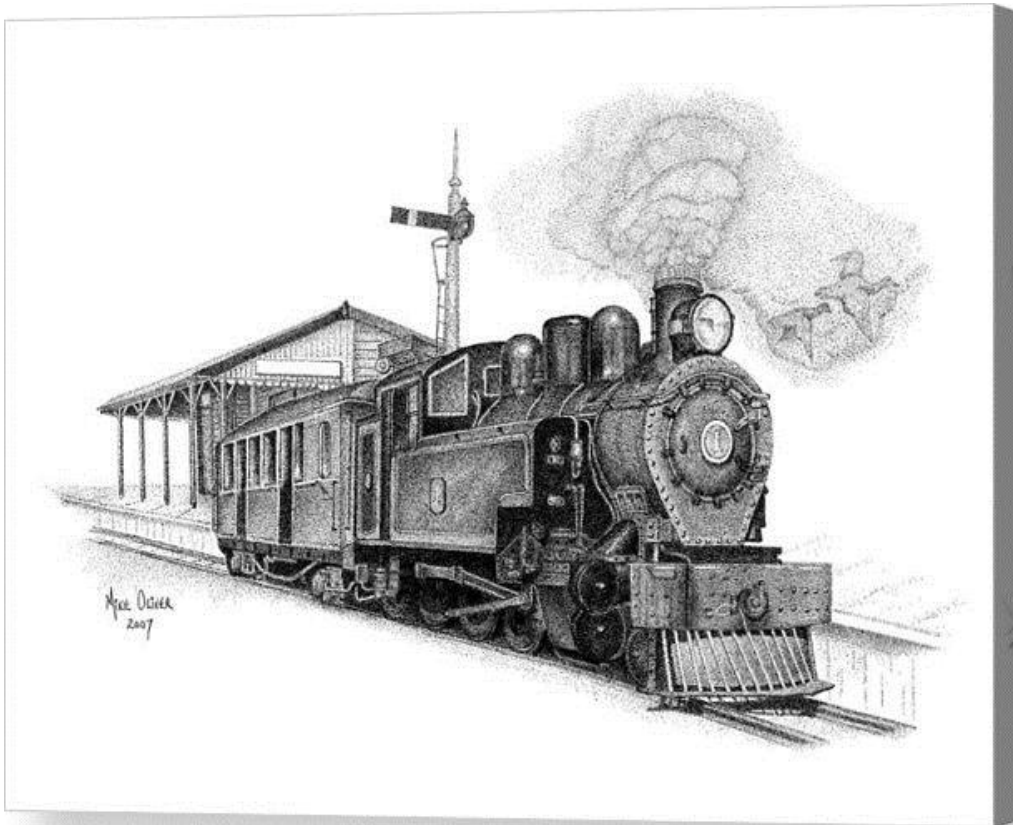


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KCR RAILWAY



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KCR a distant dream even as authorities start fencing process

After endless financial and bureaucratic deferrals, it seems Karachi's defunct public transit system may finally be moving towards revival. The Sindh Government is expected to pump Rs80.7 million into the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) project to construct a boundary wall that will prevent future encroachment of land and the area around the railway track.

"Fencing is important for the security of land and it will be done in two phases," Sindh Transport Secretary Ghulam Abbas said while commenting on the project. Abbas expects to accomplish phase one within the current year.

"In the first phase, we will be inviting contractors to submit bids for the fencing," he said. "This is expected next month," Abbas added.

The circular railway is a looping network of several stations that was expected to connect various parts of the city. Almost two decades ago, the transit project was abandoned. Since then, the railway land has been encroached or illegally occupied by people looking for a piece of land to dwell in the burgeoning megacity.

According to the budget for the current fiscal year, the provincial government has allotted Rs.41.5 million for PC-1 of the KCR project. In total, the project is set to receive a financial lifeline of Rs.124.14 million, which is Rs.88.86 million less than the previous financial year.

Abbas claimed the Pakistan Railway authorities and Commissioner Karachi have removed encroachments in several areas. However, the land is yet to be handed back to the Sindh government.

"The process of fencing will begin shortly," said Abbas, adding that the KCR project is likely to be completed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project at a whopping price tag of \$1.97 billion which will be provided as a loan by Beijing.

"To secure funding from China, sovereign guarantee should be given by federal government and the final agreement should be made," the secretary added.

However, Pakistan Railway officials believe the restoration of the KCR project is a distant dream for now. According to sources privy with the matter, the restoration process can only begin after the KCR land is returned to the provincial government. Apart from that, the Federal government also needs to seal an agreement with the government of China for the restoration of the abandoned project.

The project has faced innumerable interruptions. In 2005, the Federal government established the Karachi Urban Transport Corporation to evaluate the feasibility of the project with the financial cooperation of Japan International Cooperation Agency, an international cooperation agency that coordinates development assistance for the government of Japan.

During the process, the government of Japan promised funds for the restoration of KCR and the rehabilitation of the people displaced during the revival process. However, the opportunity was not availed by the Sindh government due fundamental differences on the process of rehabilitation of displaced individuals.

(By Syed Ashraf Ali The Express Tribune, 04, 08/07/2019)

Minister says laying of Karachi-Peshawar main line tracks to improve PR services

Federal Minister for Railways Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed has said that the laying of tracks for the Karachi-Peshawar Main Line 1 (ML-1) project can greatly improve railway services in Pakistan.

"This year, we will see progress in the laying of the tracks for ML-1, which I see as the only solution for railways," he told a press conference at his camp office here on Friday.

He added that in the next 90 days, the Pakistan Railways was also going to have new washing lines for trains in Karachi and Lahore.

Observes that support of Sindh govt needed to clear KCR tracks of encroachments

On the occasion, he also announced extending route of the Sindh Express from Sukkur to Multan. "The Sindh Express will start running [on the extended route] from August 10."

The minister also said that he got a chance to spend the past four days with the teams inspecting railway tracks in the country following the rains and he was not happy about what he saw.

"There has not been so much water on the tracks in the last 150-year history of the railways here. We can't run trains in water but to make up for the cancelled trains we added extra carriages to handle the crowd of passengers. In fact, we have managed to fix all the carriages which were not in use to increase our carriages to 13,000, and they are all running," he said.

He said that there was so much mess around the tracks in Larkana that the situation was close to hopeless.

"There are even children being born on or around the tracks," he said. "We can offer railways' land for a green belt by the tracks to [make] better things but the provincial government also needs to meet us halfway."

"In places like Sukkur I have even seen graveyards, mosques, schools, etc, right next to the tracks. I have seen thousands of people here sitting on the tracks at Rohri chatting away in leisure or playing cards among themselves. To take a shortcut I saw people crossing the tracks with their motorcycles. They don't seem to realise that the tracks are meant for trains and that their carelessness can kill them", he said. "Tell me, how can the trains work that way?"

He added that railways had 138 trains running on these tracks. "We have millions of people here travelling via trains and we have brought seven to 10 million more by introducing new trains."

Freight rate increased by 20pc

The minister said that due to the increase in oil prices the railways had to increase freight transport rates by 20 per cent.

He also said that an agreement between the Karachi Port Trust and the South Asia Pakistan Terminal Limited would see freight trains bypassing Karachi and running on the outskirts of the city, which will also keep out pollution.

Coming to the Karachi Circular Railway, he said that so far 38 kilometres of the track had been cleaned up with three to four kilometres still remaining.

"The Pakistan Railways has done most of the work here but to clean up the remaining tracks we need the support of the Sindh government," he said.

To a question about too many railway accidents, the minister said that there had been three big accidents this year which are less than last year.

"The tracks are old, the signals are old," he added as an explanation. "But the trains are running well despite the unfortunate accidents. What we earn we are putting back into making things better in the railways. I work for 18 hours. I don't know what more I can do to make things better here."

To another question about new locomotives imported from the United States some time back, he said that the railways had got some nine new locomotives from there in the last government which have still not been used.

"They are untouched and they are all in the workshops not in any condition to be brought on the tracks. Someone earned a lot in the name of commission when acquiring them but we are now in the process of ordering new parts for them and hope to make them track-worthy soon," he said.

'Shahbaz, Maryam have separate agendas'

The minister then invited questions on politics and had journalists in fits because of his comments.

About Maulana Fazlur Rehman's saying that he had no confidence in Sheikh Rasheed's ministry and his wanting him to resign from his post, he said that he would only resign if Pakistan Peoples Party chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari asked him to do so. "Who is Fazlur Rehman anyway to ask me anything? Let Bilawal ask me," he said grinning.

When asked to comment on Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz president Shahbaz Sharif, he said that the man has left "cats on duty to guard milk".

He said that both Shahbaz and his niece Maryam Nawaz had separate agendas. "They don't see eye to eye on important matters and they need to be on the same page to help things move ahead," he added.

About himself, Sheikh Rasheed said that he had spent a lifetime in politics and had the ability to see through many people. "It is basically this one single seat from Rawalpindi which seems to be a problem for everyone," he laughed.

(By Shazia Hasan Dawn, 15, 03/08/2019)

Families affected by KCR anti-encroachment drive demand alternative houses

Members of the Karachi Circular Railway Affectees Action Committee (KCRAAC) and various civil society organisations on Thursday said that more than 1,000 families whose houses had been dismantled by the railways and city authorities were still awaiting relief.

"Some 1,108 out of 4,653 affected families have been rendered homeless after their houses in Quaid-i-Azam Colony, Gharibabad, Wahid Colony, Mujahid Colony, Moosa Colony and Moosa Goth have been razed by Pakistan Railways, PR police and district administrations," said an affected woman resident at a press conference at the Karachi Press Club.

Eminent town planner Arif Hasan, along with members of various organisations including Anis Haroon, Karamat Ali, Nasir Mansoor and Haji Khan Badshah, chairman KCRAAC, were present.

She said majority of the affected families had lost their houses during the month of Ramazan.

"Now we have nowhere to go, no alternative residence to live in. Thus, we are sitting atop the debris of our destroyed houses under the open sky when worst rains are hitting the city," she said.

She said that around 400 children had now no option to get education as their school and madrasah had also been dismantled. She added that the apex court had not just directed for removing the establishments on the route of KCR; but, it had also ordered the federal and provincial governments and Karachi Metropolitan Corporation to provide decent alternative housing to the affected people.

Mr Badshah asked the authorities concerned and the federal and provincial governments to listen to the call of the affected families that were waiting for implementation of the full judgment of the apex court.

He said that before the government provided decent accommodation to the affected people, the families should be provided with basic facilities (water, electricity and toilets) at the places they were stationed at presently.

Besides, the families whose houses were awaiting a similar fate should be given alternative places first to live before the bulldozers were sent it.

"We are not against such a vital project, but we request the authorities to protect our families that were leading a normal life before such an action was taken."

He said the authorities should secure the land, which was required for the project and the remaining land should be leased out to the residents.

Members of the civil society organisations said it was in the air that the KCR project was again being handed to the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and no longer remained a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

"We welcome it and want that JICA, which had originally been assigned this project, should undertake another survey of the buildings constructed on the route of the KCR."

The residents complained that certain officials from the railways police harassed people living in Quaid-i-Azam Colony and other such areas.

"They have broken our shelter that we had put up to protect ourselves from rains and use foul language before our families. We should be protected from this," said an affected resident.

(By The Newspaper's Staff Reporter Dawn, 16, 10/08/2019)

KCR victims

ON May 9, the Supreme Court ordered the Pakistan Railways to remove 'encroachments' from the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) right of way within 15 days, after which the Sindh government would take over the project and make the KCR operative in one month.



The Supreme Court further ordered that the Sindh chief minister, Karachi mayor, Sindh chief secretary, Karachi commissioner and the Railways shall ensure that the schedule is followed and that they will seek whatever assistance is required from the federal government's planning division. The railway's representative, who had proposed the schedule, assured the court that this would be done. In addition, the court ordered that the evicted households should be provided with appropriate housing within one year of their eviction.

However, it was simply not possible for the railway to meet its promises. They did not have the capacity to demolish 4,653 homes from the 50 feet (15 metres) right of way on either side of the railway track in two weeks. It could not make the railway operative either, simply because the Green Line BRT corridor had cut across the railway track, and for the railway to be operative required an underpass or bridge across the BRT corridor. This would take at least a year to build.

But, the demolition of the houses began as per schedule on 14th of Ramazan at the height of a heatwave in Karachi; 1,119 homes out of 4,653 were pulled down but the people have continued to live for the last two and a half months under the open sky on the rubble of their homes. The reason for this is that if they leave their homes, they will cease to exist for the railway authorities and as such they will lose their right to seek any form of compensation that the state may subsequently negotiate with them.

People continue to live under the open sky on the rubble of their homes.

Living conditions on the rubble are terrible. Water, electricity, and gas connections have been disconnected by the railway police. Consequently, water has to be purchased, cooking has to be done on wood fuel, children cannot go to school, and women cannot go to work. There are no toilets and no manner of removing excreta. Attempts at creating some sort of parda for toilets are thwarted by the railway police, and there are complaints from women that the railway police misbehave with them. Men also cannot attend work regularly. As a result, incomes have declined and because of heat, dehydration and disease are rampant.

These are people who once had a roof over their head, legal gas and electricity meters, proper postal addresses, and had been registered as voters. Meanwhile, no plan for the rehabilitation of the evictees along the KCR right of way has been initiated as

ordered by the Supreme Court, and the demolition process has prematurely come to a halt. On the hearing of Aug 9, the railways informed the court that the KCR project was not feasible and that the railways could not possibly implement it. As such, the demolition of the homes makes no sense whatsoever.

To ease the situation for the affectees, each household head should be given a paper stating his/her name and the address of the demolished house and also stating that the person is entitled to compensation or relocation. The household will then be able to make arrangements to move out from the rubble of their home to their relatives or to rental accommodation. In addition, it is essential that a rehabilitation plan for the evicted households be developed immediately so that people have a place to live.

But there are other issues as well. The railway right of way is also encroached upon by the Railway Colony, factories, warehouses, and commercial buildings. Will they also be demolished? So far, no plan for that exists. Then 3,534 houses still need to be demolished if the railway right of way is to be cleared. Their demolition should take place only after they have been rehabilitated so as to avoid the present situation. And what about the 20,000 to 30,000 other homes that lie beyond the KCR right of way? These settlements also need to be notified as katchi abadis and regularised.

For rehabilitating the 1,119 households that have been demolished, 24 acres of land is required. They should be settled within two kilometres from their original homes so that their social relations, workplaces and children's schools can be easily accessed. Such a relocation project could be a model for the prime minister's housing programme.

But then the question is, who is going to undertake this rehabilitation? So far no interest has been shown by the local, provincial, or federal governments and the shameful conditions in the demolished areas persist.

This whole episode demonstrates that government departments are not aware of the situation underground and that their decisions are made on false assumptions, as a result of which the people of this city undergo immense misery.
(By Arif Hasan Dawn, 09, 25/08/2019)

Cabinet body urges talks with China on key railway project

Amid unease of three cabinet members, the Cabinet Committee on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Monday decided to start financing discussions with China on the \$8.2bn Main Railway Line (ML-1) project and cleared a draft CPEC Authority bill for cabinet approval.

Informed sources told Dawn that Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed had expressed displeasure over almost no progress by the planning authorities on ML-1 despite being a strategic project, while Adviser to the Prime Minister on Institutional Reforms and Austerity Dr Ishrat Hussain was critical of creating yet another organisation despite financial crunch.

Federal Minister for Planning and Development Makhdoom Khusro Bakhtyar presided over the meeting. It was attended by Sheikh Rashid and Maritime Affairs Minister Ali Zaidi, Dr Ishrat Hussain, prime minister's adviser Abdul Razak Dawood, Planning Commission deputy chairman Dr Jahanzeb Khan and federal secretaries.

Clears draft CPEC Authority bill for cabinet approval

Sheikh Rashid told the meeting that it was painful for him to say that the Planning Commission had become the biggest hurdle in the way of launching ML-1 and no decision had been taken whether or not to give the project to China. He said the project had been slowed down ever since the government had entered into an IMF programme. An official quoted the railways minister as telling the meeting that he would take people into confidence over the issue.

A senior official of the Planning Commission explained that there was still no framework agreement on the ML-1 project.

After further discussions, the "committee decided that financing discussion on ML-1 project should be commenced to finalise the mode and PC-1 of the project", said an official statement.

Mr Bakhtyar reiterated that ML-1 was a very important project under the CPEC portfolio and the government was committed to fast-tracking it.

Sources said Dr Ishrat and Mr Dawood questioned the wisdom behind a large CPEC Authority when a major part of the CPEC had already been completed. Dr Ishrat said there was no need to have 70-80 staff for the proposed authority for CPEC, expected to be completed by 2024, at a time when the country was facing financial crunch. He said it was against the spirit of the government's austerity programme and called for rationalising the strength of the proposed authority to ensure that there were no issues of their salaries and other expenditures over the medium term.

Mr Dawood endorsed these views, saying the organisation should be lean and equipped with a few smart people. He is reported to have told the participants that how painful it could be to sever jobs if these became redundant at a later stage.

It was reported that around 50 staff currently working under the CPEC were being given monthly contracts instead of one-year contracts as was the case in the past which created unrest in the workforce. It was explained that fresh induction would be made for positions like chairman of the authority and executive directors, directors and sectoral members, but the existing staff would be given priority marks.

The planning and development secretary briefed the meeting on various projects under the CPEC framework.

The planning and development minister directed that progress on the Rashakai Special Economic Zone be fast-tracked to ensure its groundbreaking before the 9th Joint Coordination Committee of CPEC in October. He said the CPEC was now entering the next phase with incorporation of additional areas and sectors and for this purpose there was a need for an integrated entity in the form of CPEC Authority. It was decided that draft act of the authority would be presented to the federal cabinet for approval.

About the Rashakai Special Economic Zone, the meeting was informed that negotiations on development agreement were in final stages with the China Road & Bridge Corporation (CRBC). The committee directed that early provision of utilities to the Rashakai SEZ be ensured on priority so that its groundbreaking could be performed next month.

Mr Bakhtyar reiterated that the government was committed to providing incentives for SEZs, including 100 per cent repatriation of profits.

The committee also decided to present land use plan for the Gwadar Smart Port City to the cabinet after incorporating recommendations of the Balochistan government.

Energy projects, including 300MW Gwadar coal power plant, Kohala hydropower project (1,124MW) and Thar coal projects, and infrastructure projects, including Multan-Sukkur Motorway and Orange Line Train, were also discussed.

The meeting was told that the Multan-Sukkur Motorway would be inaugurated soon, while civil works on the Orange Line Train project would be completed by December.

The planning and development minister emphasised that all stakeholders should resolve pending issues pertaining to the CPEC projects at the earliest to accrue maximum benefits from the forthcoming the Joint Cooperation Committee. It was decided that the next meeting of the Cabinet Committee on CPEC would be convened in September.

(By Khaleeq Kiani Dawn, 01, 27/08/2019)

CPEC: what's stopping Pakistan Railways?

The world's second-longest train route connects Yiwu, a trading centre near Shanghai, to London. The 12,000-plus kilometer-long railway track which opened in 2017 has made possible hauling millions of tons of goods within 18 days, which once took 30 to 45 days of sailing to reach the shores of Great Britain. The China-Europe rail now connects 108 cities across 16 countries, ushering in new opportunities for trade and prosperity and unfolding a new economic world order.



In Pakistan however, we have yet to initiate the up-gradation and doubling of ML-1 from Karachi to Peshawar. The track will ultimately extend to Kashghar, providing access to the BRI railway grid.

For now, the ML-1 up-gradation project remains limited to neatly-ribboned blue files, prominently displaying the Government of Pakistan's emblem, slowly moving from one ministry to another. Ministers and their ministries are bickering over approval processes; feasibility studies are taking forever to complete; while the intimidating \$8 billion price tag keeps on haunting those who dare to touch these files.

Irrespective of these political scuffles, turf wars and blame games that characterise the usual business of government, there are three fundamental reasons behind this inaction.

First is the prevailing economic crisis and the ongoing IMF programme. Not only has the IMF raised serious concerns about Pakistan's debt sustainability, but it has also placed a tight limit on the number of government guarantees. In the absence of any government guarantees the ML-1 financing may have to be undertaken by the Pakistan Railways itself, which would need other guarantee mechanisms.

Moreover, the fiscal constraints leave little room for any significant co-contribution. The total cost of the project is \$8.2 billion, with 85% financing coming from China with a grace period of 8 to 10 years. Although this would mean no immediate outflows on account of repayment, the remaining 15% which translates into a whopping Rs193 billion would have to be contributed by Pakistan. Even for the first phase of \$2.3 billion, we would need to pitch in Rs54 billion. If the government is serious about ML-1 up-gradation, now is the time to figure out these issues and find workable solutions.

Secondly, the newly formed debt commission is looking into past mega projects, while NAB and provincial anti-corruption authorities are actively sniffing for corruption everywhere. A suspect is treated as a convict and before he could prove his innocence (or be proven guilty) he would have served years in prison already. In this situation, it is not easy to find a bureaucrat who is willing to sign on this multibillion-dollar framework agreement.

Thirdly comes the pricing of the project. The project is likely to follow the CPEC procurement modality, with limited competition amongst Chinese contractors. This should be fine as long as the pricing remains competitive. But international benchmarks suggest that this price is probably on the higher side. The 1,214-kilometre long Chinese Geku Railway due to be completed in 2019, for instance, costs \$5.4 billion to build from scratch. Considering that ML-1 is an upgrade the price tag of \$8.2 billion for 1,872 kilometres looks a little steep.

But such comparison could also be misleading, as project specificities could sometimes cause large cost variations. An alternative approach could be to limit the CPEC framework agreement to two of the three project components and undertake one component through international competitive bidding. This could help the government in real price discovery and can support in price negotiations with the Chinese.

If handled right, the ML-1 could become Prime Minister Imran Khan's legacy that could get him political dividends for years, like the Motorway did for Mian Nawaz Sharif, or else it could easily turn into political baggage.
(By Hasaan Khawar The Express Tribune, 16, 03/09/2019)

'KCR victims'

THIS is apropos Arif Hasan's article 'KCR victims' (Aug 25). The federal government has always dilly-dallied on Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) as well as other train projects in Sindh.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Pakistan Railways should claim in the Supreme Court that KCR is not a feasible project. If the federal government can support a \$1.6 billion commuter train project for Lahore without even a feasibility study, how can Pakistan railways claim that KCR is not feasible?

Japan International Cooperation Agency had spent \$11m on a feasibility study to offer a \$1.8 billion soft loan. What did the federal government do? It had technically refused the Japanese offer.

There is a junk report circulating around in social media that the KCR will only cover about five per cent of the population in Karachi, and so it is a useless proposition. This is again a false propaganda to impede Karachi's development and modernisation.

All over the world, a single train loop is seen to cover at best a one to four per cent of population. For example, San Francisco's BART system provides transportation to only 231,000 commuters a day over its five loops, which is barely 3.2pc of the 7.15 million population of the area it covers, or 0.64pc per train loop. London's underground is slightly better with 338,000 per line, or 4.1pc of its dense population.

In comparison, the KCR is designed to carry 700,000 passengers every day, or about five per cent of Karachi's population on a single track line. In Karachi and Lahore, all the bus rapid transit systems will cover far less of a population than KCR.

The article also speaks of the plight of the encroachers. For the article to propose that some Sindh government entity must take care of these lawbreakers is wrong. These encroachers should be arrested and put behind bars for illegal trespass and must also be required to pay rent for all the time they have been there.

I urge the Sindh government not to lose heart and stand up to all the false attempts to derail KCR.

*Syed Shams Naqvi
Lafayette, USA*

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APROPOS the opinion piece 'KCR victims' (Aug 25) by Arif Hasan. The plight of the affected has been described in following words: "These are people who once had a roof over their head, legal gas and electricity meters, proper personal addresses and had been registered as voters."

At present they are living under the open sky. The demolition of their houses started in the middle of Ramazan. What a time to start such an inhuman project! As for rehabilitation, it needs planning, time and above all money. From where this will come we do not know.

However, at this stage two things need to be looked at — firstly, the railway ministry needs to employ competent technical staff that can say (with good authority) that under the current circumstances to revive the KCR project is not feasible.

Secondly, the law ministry and elected representatives should look at the whole picture and see what their orders can do — this unprecedented move has ruined the lives of thousands of people.

*Prof Khalid Hassan Mahmood
Karachi
(From the Newspaper Dawn, 09, 05/09/2019)*

PPP MPAs deplore PM's exclusion of KCR from upcoming China trip

The Sindh Assembly adopted a resolution on Monday, recommending the provincial government to approach the federal government and ask it to accord the highest priority to the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR). According to Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, KCR has been excluded from Prime Minister Imran Khan's agenda for his upcoming visit to China.

In his speech, the CM said that he would fight for the rights of Sindh whether the opposition parties support the move or not. The resolution was moved by Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) MPA Ghanwer Ali Khan Isran, who said that the KCR project was earlier

included in China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the request of the provincial government in 2016 and since then, the Sindh government has been diligently following the project.

"It is noteworthy to state that so far, several letters have been written by the chief minister to the federal government in the last three years and most recent was written in August 2019," read the resolution. "Sindh government has participated in all the relevant technical forums relating to CPEC projects including Joint Working Group and joint coordination committee meetings in Islamabad and China from 2017 to 2018," it states further. "The government of China acknowledged the feasibility of the project and agreed to include the same in its portfolio," states the resolution.

According to the resolution, the Sindh government is taking full responsibility for loans and their repayment while the federal government has only been providing sovereign guarantees. The resolution argued that this was against Karachi and national development which would be possible by investing in mass transport for the city.

"It has been reported that the prime minister of Pakistan on his upcoming visit to China will be engaging to secure financing for ML-1 [The Karachi to Peshawar Railway Track] and not KCR.

It is stated that the KCR project, by all means, is a project of national importance and not only the people of Karachi, but the entire country will benefit from it," reads the resolution.

The resolution passed by the house stated that the "first 'Right Way' on the 18-kilometre stretch from Drigh Road to City Station and Karachi Port should be accorded to KCR," in the interest of Karachiites. "...an alternate route, the preferably elevated track may be established by the federal government for the purpose of ML-1. The house further implored and demands that the PM should make all endeavours to make the KCR project a priority in his forthcoming trip to China," it adds.

'Let us speak'

PPP MPAs supported the resolution while opposition lawmakers of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan (MQM-P) opposed it. They expressed the opinion that they had nothing against the resolution or the KCR project. They claimed they opposed the resolution because the Sindh government would not give them a chance to speak.

Meanwhile, the Coastal Development Authority Act 1994 was amended to include the Karachi coastal belt to Sindh's jurisdiction. The bill, which was passed in the assembly, was presented by Local Government Minister Saeed Ghani. Prior to this move, Karachi had not been part of Sindh's coastal jurisdiction.
(By Hafeez Tunio The Express Tribune, 04, 08/10/2019)

Sindh Assembly opposes Centre's plan to prefer ML-1 over KCR

The Sindh Assembly on Monday passed a resolution against the federal government's plans to prefer the Karachi-Peshawar railway track (ML-1 project) over the revival of the Karachi Circular Railway, demanding Prime Minister Imran Khan make the KCR his top priority during his visit to China.

After the chair suspended the day's business, Pakistan Peoples Party's Ghanwer Isran moved the resolution stating that the federal government's plans to prefer the ML-1 project at the cost of the KCR, which was already included in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects, was a grave injustice to the people of Karachi.

"The house resolves and recommends to the government to approach the federal government to accord the highest priority to the KCR. The KCR project was included in CPEC on the request of the government of Sindh in 2016 and since then, the project has been diligently followed by the provincial government. [Since then] so far several letters have been written by the chief minister to the federal government in three years, the most recent of which was written in August 2019," said the resolution.

It added: "The Sindh government has participated in all the relevant technical forums relating to CPEC projects including the Joint Working Group and 6th, 7th, and 8th Joint Coordination Committee meetings in Islamabad and in China held from 2017 to 2018. The Government of China's representatives acknowledged the feasibility of KCR and agreed to include the same in its portfolio.

Major opposition parties object to the PPP resolution; Firdous Naqvi 'smells rebellion' in CM's speech

"It is the Sindh government which is taking full responsibility for the loan and its repayment while the federal government is to only provide sovereign guarantees," it added.

The resolution referred to the reports that the PM on his visit to China would be engaging to secure financing for ML-1 project and not the KCR.

"Hence, again, Karachi and the national development, which is to be realised by investing in mass transport will be ignored. KCR project by all means is a project of national importance and not only the people of Karachi but the entire country will benefit from the KCR project."

"The house resolves that the first Right of Way on the 18kms, from Drigh Road to City Station and Karachi Port, should be accorded to the KCR in the best interest of the people of Karachi. Moreover, an alternate route, preferably elevated track, may be established by the federal government for the purposes of ML-1," it said.

"This house further implores and demands that the Prime Minister should make all endeavours to make the KCR project a top priority in his forthcoming trip to China," concluded the resolution.

Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah said the prime minister should make an effort to get the KCR included as an integral part of the CPEC projects at the JCC in China. Besides, PM Khan should also direct for ensuring sovereign guarantee for the project.

He said JICA had withdrawn from the KCR in 2012 after which the provincial government took up the project with the Chinese.

He said he had written at least four letters to the prime minister and present federal government. He added Islamabad wanted to shift the KCR project elsewhere from the present route to benefit the ML-1, which "we'll never allow at any cost".

"I make it clear here that KCR's corridor will not be permitted to be used for ML-1. The ML-1 is not acceptable at the cost of KCR and the Sindh government will not allow this at any cost," said Mr Shah in a defiant tone.

Opposition Leader Firdous Naqvi said the chief minister's speech was merely for point scoring.

"This is just point scoring. And, we smell rebellion in your words. You should have written more letters to the federal government. The project is extremely important, but the way your government is taking it up is not correct," said Mr Naqvi.

Mr Shah said he would continue to talk like that even if the opposition parties in Sindh who ruled Islamabad smelled rebellion in it. He said he had got no reply to several of his letters from Islamabad. Besides, he had not been informed officially about the PM's visit to China and he got information about it from TV reports.

"This practice is totally against the accepted norms. All chief ministers would be informed by the federal government before such visits of the PM, but no one from Islamabad has contacted me on this."

He demanded that the KCR project be designed like Lahore's Orange Line project.

He requested the opposition to support the resolution.

The chair put the resolution before the house and got it passed with a majority vote. The major opposition parties opposed it.

No downsizing in KMC

Responding to a question of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's Khurram Sher Zaman during Question Hour, Local Government Minister Nasir Shah said there was no plan for downsizing of staff in the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation.

He said the Sindh government sanctioned funds for KMC but it should increase its sources of revenue.

He added that the KMC should itself pay the pensions to its retired employees.

Grand Democratic Alliance's Nand Kumar asked whether the authorities had found criminal records of around 10,000 KMC employees according to certain reports.

"Biometrics was used to authenticate thousands of KMC employees and a number of them have been found with criminal records," the minister said, adding that appropriate actions had been taken against those errant employees and in some cases FIRs had also been lodged while those involved in criminal offences had been arrested.

Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan's Jawed Hanif said paying salaries to the KMC employees was Sindh government's responsibility. He demanded formation of the provincial finance commission.

To another question, the minister said illegal quarrying activities at Manghopir were posing a serious threat to water installations located there.

Later, the house unanimously passed the Coastal Development Authority (Amendment) Bill after it was duly examined by the standing committee on law and parliamentary affairs.

(By Hassan Manssor Dawn, 15, 08/10/2019)

Tezgam tragedy

THE Tezgam inferno near Liaquatpur in southern Punjab is a horrible reminder of the dangerous times we continue to live in, especially in a land exposed to perils that should have been eliminated long ago.

More than 70 lives have been lost in the fire that broke out early Thursday morning in the train as it journeyed upcountry from Karachi.

The railways minister added insult to injury when he blamed passengers for using a gas cylinder which caused the fire. Surely, if he was able to so quickly solve this mystery, he could have gone on to specify which passenger was responsible. Or did he mean that all of them were equally to blame? The real question is: who allowed those gas cylinders into the train?

Regrettably, accidents involving Pakistan Railways are frequent, and there have been a series of them during the year-old tenure of Minister Sheikh Rashid. A dozen of them have been categorised as 'major'.

Incidents of fire breaking out on trains in the country are also quite common.

Railways officials reported 12 fires over one year to the National Assembly during a briefing in July. In four of them, the fire had erupted in the dining cars that accompany the passenger bogies. There were at least eight incidents of fire elsewhere on trains.

Yet it took a fatal blaze of this magnitude for Sheikh Rashid to come up with the assurance that henceforth, the ban on carrying items such as filled gas cylinders on trains would be strictly enforced.

Many of those killed were said to be going to Raiwind for the tableeghi congregation. The minister said the ban extended to tableeghi members who, by his own admission, had been given some kind of an exemption on this count. This is an admission of negligence, and bound to fuel demands for the resignation of those in charge of Pakistan Railways in aid of a fair inquiry.

If the official response offered a sense of regret it was drowned in the effort to paint a perfect picture of what the railways would look like after the government approved a proposed reform scheme. This is an ill-timed reiteration of the vows regarding a turnaround, and eclipses many issues related to the day-to-day running of the railways.

The railways minister might congratulate himself for coming up with a supposedly ingenious lottery scheme to hire new staff and go on endlessly on the need for funds to transform the system. But such thinking is at best an escape from reality, and does nothing whatsoever to address problems such as broken and crumbling tracks, improperly operated railway crossings, the lack of vigilance and security, and many other challenges plaguing the Railways.

The louder the pledges, the more obvious the contrast becomes between what is and what ought to be.

(By Editorial Dawn, 08, 01/11/2019)

Pakistan Railway

RAILWAY Minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad was present at Ranpathani railway station on Kotri-Karachi section for two days and supervised resumption of traffic which was seriously disrupted owing to heavy rains washing away the bridge in mid-October. The minister deserves praise for his act but his other actions puzzle the common citizen.

The minister has ordered the resumption of service of a number of trains which were running in deficit and were stopped for this reason by the previous management. The minister has also pledged the revival of the Karachi circular railway and an operation was started to clear encroachments which rendered thousands of people homeless. The project stands abandoned.

That is not all. Hardly a month passes without a railway accident. These mishaps have resulted in huge losses of human life and damages to the railway. One wonders why this gentleman still continues as the railway minister despite all these lapses.

Raees Ahmed Khan

Jamshoro

(By The Newspaper's Staff Dawn, 09, 29/11/2019)

Bold PR plans

THERE is no escaping the plight of Pakistan Railways and certainly no shortage of hard-to-believe projections about its turnaround. Only last week the project director of the 1,900-km Mainline-I plan briefed a Senate committee on the PR revolution in the making. He spoke of doubling the number of passenger trains from the current 40 and boosting the railways' share in freight traffic from Karachi to 20pc from the abysmal less than 4pc at the moment. Those tempted to hit the road between Peshawar and Karachi thanks to the recent opening of highways that are supposed to drastically reduce the distance will, apparently, have tougher competition from the old, 'reliable' train.

Moreover, after the opening of these new road links, a premier bus service promises to take passengers from Lahore to Karachi in 14 hours, with stopovers included. The railways, with all its 'romance' and 'comfort', claims it will complete the same journey in 10 hours once the ML-I project is finished. It promises greater passenger protection, though the 70-odd train accidents since August 2018 when the PTI came to power may prove to be something of a deterrent for aspiring rail travellers. There is also a promise to open up the railways and let it embrace new ideas, in contrast to the very strict government-controlled existence imposed on it over the years. During the briefing, the upper house committee was told that after the completion of the ML-I under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, trains will be outsourced to private operators. In response to the old reservations against entrusting maintenance of infrastructure to private hands, the government will keep control of the railway tracks.

All this is dependent on the successful completion of the ML-I, which experts say will take nine years. It is a huge project estimated to cost \$9.2bn and is being touted as the railways' saviour against a background of non-provision of sufficient and timely funds. The absence of resources and political decision-making has been the bane of PR. The calls about freeing the institution held captive by the ruling parties will have to be ultimately heard for a true revival. The debate must take place now with a frankness that the dire situation of the country's train system demands. The introduction of private operators once the system has been spruced up may be a good beginning but some experts advise releasing the PR from the often debilitating control of the Ministry of Railways. The idea of having an independent regulator help PR run its operations may at first sound too radical to some of those who are conservative

and shy of fast remedies. Let it at least be the starting point of a 'save the railways' discussion that should not suffer on account of the absence of frankness and bold turnaround steps. Desperate times do not breed easy answers.
(By Editorial Dawn, 06, 09/12/2019)