In the Sindh Special Development Board's case the government seems to be saying forget the Karachi Municipal Corporation, the Sindh government wants a new board to do this work.

Only, that instead of the Sindh government acting as a watchdog for builders and developers, it is handing them half of the city. "With investment money banging on the door, no self-serving government would care to create hurdles for it by establishing building bye-laws and master plans," explains architect Arif Belgaumi, who teaches architectural design at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. "This is a classic trinity of free market economics, privatization, deregulation and cuts to social spending. The State only acts as a facilitating agent."

The irony is that this piece of legislation was put forward by the left-leaning Pakistan Peoples Party, which was supposed to be a pro-poor party. This is a shame because it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s who changed government policy on katchi abadis by saying they should be regularized and its people be given a right to the land at affordable prices. He was responsible for an improvement in institutional thinking that just considered the dwellers of katchi abadis a nuisance.

One of the clearest indications that this is not a pro-poor piece of legislation is the simple fact that no one representing the poor is on the board that decides the fate of katchi abadis, slums and goths. It is full of government functionaries and members of statutory bodies. But to give the impression that it has the welfare of the people of the katchi abadis at heart, the bill says that the builder will provide them health insurance and education up to graduation. (One developer is already making these charitable promises on television).

Arif Belgaumi sees this as an absence of governance. "Over the years ... so much of the State's responsibility—utilities, housing, education, health, security—has been assumed by the private sector and NGOs that the State has given up the pretense of providing them."

So the developers are in fact, the de facto government of Karachi. This is a neoliberal shift, in a way, that it gives the private sector more of a role. But the private sector makes decisions based on commercial interests and not necessarily for the welfare of the citizen no matter how rich or poor they are—as the state should be doing. In this case, the private sector is making a push to get a valuable asset: land.

Arif Hasan has seen this kind of neoliberal thinking inform decision-making for the Karachi Development Authority and politicians. "You have people, developers, officials saying that these people are sitting on extremely valuable land," he says. And people like Khuda ki Basti's Tasneem Siddiqui and the late Parween Rahman of the Orangi Pilot Project have been accused of encouraging katchi abadis by advocating regularisation (giving people lease papers).

Just as with the red light area in *Anandi*, people in Karachi blame social ills on katchi abadis because they are home to the poor. People say that they shouldn't exist. "This is middle-class thinking," says Siddiqui. Poor people are criminals. ABAD's chief Junaid Taloo demonstrates this philosophy amply by saying: "There is major crime there because the law enforcers can't

enter." He adds that ABAD wants to help address Karachi's law and order problem by rehabilitating slums.

And so slums should be demolished. It was this policy outlook that prompted the government to start the Lines Area Redevelopment Project in the early 1980s. The residents were relocated to places like Korangi. They were given *parchis* for their housing units with the promise that they would be called back when the new housing was built. Frustrated by delays many people eventually sold their *parchis* to middlemen or developers. The sunk further into poverty. In the meantime, the land was encroached on by commercial interests and even the police. "So it's a garbage dump, that scheme," argues Siddiqui. "That's why I am against removing people." But what about giving them cash for their land? The problem is that they will still then be shelterless. You have to regularise them where they live.

This is a model that works. Tasneem Siddiqui suggests first holding a survey. Check how the land is being used, how many people live in one unit and what it consists of (ground +1 or +2). You tell people what the cost of the land is and how much they have to pay for it to become an owner. In the case of katchi abadis the law says they needed to pay Rs25,000 in 1987. (This rate may have been revised upwards). There is a law that for incremental housing that says government land can be sold for 25% of the market price. This is how you make it affordable for low-income groups.

Siddiqui recommends dividing that payment into three parts. One-third goes to the government to pay for the subsidized land so the katchi abadi dweller gets a lease. One-third goes into paying for an office to do all this

paperwork. And one-third goes into improving the katchi abadi's services such as sanitation. In this model no one is uprooted and the living conditions in the katchi abadi are gradually improved. The government also brings into its net the katchi abadi.

Siddiqui argues that this was an affordable model whose success the Sindh Katchi Abadi Authority demonstrated from 1991 to 2005. It gave papers to many katchi abadis. "For 15 years this work went on and was internationally recognised. It was self-financed," he says. "There was no ADB or World Bank or even the Government of Sindh."

Upgrading an informal settlement is one of the solutions. But ABAD's Junaid Taloo and the people behind this law seem to think the 'demolish and build high-rise' model is a better fix. Arif Hasan worked on evaluating the possibility of this model in Ho Chi Minh city. They found that the governments can't afford it and neither could the people. Shifting slum dwellers out to rebuild cost \$5,500 per unit but upgrading slums cost the more reasonable \$325 per unit.

Bombay was not successful in trying the 'demolish and rebuild' model in its biggest slum, Dharavi. The Maharashtra government had to give in to the National Slum Dwellers Association protests. In Turkey, though, the government body TOKİ was able to push this experiment through. It demolished the slums where land was valuable and relocated people to 15-story flats on the outskirts. But in the end Turkey was accused of human rights violations. "They are nicely designed blocks, with all the facilities you can think of, but the people are angry," says Hasan. They can't supervise their children so they form gangs and they take drugs. Schools and hospitals are too far away. Women can't get work near their residence where they used to before.

Any policy for a katchi abadi needs to consider the cultural, social and economic fabric of that neighbourhood. One major reality to factor in is that working class people need to live close to their work—especially if the city doesn't have a mass transit system. Architect Adnan Asdar, who has designed low-income housing, saw what happened to people who were evicted to make way for the Lyari Expressway. They were sent to Musharraf Colony near Hawkesbay. "It is two hours away from the city centre," he says. People spend Rs100 a day on transport to work which comes to Rs3,000 a month. "People shouldn't have to pay more than 5% of their income on transport," he says. You make them poorer by relocating them.

Economics also comes into play if you consider the model of moving people in katchi abadis into high-rise buildings. A walk through any of these neighbourhoods will prove that they use their plots for small business as well. What will a mechanic do if you put him on the sixth floor?

And unless the new low-cost flats you build for katchi abadi dwellers are handed over free, you will make them poorer if you expect them to pay for them. "This happened with the Landhi-Korangi, General Azam scheme, based on the Doxiadis plan in the 1960s," says Arif Hasan. He is referring to 1958 when Ayub Khan decided to create enclaves for the working poor to relieve the pressure on the centre of Karachi. These people were mostly refugees from India. Lt. Gen. Azam Khan was the minister for rehabilitation at the time. The regime enlisted the help of Greek architect CA Doxiadis who proposed to send them to Korangi. The

people were supposed to pay monthly installments on the new housing but when they didn't the project came to a standstill "because the revolving fund didn't revolve". A time came when the project was spending more on paying the staff meant to recover the dues than the dues themselves.

If the Sindh government doesn't want more slums to develop they would do good to first study how they develop in the first place. There is no shortage of expert studies on this topic. Most of this history is linked to the influx of people for various reasons over the decades.

Originally though, according to Roland DeSouza of the non-profit Shehri, aside from Mithadar and Kharadar, all the rest of the areas in Karachi, such as the quarters, were planned by and large by the British. It was on the empty spaces that the newly arrived Muslims from India started to take up. They 'squatted' on nullahs, parks, amenity plots and plots vacated by the Hindus before the evacuee trust could get to them. Subsequently, though, a low-income housing backlog started to develop over the decades. "That is why katchi abadis developed, because they were affordable," says Arif Hasan. "No poor person would live in a katchi abadi if they could afford a plot in a pukki abadi. The real KDA in Karachi were the informal developers [who made this possible]."

When the government did build low-cost housing, though, it sometimes didn't factor in that the poor simply can't wait. The Khuda ki Basti model works because it allows the poor to live close to the site and hands over the house in three months. "When KDA developed schemes for 60 sq yd plots they'd take the money and not develop it for another 10 years," says DeSouza. "The builders don't like the KKB model

because there is no money to be made.”

There was more money in developing middle-income housing. Today there is no shortage of two-room flats that the builders make for Rs1.2 million on 600 square feet, says Tasneem Siddiqui. “There is a glut of them,” he says, pegging an estimated 50,000 of them empty in Karachi. “Ask ABAD why they are empty.”

They are empty because many times builders fail to fulfill promises to the client who has been keeping his end of the bargain by paying monthly installments. “They announce flats with no utility connections,” says Siddiqui. The builders delay the projects, escalate the price and blame government agencies for a lack of infrastructure—all of which they should have planned for in the first place. Sometimes the partners on the project fall out and the work is left incomplete. Sometimes the land is disputed in court.

People who make, say Rs10,000 a month can’t afford to make down payments for a Rs1.2 million flat. They need low-income housing which has a different financial model. The government takes a reasonable price for the land. It was fixed at Rs25,000 per acre in 1987 but would have been revised since. In the end, the poor would pay Rs8,000 in total (if you took Rs100 per square yard) for an 80 square yard plot.

But then your government should want to make its land available. Siddiqui estimates that there could be up to 10,000 acres that could be freed up. His logic is unassailable: 20,000 people live in Khuda ki Basti; people who would have otherwise been in a slum. “Why can’t you make 10 such schemes?”

He suspects that ABAD’s members feel that now that government planned flat sites have dried up and they have to buy the land at expensive market rates, they have turned their sights to katchi abadies. “Now all the schemes are full by allotment and they want more plots,” he explains. In fact, Belgaumi questions why the bill has specifically restricted its beneficiaries to the membership of ABAD. “One could argue that the bill creates a monopolistic, unfair commercial relationship, in violation of the rules of the Sindh Public Procurement Authority by creating a law which awards work on the basis of a membership to a trade organisation.”

Arif Hasan foresees that builders will try to cross-subsidise if they attempt this model. It means that they will take over a katchi abadi, build expensive apartments by the street and use them to pay for the low-income ones behind. He is still scratching his head over the math, though. “At best they will do one settlement,” he says. It costs roughly Rs500,000 today to make one unit. He doesn’t see how it can be paid back even if you phase it out for 10 years. “This will not work, in my opinion. Not because these are wrong or institutional arrangements or objectives,” says Arif Hasan. “It will not work simply because the people involved do not have the capacity, technical or financial to uproot the settlements and replace them by high-rise buildings for the poor.” If you demolish homes that have utility connections, businesses, factories in them, then you’re going to have an explosion you aren’t going to be able to manage.

The truth is that this bill is linked to a grander plan.

When he first read the bill, Roland DeSouza realised that it answered a question he had when the Sindh High Density Development Board Bill came out in 2010. In it the government earmarked 11 neighbourhoods as high-density zones. “Most of them were katchi abadies,” he says. “At the time we wondered, how they were going to put high density zones in katchi abadis?” With this new law, it suddenly became crystal clear. The 2014 bill was making the 2010 bill possible.

Even Belgaumi sees the two bills as inter-related. “I will not be surprised if at some point in the near future the stipulations of the two bills are merged into one,” he says. Here is how it will work: The Sindh High Density Development Board act established a body which was willing to sell off the city for the right price. The Sindh Special Development Board act simply identifies the buyer in this transaction as ABAD. “In both bills the areas of the city to be transacted are the katchi abadis.” He says it is simply masquerading as the magic bullet – public-private partnership – which will solve the acute housing shortage in the city. “But it is a pretext to open up large tracts of inner city land to the whims of unscrupulous real estate developers.”

No matter what the model, the experts are skeptical anything will be achieved simply because of the political fallout. ABAD’s Junaid Taloo insisted, however, that they will construct one example in a bid to win other people over. People like Arif Hasan have heard those kinds of promises before though. People who have lease papers won’t move easily. That is why the bill says the law enforcers will help. “They will send their goons in there,” says DeSouza. Belgaumi also saw the element of force by the need to include article 8.(13) “The law

enforcement agencies shall provide maximum support to the board for removal of katchi abadies, slum structures and encroachments. The developer shall also be provided protection and a safe working environment to carry out their business activities.”

Regularized katchi abadis are legally as good as the planned and leased neighbourhoods. Prof. Noman Ahmed feels that the underlying objective of this law seems to accord unjust powers to decide, plan, and execute on the land that they neither own nor possess the jurisdiction to operate upon. No one has even asked the poor if they want to live in a 600 sq feet space in a high-rise. And the people who live in joint family systems by adding a floor to their house are unlikely to be able to afford or want to live in a small flat.

Just to be clear. These urban planners are not against densification. Tasneem Siddiqui and Arif Hasan both back vertical growth. “I feel there is a great need for the densification of the more elite areas of the city,” says Hasan. “Karachi’s low-income settlement densities can go up to 6,000 persons plus per hectare but DHA is 200.” The high densities are creating conditions of overcrowding and the expansion of high-income settlements is also unsustainable.

Siddiqui espouses the low-rise high density formula in the heart of Karachi. He gives the example of Martin Quarters near Guru Mandir where houses are mostly ground floor only. “If you replanned, you could add 10,000 families actually,” he argues. All you need to do is add one more floor and a staircase. In places such as the military barracks opposite Lines Area he proposes going ground plus 4 for flats.

Ultimately, though, if the government really wants to tackle the housing crisis, it will have to raise densities to 850 persons per hectare whether high or low income. This means you can’t make a plot of over 400 square yards. This means you stop allowing 2,000 square yard mansions where only five people live as you see in DHA.

(The Express Tribune, 10/11/2014)

Detrimental to health? Activists want to secure the future of Karachi’s children

A diverse group of people, which includes a filmmaker, two physicists and an architect, is trying to prevent the construction of two nuclear power plants in order to secure the future of Karachi’s children, said filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy on Monday.

In the wake of a stay order on the construction of the Chinese-funded K-II and K-III nuclear power plants near Karachi, the petitioners in the case organised a town hall meeting at The Second Floor café on Monday evening to generate public awareness and fuel public discourse about the plants.

The Sindh High Court petitioners, who include Chinoy, physicists Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy and AH Nayyar and architect Arif Belgaumi, along with their lawyer Abdul Sattar Peerzada, insist that the power plants are not only detrimental to the health of Karachi’s citizens but also illegal since their construction failed to abide by Section 12 of the Environmental Protection Act of 1997.

This act necessitates a public Environmental Impact Assessment hearing, followed by a public verdict, before such a construction venture could be taken up.

In previous hearings of the case in court, the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (Sepa) had pleaded that the nature of the power plants’ construction did not fall within the ambit of the act since there was no room for health hazards.

Barrister Peerzada, however, says that it is incumbent upon Sepa to hold such a hearing.

According to Dr Hoodbhoy, the radiation from these power plants will be harmful for health. He added that the construction of more power plants also increases the likelihood of a nuclear tragedy such as those that happened at Fukushima Daiichi and Chernobyl.

“The world is moving towards solar and wind power, but Pakistan is pursuing the dangerous course of nuclear energy without even trying to abide by the constitution,” he added. “Imagine if a nuclear disaster were to strike Karachi. Imagine 20 million people evacuating the city all at once.”

The next hearing of the case will take place on November 20. (The Express Tribune, 19/11/2014)

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Blinded with rage, the bigots have murdered 62 'alleged blasphemers' extrajudicially since 1990, without the completion of the legal process. The latest to suffer this fate was a couple, brutally murdered last week by a mob near Lahore. Asiya has been in prison since 2009. A Christian and the mother of five, one of whom is a special child, she has become the victim of the evil forces which operate behind the scenes. An argument with some women on drawing water from a well led to a rumpus that caused the police to be called. Blasphemy charges were levelled against her and in 2010 a lower court handed down the death sentence. This was upheld by the Lahore High Court last month. Asiya's case has received much publicity. She is vulnerable for multiple reasons: gender, poverty and faith. She does not have strong legal aid either because the extremists have pre-empted an honest and competent legal process in blasphemy cases.

Women's Action Forum was spot on when it expressed its fear that this may be a case of settling personal scores and reminded the state of its "first and foremost duty to protect the life and liberty of its citizens especially those who are powerless to defend themselves". Constitutionally, every citizen has the right to a fair trial under the due process of law. Asiya Bibi will appeal to the Supreme Court and again it will fall to the judiciary to protect the right to a life of dignity of a citizen — the right Perween Rahman fought for on behalf of others. The judiciary bears a heavy responsibility, given the failure of the other organs of the state. If the judiciary pursues the case in earnest and succeeds in baring the culprit, Perween can become a catalyst of change in our decrepit system.

If Asiya escapes the gallows with the support of the court, she could usher an age of rationality in the madness that has overtaken us. These cases are important because behind each incident of this kind there are insidious, evil forces at work. Their identity is masked by their front men — who pull the trigger or level blasphemy charges. They are the real threat lurking in the shadows and often shielded by the police. They need to be exposed, be they the vested interests who were antagonised by Perween's work in the goths or the bigots in the mosque who incite mob frenzy to intimidate religious minorities.

(By Zubeida Mustafa, Dawn, 12/11/2014)

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Secondly, there have been a number of judgements by the superior courts against cutting down mangrove forests. Apart from being hatcheries for fish and shrimp, mangroves are a natural buffer against sea erosion and destruction by the elements. "The Indian Forestry Act of 1927, inherited by Pakistan in 1947, has many provisions to safeguard forests including mangroves," said Dr Mohammed Ali Shaikh, former director general of the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency. "The spirit of this and other laws is that forest area shall not be diverted for any non-forestry purpose except with the government's approval."

However, the newly designed master plan of DHA Phase 8, prepared by Zavia Architecture, includes the 490 acres of mangroves incorporated within it. Two bridges are also shown linking this off-shore area to mainland DHA. A senior official at DHA categorically denied that any such town planning had been authorised by DHA. "If someone else has gone and done it, that's their doing," he said. "DHA has to hire consultants through open bidding on the town planning." But a source at the architecture firm said the map was presented to DHA Karachi's executive board as well as senior military personnel, who are in the process of approving it. The petition against the waterfront project names DHA and Board of Revenue (BoR) Sindh among the respondents. The BoR Sindh is a provincial government department and the original owner of all land in the province, and the controlling authority for collection of land revenue, preparation of land records, etc. It is responsible for allotting land to individuals, organisations and agencies in the province for specific purposes. In reality, it has often colluded with unscrupulous 'land developers', an alliance that has rendered Karachi a multi billion-rupee playground for those with the right cards to play.

The story behind this mangrove forest goes back to 1994, when PPP's Agha Tariq, then minister for mining, issued a 30-year mining lease for 342 acres (within the 490 acres now earmarked for the waterfront project) in the name of his wife, Gulnar Begum. In July 1996, through BoR Sindh, he had that lease illegally converted into a 99-year lease for commercial/residential/industrial purposes. Then, in September, through his wife, he sold the 342 acres to Marina City Developments, a partnership of businessmen Asif Baig Mohammed and Khalid Masood, and one Seema Treesa Gill. "We wanted to develop the land into something better than the Dubai Marina, much before Dubai Marina even came up," said Mr Masood. According to court documents, the third partner, Ms Gill, was actually Gulnar Begum's maidservant, an arrangement that gave the former de facto ownership in the 342 acres. In September 2007, Mr Tariq passed away. There has been decades-long litigation over the 342 acres in various courts with regard to the

allotment rate and, after a falling out between Mr Mohammed and Mr Masood, the issue of ownership as well. Court proceedings are still ongoing. In the last few years another party has staked its claim to part of the 342 acres based on an agreement with one of the two businessmen. That case is also in the superior courts. Meanwhile, bizarre developments further muddied the waters. Sometime this year, the BoR shifted the 342 acres in litigation to four individuals along with an additional 148 acres of surrounding mangroves, adding up to a total of 490 acres, in a land swap for so-called ancestral land in the interior of Sindh. To do this, BoR officials manipulated land records and, in the process, also violated the ban on allotment of forest land under any circumstances. The four individuals' claim was based upon a document ostensibly dating back to 1937 — copies of which are in Dawn's possession — that show 600 acres in interior Sindh as their 'marosee' (ancestral) land. Egregious factual errors in the text point to the document's extremely questionable provenance. Among them is the mention of 'District East of Karachi': no such district existed in 1937. Besides this, court papers show the beneficiaries of this vast ancestral holding as residing, rather implausibly, in katchi abadis such as Metroville and Orangi where homes are no more than 100 square yards. According to sources, the document from '1937' was actually drawn up for the benefit of a powerful civil servant working with the late Jam Sadiq Ali during the latter's tenure as Sindh chief minister "A benami contract with the four purported claimants makes him the actual beneficiary," said a BoR official. "The current plan — the shifting of their claim to the mangrove forest area — was executed with help from [a well-connected political personality in Sindh], on an understanding to split the proceeds."

In July this year, the actual beneficiaries used an investor and land developer from Bahawalpur with good connections in military circles to approach top DHA officials. These officials were more than keen to sign an MOU on developing the 490 acres, racing against time to close the deal because the tenure of the key officials was to expire in September and October. No wonder, for there is much at stake.

Even a back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that proceeds from the project will be phenomenal. When the 490 acres (2.9 million sq yards) are incorporated into DHA Phase 8 and carved up into several hundred commercial and residential plots, their value will run into hundreds of billions of rupees. (According to a source at DHA, the incoming DHA administrator, Brigadier Zubair Ahmed, had to cool his heels for a month before he was allowed to take charge on September 8.)

On Monday Sept 8, 2014, DHA officials deposited a pay order drawn on the National Bank of Pakistan for Rs11,979,000 as stamp duty payable to the treasury for purchasing the mangroves forest area. "Several BoR functionaries including the Registrar were accompanying them so that as soon as the stamps were affixed, registry of the sale deed could be made right there and then," said Mr Yar Khan. "The original intention was to deposit the pay order on Saturday September 6. However, the transaction couldn't go ahead as planned when the branch said the amount was too large and the pay order should be submitted the following Monday." When asked about this, a senior official at DHA said, "Yes, stamp duties have been paid but the sale deed has not been executed." He added that could only happen after DHA was assured the land was free of any encumbrances and could be sold. However, it would be pertinent to ask how the stamp duty was calculated and why it was paid if the sale had not been finalised. DHA is fully cognisant of the shady story behind the 490 acres it is eyeing for the waterfront project. Lt General Sajjad Ghani, who recently retired as Corps Commander Karachi and as President DHA Executive Board, was reportedly given a detailed account. Perhaps the new DHA administrator, Brig Ahmed, will consider looking into the many questions raised by DHA's latest venture. Unless of course, the fate of the mangroves has already been sealed by his higher-ups.

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