

CHASHMA AFFECTEES VOW TO CONTINUE THEIR STRUGGLE

TAUNSA SHAREEF (DERA GHAZI KHAN), 5 Oct 2002 : The people affected by Chashma Right Bank Irrigation Project (CRBIP) staged a protest rally against the highhandedness of local district administration and Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) and the violation of Development Bank (ADB) of its own policies and procedures here on Saturday.

They warned the ADB and Wapda to launch a mass movement against them if they failed to ensure immediate addressal of their grievances. They were demanding allotment of land against the land acquired from them by Wapda, land valuation according to market rates, resettlement and rehabilitation of the affectees, accountability of the ADB and Wapda staff, and elimination of corruption and commission mafia in the project.

More than 500 project affectees, peasant councilors and the representatives of political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in the rally organized by Chashma Mutasereen Committee (CMC) and Chashma Right Bank Canal (CRBC) Area Organization. The rally started from the Tehsil Headquarters (THQ) Hospital and after marching through Main Bazaar reached Kachhery Chowk where it culminated into a public meeting.

The demonstrators, accompanied by drumbeaters, were chanting slogans against the ADB and Wapda. They were also carrying banners and placards inscribed with slogans like 'no to ADB' and 'stop financing mega projects'.

Addressing the rally, Tehsil Naib Nazim and local PPP leader Dilshad Shaheen criticized rampant corrupt practices in the project and demanded fair and transparent mechanisms. He said the project, instead of bringing prosperity to the area, was adding to the miseries of people. The CRBIP, like all other mega projects, was increasing joblessness in the area of Damaan, where unemployment has already reached an appalling level.

He said the displacement, caused by the project, deprived people of not only their centuries old settlements but also of the livelihood sources. Presently the affectees have no alternative source of income and the compensation amount being given to them was far less than market rates and thus insufficient for the restoration of their livelihood.

Speaking on the occasion, Pakistan Seraikistan Movement's Chief Hameed Asghar Shaheen said CRBIP like Greater Thal Canal, Gomal Zam Dam and Kachhi Canal was a conspiracy to colonize land in the Seraiki belt. He said all the irrigation projects completed in past had caused in-migration in the Seraiki belt due to which economic survival and cultural identity of Seraiki people got badly affected.

In CRBIP's case too, the ethnic anxiety was increasing due to mass influx of Pakhtun population in the Damaan area, particularly in Dera Ismail Khan tehsil. He demanded of the government to immediately stop recently announced mega irrigation projects aiming at plundering of Seraiki belt's natural resources in the name of development of the area. He said that after the election, SQM would host a joint conference of the affectees of different irrigation projects of the area to press the newly elected government for the immediate cancellation of these projects.

Zafar Lund of Hirrak Development Foundation said the people of Damaan were still licking the social, environmental, economic and cultural wounds inflicted by the CRBIP when the government inaugurated another 'mega disastrous' project, namely Kachhi Canal, in the area. He apprehended that Kachhi Canal would increase water logging to an extremely dangerous level due to which agriculture and diverse water resources will be destroyed.

Shafi Qaisrani of Chashma Mutasereen Committee condemned the ADB and Wapda for playing anti-people role in the area and warned to stage massive protest demonstration against the unjust award for land compensation in front of the ADB office in Islamabad. Terming the land acquisition process illegal, he criticized the ADB and Wapda for preparing no resettlement plan for the 22 villages facing the threat of displacement.

He said their two-year-long experience of engagement with the ADB and Wapda had been very disappointing. During these two years, he said, they got an opportunity to see closely both the institutions violating their own policies, which made them believe that these institution were in no way interested to resolve the problems created by them.

He said ADB and Wapda's denial for sharing the TORs of the proposed Grievance Redress and Settlement Committee and other project reports requested by them was against the principles of justice and transparency.

Besides the Chashma Mutasereen Committee and CRBC Area Organization, the other NGOs whose representatives participated in the rally included: Pakistan NGO Forum, SUNGI Development Foundation, CREED, Damaan Development Organization, the local members of Amnesty International, Al-Amal Foundation, Taunsa NGO Network, Awami Samaji Organization, People's Rights Movement, and Kachi Abadi Alliance.

The political parties which showed solidarity with the affectees by participating in their rally were: Pakistan People's Party, Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), Seraikistan Qaumi Movement, Seraiki Lok Sanjh, Seraiki Shagird Sanjh and Seraiki Lok Tamasha.