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KARACHI: Keti Bunder facing sea intrusion

By Faiza Ilyas



The bridge which connects Karachi, Ghoro and Mirpursakro with the talukas of Ghorabari, Kharo Chaan, Garro and Keti Bunder collapsed 15 days ago. However, no repairs have been carried out yet. This has greatly hampered the transport of fruit, vegetables, poultry and betel leaf from these areas and locals are now forced to opt for longer routes to reach their destination.
—Photo by writer

KARACHI, June 18: About 28,000 people of Keti Bunder may suffer a major displacement in the next 10 years as the sea is fast eroding their land. With the construction of dams and barrages upstream and stoppage of water downstream, the pace of sea intrusion has increased over the decades. The area has become highly vulnerable to cyclones and tsunamis as mangroves that serve as natural barriers to these calamities are being uprooted at an alarming rate.

These facts were highlighted during a tour of journalists to the deltoid region. The visit was organised by World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Karachi.

Deprived of basic facilities such as a water supply and proper sanitation, and with no infrastructure for health and education, the impoverished fishermen bitterly spoke of the government's continued indifference and the neglect of society at large during the journalists' visit to the area.

“Every monsoon, fishermen suffer damages due to rising sea tides. However, there was no help ever from any official quarters. Last week, most fishermen in the affected creek areas spent the night in boats as many houses were inundated in front of their eyes and their precious belongings were lost,” said Mohammad Siddique, who with many others had shifted to the inland area of Babu Dablu village near the Keti Bunder Town from Chaan and Hajamro creeks a few years ago.

Though the coastal area faces a number of problems, the foremost is the lack of drinking water supply. Keti Bunder has no direct line for drinking water while official work on the same continues at a snail's pace. Water is brought in through tankers and is sold for Rs1,000 to Rs2,000 a trip. Landlords buy water, some store it in their tanks, which is then supplied to inland and creek areas. Four to five gallons of water is sold at Rs25 to R30.

Middlemen, who give credit to fishermen on interest and then continue to exploit them for generations, are also supported by landlords. “The Shirazis and Malkanis have established their hegemony in coastal areas and are exploiting marine resources as well as poor fishermen. They claim that the creeks are their property and extort money from fishing people,” said a

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fisherman.

Over 90 per cent of the population of Keti Bunder is illiterate and lives well below the poverty line. Sea intrusion, which has become faster in recent decades, has swallowed up 28 dehs (settlements) out of the 42 and the population has been displaced thrice. Abject poverty, disease and government apathy have left the people hopeless and almost the entire population has been hooked to gutka. Even women and children are not free of the addiction. Some non-government organisations are doing their bit, but that is too little to improve the lives of thousands of people.

“What is there to live for? Gutka is a big relief. It helps us to get rid of hunger, pain and the agony and weakness of illness,” said another fisherman. About the exploitative tactics of the middlemen, he said these people provided poor fishermen with loans for meeting travel expenses.

“Things were not that bad when I was young. We used to have a good catch and lived a healthier life. Now, it’s difficult even to feed children during off season,” said Mohammad Hasan, an old man with poor health and eyesight. “My eye problem has spread to such an extent that I can’t even see now. I went to a doctor in Gharo, but I couldn’t continue the treatment since I didn’t have money. I spend my entire day sitting on the chair listening to surrounding voices and, at times, reminiscing bygone days.”

Once a thriving land

More than half a century ago, when the atrocities of the landlords were not so rampant and dams had not been built upstream, Keti Bunder was a hub of international trade activities in Sindh. The once beautiful flourishing deltoid area comprised vast agriculture lands brimming with marine resources. Ships from as far as Europe used to anchor here.

Its main produces were Sindh ganja (red rice), coal, desi ghee, butter and wood. It was so rich that once its municipality gave a loan to the Karachi municipality and records of 1934-35 show that local traders had their commission agents in Muscat. The area was ideal for the production of banana, coconut, melon and watermelon.

Today, the picture of a grave man-made tragedy stands like an unfortunate princess who despite losing her beauty, youth and affluence in a mutiny, still faces threats to her existence as the giant sea is gradually eating her up. According to some estimates, Keti Bunder has lost 113,900 acres to the sea and slowly, like other parts of Badin and Thatta districts, is losing more area with time.

According to a WWF document: “Due to very low discharge of the Indus and lack of flooding, the palla fish has been unable to migrate upstream for breeding and hence its stocks have depleted at an alarming pace during the last 15 years. It was reported that as the single large species of fish comprising 70 per cent of the total catch in the past. At present, it hardly constitutes 15 per cent of the total catch.”

Though vegetable, betel leaf, sugarcane, wheat and fruits are still grown in the inland areas, 80 per cent of the population is engaged in fishing. Earlier, only 20 per cent were involved in fishing. Still about 39 plant and 69 bird species are found in the deltoid region while Keti Bunder North and South is a wildlife sanctuary, mainly for water birds.

Mangroves depletion

During a presentation, Zahid Jalbani, WWF representative at Keti Bunder, said that mangroves were disappearing at a faster rate in the Keti Bunder area. Mangroves, which grew in a combination of saline and freshwater, only existed in Thatta and Karachi districts in Sindh and only four species had now been left out of eight.

“Though illegal cutting of mangroves and grazing are also contributing to the depleting mangrove cover, the reduced flow of freshwater is the major reason behind their destruction.

The pace of devastation has dramatically increased over the time which is alarming. Obviously, their destruction is directly linked to the low catch of fish and shrimps. At least 10 MAF of freshwater downstream the Kotri barrage is needed to rehabilitate the region.”

If the situation persisted, he said, the entire biodiversity of the area would be lost, besides leading to serious social and economic repercussions. “Not only that the area would be vulnerable to cyclones and tsunamis,” he said.

About the WWF intervention under the Indus for All Programme, Mr Jalbani said that a number of initiatives had been taken with community support. They included setting up of five wind turbines in coastal and inland areas, mangrove plantation, uniting villagers under community-based organisations and provision of boats with water tanks that feed four villages. Medical camps and workshops for awareness-raising had also been held.



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