

Karachi demolitions

Arif Hasan | January 31, 2019

THE Supreme Court of Pakistan has ordered that Karachi be restored to its former 'glory' of 40 years ago by demolishing all that which was not legally constructed since then. This is simply not possible. Karachi's population in 1981 was 5.4 million. Today it is 17m. The katchi abadi population in 1978 was 2m and today it is estimated at more than 9m. The number of vehicles in 2005 was 2,359,256 and in 2018 it was 4,642,196. Motorcycles increased from 361,616 in 1995 to 2,856,704 in 2018. Meanwhile, Karachi's urban footprint has more than doubled in the last 40 years.

Since 1947 (and not since 40 years ago), Karachi and its master plans have not been able to predict or meet the requirements of an increasing population. As a result, homes, industrial areas, markets, godowns, and cargo and bus terminals have sprung up informally. The demolition of what has been built in violation of Karachi's master plan of 40 years ago will destroy the socio-economic fabric of the city and fill its roads with homeless people.

The recent unplanned, selective and anti-poor demolition of encroachments in the city has destroyed its informal economy. Over 11,000 small businesses and more than 300,000 jobs have been lost, and customers are at a loss as to where they can make purchases. Meanwhile, the local government has no money to pick up the debris of the demolished markets.

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What is required is to bring back the hawkers and market operators to their places of business in an organised manner which does not disrupt the functioning of the city and at the same time restores the badly damaged informal economy of Karachi. To improve conditions, it is essential to assess what has been built without permission and identify that which is of socio-economic benefit for the city — and regularise it.

A heavy regularisation fee or penalty (maybe even imprisonment) should be imposed on the persons responsible for the illegal developments, which should then be spent on the improvement of the area where the property is located. That which is environmentally harmful for the city, or land which is required for important infrastructure projects, should be removed, providing only exploited affectees with alternatives.

As their lordships have started taking executive decisions, they might consider promoting a number of initiatives which would benefit Karachi. The area between Shahrah-e-Faisal to the south, Lyari river to the north, the port to the west, and the old Sabzi Mandi to the east (where most of Karachi's formal and informal businesses are located) is accessible through 13 roads which are used by hundreds of thousands of people and vehicles to get to and back from work.

This area desperately needs a traffic management and circulation plan which segregates through and local traffic, slow and fast-moving traffic, and vehicular and pedestrian movement. This will go a long way to tackle the traffic issue and create more car parking space.

Their lordships might also consider ordering the Sindh government and the KMC to introduce 10,000 large buses and create a proper school for drivers, conductors, and traffic managers who alone should operate the Karachi transport system. This is essential because the BRT mass transit plan will not be able to serve more than five per cent of the trips generated in Karachi.

Another issue which is tormenting more than 400,000 (mostly poor) people living on the Karachi Circular Railway 'right of way' is that they do not know what their future is, or the amount of land that the railway requires. It is essential that the railway takes a firm decision on the land that it needs so that this nightmare being faced by the people is removed.

The destruction of commercial activity in the railway land informal settlements, from which about 25pc of the population make a living, should also be stopped and be made part of a larger rehabilitation plan. The rehabilitation of these affectees should take place nearer to their present places of residence and it can be a part of larger commercial projects which can bring considerable revenue to the government and at the same time provide housing for the affectees.

The above Karachi rehabilitation plan is the only way to reconcile the city's ad hoc growth with its present plan for the future. This cannot be done by giving unmanageable time frames or by setting up committees consisting of compromised persons and hiring of inexperienced consultants. For this, a five- to 10-year time frame is required, along with appropriate institutions with teeth for planning and implementation. These institutions do not exist and need to be created and nurtured.

Meanwhile, through small projects, the city can be given some temporary relief. Anger has to be replaced with respect and understanding if Karachi is to be salvaged.

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