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GENDER & WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women & Politics

Pakistan to Host 7th Meeting of Women Speakers

Pakistan will host the 7th meeting of the women speakers from around the world in November this year. This was announced by the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in Panama City at the conclusion of the 124th General Assembly of the IPU. It will be for the first time that Pakistan will be given an opportunity to host a prestigious IPU event of such a grand stature ever-since the country became member of this international body comprising parliaments of the world. The IPU has currently 157 member countries. In view of the security concerns, there remained some hesitation on the part of member states in accepting the offers made in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Nevertheless, it was the personal pursuance and lobbying that the women leaders finally agreed to meet in Islamabad in 2011. The meeting, to be held in November, will draw 37 women Speakers from different parliaments of Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, South America and Asia. There are no women Speakers in the Australian continent. Asia has the least number of women Speakers with the Speakers coming from Pakistan, India, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Europe has 15; Africa has nine while the Caribbean and the Latin American states have eight women speakers.

[Daily Times - April 22, 2011]

Women & Laws

NCSW to Ensure Harassment Act's Implementation in Provinces

The Implementation Watch Committee of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) would focus on implementing Anti-Sexual Harassment Act at provincial level besides ensuring appointment of ombudsperson in provinces in the coming year. National Implementation Watch Committee (NIWC) Chairperson Fauzia Saeed in a press briefing shared the progress of implementation of the Harassment Act during last one year and key points to be prioritized in the next year. Swift measures would be taken to expedite the implementation process at provincial level, however, ombudsperson will be appointed at the provincial level, until then, the provinces might ask federal ombudsperson to deal their harassment cases. Sharing progress of implementation of the legislation, Fauzia Saeed said that media organizations, including major newspapers and television channels, had hardly implemented the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act. Media which is quick to do accountability of others has failed to form committees and comply with other provisions required in the law. Only three media channels and two newspapers had reported setting up of a committee as prescribed in the law. Press clubs, newspaper establishments and channels must come forward and comply with the law.

Numbers of harassment cases during last one year are around 200 cases; registered through the legal aid centers of Alliance against Sexual Harassment (AASHA). Out of over 100 banks under State Bank of Pakistan, only 26 have complied with the law while the Pakistan Banking Association has been sending reminders to the banks to hold training workshops and seminars to make their officials understand the issue. Despite issuing guidelines by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) on anti-sexual policies, the universities have not sent back any information to confirm that the committees are being formed as required by the law to curb the incidents of sexual harassment. AASHA has arranged over 150 awareness seminars across the country. Likewise, Mehargarh has also conducted around 13 training workshops for trainers. A poster is also designed for police which is been placed at all the Federal Capital, police stations and will also be sent to the provinces. Thousands of organizations at district level have adopted code of conduct and formed committees. The text of the law and the Code of Conduct is circulated among all provincial Ministries. The legislation is even translated into Sindhi and circulated among the senior officials.

[Daily Times - April 20, 2011]

Inheritance Laws

The Fair Share

It is interesting that both Islamic (*Sharia*) law and the Pakistani state law give women the right to inherit immovable and movable property but these laws are never implemented and women are denied control over inheritance, especially of land. In most areas of Pakistan, customary inheritance practices emphasize the importance of keeping property within the family which is always controlled by men. Most people give dowry as the explanation for not giving women share in inheritance, though this is illegal by all standards.

Experts on the issue believe that laws of inheritance are very clear about the share of female members in a family but they are hardly observed. Women hardly get anything from their inherited property. They own less than two per cent of the total agricultural land in Pakistan. It is the culture that always prevails and denies women right to own property. According to International Property Right Index 2010, Pakistan is ranked 104th out of 125 countries in property rights for women. If women do inherit property, it typically remains controlled by male members. Although in principle the family is likely to recognize female members' right to inherit property, it is rarely the case that the female inheritor retains or sells her property. According to the findings of Pakistan Rural Household Survey (PRHS-II) 2004, conducted by Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), 45 per cent of women whose fathers have already died reported that their fathers had land or other significant property at the time of death.

In 2010, the issue was raised in a study titled, Denial of Women's Rights of Inheritance: Enhancing their Vulnerabilities to Domestic and Social Violence, conducted by the Awaz Foundation Pakistan, a Multan-based NGO. The research mentioned that about 90 per cent of the total respondents who were interviewed during the study were of the opinion that people think that women should be given share in the inherited property, whereas only 10 per cent of the respondents didn't consider it as a right of women. But when asked whether the communities actually give this right to women, 100 per cent of the respondents answered in the negative.

Being a male-dominated society, when it comes to inheritance, all those practices, legal or customary, are used which favor men. Those laws or customs are used while distributing inherited property that ensures minimum rights for women. The general concept is that the courts enforce the Personal Law in favor of women. It is also ensured that other legal heirs cannot deprive women of their religious rights of inheritance. Women are perceived to be weak, illiterate, dependent, in need of protection and ill-equipped to handle property matters. Thus any decisions favoring them seem to be based on condescension rather than an acknowledgement of equal citizenship of women. Even if laws favor women, they cannot enjoy this privilege because in many areas of Pakistan women do not have identity cards and without it they cannot possess property. Granting women their rightful inheritance is an unheard practice in our society. Usually, after the father's death, property goes to the sons. when it comes to emphasis on 'an equal right to inheritance' for men and women, it should be interpreted as an equal ability of women to claim or assert rights of inheritance, "but it does not necessarily mean equal share or proportion in inheritance as that of men. This is in accordance with the principles of Islamic Law on Inheritance.

[The News – April 4, 2011]

Married To Traditions

Most veiled and modern women in both conservative and liberal Pakistan share the same fate of being 'omitted' when it comes to getting their share in the property of their parents or male siblings. Though many traditions regarding marriage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are similar, the trend of inter-family marriages that ensures that the ownership of inherited property remains in the family is equally shared in Punjab and Sindh. However, one ritual distinct to Sindh is the marriage of a female to the Holy Quran. Although the tradition is not a common practice anymore, it was used to protect the family fortune from going out into the hands of the girl's in-laws by filling a marriage certificate with 'Quran' written in the space for husband's name. This meant the woman would be considered as 'married' and that she would remain in the family home till death.

Various old age customs are in practice in KP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that deny women their due right to inheritance. One such tradition is the remarrying of a widowed female to her brother-in-law, ignoring any age difference there might be between the two. A woman being married off to a much younger man is even more common. In some cases, a young widow is forced to tie the knot

with a man twice her age and a previously married man. Defying this custom is not common in the conservative Pakhtun society as it is hard for a woman to live by her own. However, there are a few brave ones who resist this tradition. One tradition common to the tribes in North and South Waziristan, Orakzai Agency and some Afridi tribes in the Khyber Agency is that of demanding money for daughter or sister from the in-laws. This bride-money is considered as repayment for the upbringing and protection of the female since her birth. There are interesting ways of going about it. The peshimam (prayer leader) of a mosque in Tank town in the southern part of KP is said to have told his daughter's would-be in-laws that he was against 'selling' her off but they could pay for his daughter's pet cat. He quoted Rs 500,000 as the cat's price. This way he 'justified' accepting "*walvur*" (Pashto word for bride-money). Selling females or fixing a rate for their upbringing is against Islamic teachings. It is obligatory for the girl's father or brother to provide her with all the basic facilities till they are married. This isn't a favor that they are doing.

Some people say that even if they try, their sisters won't accept any share in the inherited property. This is a lame excuse. As a Muslim, give the due share to your sister/daughter and, if she pleases, she can return it to you later. The inheritance and marriage issues in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA are not restricted to the illiterate and rural people because educated Pakhtuns also hesitated to grant rights to the heirs. The practice of negating inheritance rights to females isn't common only among the commoners. In fact, some people who are the upholders of the law also hate sharing their paternal property with their female siblings. Although women in Pakistan are a long way from attaining their proper inheritance rights, a positive change among the religious-minded and the educated lot is in the offing. Or, so it seems, as a small but growing number of people are willingly giving the due share in the inherited family property to their daughters and sisters.

[The News – April 4, 2011]

Legislation Needed To Curb All Sorts of Violence against Women

Besides crimes, institutional factors such as male domination, patriarchal biases in criminal justice system and law enforcing agencies hamper the women access to justice. The seminar on violence against women and seeking a way forward called for serious efforts from all quarters including the judiciary and the politicians to eradicate all sorts of violence against women. It is important to know the factors, including personal, societal, political and institutional, that hamper victims' access to justice. Steps are still needed to provide adequate safeguards to women. There have been lacunae in the system to provide justice to victim women, which indirectly condones acts of violence allowing perpetrators a free hand to commit violence with the belief that they will not be punished.

Women continue to face social, cultural, political and institutional barriers in getting justice, due to their subordinate position in society, lack of education, information and awareness. It is important to engage men not just through gender sensitization trainings but to involve them actively in programmes related to violence against women. Advocates highlighted various legislations, including Penal Code, for eradicating violence against women. They referred to five codes that could have been used in this particular case including Case of attempted murder according to Pakistan Penal Code 324, secondly accusing a woman without evidence that makes it offence of *Kazaf* according to Hudood laws of 1979. The audience was told that in this case the punishment was the same as for *Zina*, but due to lack of awareness the aggrieved people were not able to refer to such laws. The Pakistan Penal Code law applies same punishment for trafficking of women that has for rape under Hudood Ordinance of 1979. Ignorance among women about their rights needed a social change in the society and not mere legislation. Religious and societal reforms could contribute in bringing about change in the mindsets of people. A recent case of *Karo Kari* in Rajanpur and the exemplary role of community social workers Rod Kohi Development Organization (RDO), Lal Garh, in resisting this alleged case amid a deep-rooted culture of *Karo Kari* in those areas backed by local powerful feudal. The social changes would eventually lead to higher education and improved standard of living of masses, which would than not be exploited by the powerful elites.

[Dawn - April 5, 2011]

Devolution of MoWD

Civil Society, Activists Give Their Vote of Trust

National Implementation Watch Committee (NIWC) agreed with the formation of a unified body on a federal level to oversee any violations by the provinces and to monitor international commitments. These views were expressed by civil society representatives, experts and human/gender right activists at a press conference. On the occasion, Pattan Development Organization, PODA, AASHA, Bedari, Women Councilors Network, activists and others jointly issued a statement which said that the members of civil society organization, gender rights activists and experts noted with concern that Aurat Foundation criticized the post-18th amendment devolution program and termed the devolution of Ministry for Women's Development as anti-women and unjust; it is strongly condemned. We appreciate the efforts made over decades by the MoWD, it is important not to overstate its contribution to promote women's rights. Women rights activists have been publicly expressing their frustration over the inability of the MoWD to play its role as a watch dog. Devolution of MoWD was not "an issue" but calling it "unconstitutional and anti-women forced to gather and raise the voices.

[The Express Tribune - April 10, 2011]

Another Perspective on Devolution of Women's Ministry

It is vitally important that the mainstreaming of gender across ministries must be made the responsibility of the provinces. Mainstreaming gender within the devolution framework as well as setting up women's specific safeguard at the provincial level is the only way forward and this process is fully supported. It is no time of raising concerns, as devolution was a long-standing demand of civil society for many decades. Reacting to the recent criticism over the ministry's devolution, the decision to devolve Women Ministry was taken last year and it has not come as a surprise to public or private sector. The federal ministry got a whole year to level the ground for transferring matters to provinces. It is unfortunate that nothing has been done in this direction. Women centered legislation and policies were produced with the efforts of gender experts and women rights activists from outside the ministry. Women rights activists had been publicly expressing their frustration over the inability of the MoWD to play its role as a watchdog ministry to oversee and ensure the integration of gender perspectives and concerns in the planning and the working of other ministries. Lack of in-house gender capacity remained as a key barrier for MoWD to play its role effectively.

In talk on legal side of devolution process the argument was rejected that provinces lack capacity to manage the new responsibilities. These believe has emerged as a result of lack of knowledge. Devolution will encourage healthy competition among provinces and will provide civil society with more windows to extend their work to grassroots level. Provinces already have institutional set-ups to deal with women issues. Regarding the impact of this decision on civil society, it would be wrong to underestimate the role of civil society at the provincial level. The civil society has got strong roots at the provincial level and can effectively play the role of a watchdog as well as a contributor in the process of women development. Now the demand is that next step of devolution should be at district level. Human Right Activists Farzana Bari and Sameena Nazir stressed the need to review the mandate of NCSW so that it can act as central body to protect the rights of women at federal level. Sameena said that with the devolution of all social sector ministries, there is no point in demanding women ministry to stay at the federal level. If social sectors ministries are in provinces that women ministry should also be devolved at the same level.

[The News - April 11, 2011]

Women's Empowerment & Gender Equality

Representation of Women in Decision-Making Process Urged

A seminar on 'Climate Change and Gender: Prospects and Challenges' was organized by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). The speakers at the seminar unanimously agreed that women should be sufficiently represented in decision-making process on climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Throughout the world, there are gender-specific differences in consumption patterns, lifestyles, access to and control of resources and power, and vulnerability to climate change. Women are not sufficiently represented in decision-making process on climate change, or adaptation and

mitigation strategies. Women must be included, not because they are “more vulnerable” but because they have different perspectives and experiences to contribute.

Further gender vulnerability in different sectors like food security, physical and reproductive health, access to resources, water, climate change, empowerment and access to basic services were highlighted. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can help the women of developing countries to better adapt to climate change induced disasters. Some of the potential areas in this context include the prevention from health risks through raising awareness and capacity building, enhancing food security through strengthening of agriculture system, improvement of water resource management techniques and ensuring participation in climate change negotiations. Considering the wide gender digital divide in Pakistan, there is a need to bring behavioral change in people, equally focusing on the provision of basic services. Seminar’s conclusion was that no authentic data is so far available about impact of climate change on gender.

[The News - April 21, 2011]

Oppression of Women Workers in Informal Sector

For long, women have been an invisible force in Pakistan as they have sustained the family quietly while keeping a low profile. But the reality is now emerging that as workers in the informal sector their role is no less significant even though they continue to remain in the background. In 2007 a fifth of Pakistan’s GDP came from the informal sector comprising 20 million workers of which 12 million were women. With globalization and liberalization of international trade, this sector has been growing over the years as has been the number of women who enter it. Their desperation and exploitation has also been increasing. In official records the home-based worker is not counted as a member of the labor force by the government. Without any social security or support but in need of resources to provide for their family, women turn to home-based work as it is easier to access. It doesn’t demand stringent qualifications and education. They embroider and stitch garments, make bangles, roll incense sticks, make paper bags, process food and even make some items for the electrical goods industries. Their versatility is beyond belief. A dress that sells for Rs. 1,000-plus fetches them barely Rs. 5 but requires hours of work. Obviously, this situation has been created by women’s economic needs, the inhumanity and avarice of manufacturers/middlemen out to earn hefty profits by exploiting helpless workers and the unwillingness or inability of weak governments to exercise social controls and regulate conditions for labor.

ILO’s C-177 convention defines them as persons who carry out remunerative work in their home or any other premises but not at the workplace of the employer. The nature of their relationship with the manufacturer is tenuous; they never meet and the middlemen ensure this lack of contact, making regulation difficult. That is why the primary demand of civil society organizations such as HomeNet Pakistan, Aurat Foundation, Sungi, etc has been that the government should formulate a national policy for home-based women workers as stipulated by C-177. If the government and society had a conscience they would have paid some attention to these workers who have not been able to lobby for their cause for obvious reasons. They are the poorest of the poor, burdened with family cares, in dismal health, lack education and training, have no awareness and are disempowered. So a strategy is needed to bring about change. We need collective power, and that is why we always organize and network. Organizing is power. That is what home-based women workers are now trying to do with the help of civil society organizations. They have set up their organizations all over the country which now work under an umbrella organization, the Home Based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF). It has affiliations with the national trade unions. The challenge for these workers is to make them heard by making themselves visible. As it is, workers do not enjoy all the rights they are entitled to under the numerous international agreements to which Pakistan is a signatory.

[Dawn - April 28, 2011]

In Swat, Empowering Women to Fight Terrorism and Poverty

The five women’s vocational training centers in Swat are seemingly on track to meet their goals of empowering women to fight poverty and the lure of terrorism through skill development. Many women and girls have come to learn occupational skills such as knitting, sewing, machine embroidery, dress designing, computer courses, spoken English, porcelain work and makeup. The Women’s Vocational Training Centre at Gul Kada in Swat, run by the Sarhad Rural Support Programme and sponsored by the

Citi Foundation, it is a visible success. There is a very positive response from the local community because of the three special courses in computers, spoken English and makeup. There are other vocational centers, but they do not teach these skills. The center is affiliated with the Technical Training Board in Peshawar and has an all-female staff, all of whom are well-qualified in their fields. Students show keen interest in spoken English and computer classes and have managed to secure jobs in different organizations. Students in the centers were really keen to learn English as it is a necessity today. They want to streamline their studies with the need of today and want to excel in every field of life as the men.

[The Express Tribune - April 16, 2011]

Ghulam Sughra Honored By the US Government

On the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama presented the annual International Women of Courage awards to 10 women from around the world. One of these 10 women was Ghulam Sughra, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Marvi Rural Development Organization. To continue their efforts of interacting with Pakistanis from all walks of life, ambassador of the United States of America and Mrs. Munter hosted a tea in honor of Ghulam Sughra, which was attended by heads of NGO's, social workers and some members of the embassy, including Deputy cultural attaché, Julia Fendrick. Addressing the gathering Ambassador Mr. Munter said a few words about Ghulam's life and achievements and said her work has been truly heroic. She has advanced freedom equality opportunity and dignity for everyone in Pakistan, not only women. She has persevered in this work often at great risk to herself, such abundance of determination in Pakistan. He concluded by thanking everyone for attending the function to honor Ghulam Sughra and said her story should be an inspiration not just to the girls and women of Pakistan but to all Pakistanis; to all Americans and to the entire international community.

Ghulam Sughra, spoke in Urdu because she do not know English; thanked the ambassador and his wife for hosting a gathering in her honor, which gave her the opportunity to meet so many other women involved in similar work. She spoke of the difficulties she faced from landlords and other men with a closed mindset to women's issues and said her work at the grassroots level was paying dividends slowly but surely and she was grateful for the support she received from a few other women. She stressed the fact that receiving the award had made a great deal of difference because many of those who opposed her were now respectful and willing to change their minds and allow her to work in their areas. She said she had more problems with landlords in the Sindh areas and religious parties in the KP and southern Punjab areas, but there were people in all parts of Pakistan, who did come forward to support her work. Sughra stands in eminent company.

[The News - April 27, 2011]

Women & Media

National Convention of Female Journalists

Realizing the sensitivities of female journalists, the National Press Club organized a two-day national convention on women journalists. Around 200 women journalists from all over the country participated in the convention titled 'Conference on Gender Discrimination in Media and Capacity Building Sessions for Female Journalists'. Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Firdous Aashiq Awan was the chief guest on the inaugural day. The main objective of the conference was to reinforce and strengthen the role of women in the media of Pakistan and to discuss and help to find solutions to the challenges faced by them relating to gender disparity. The private sector electronic media in Pakistan is thriving at a great speed. The media boom has created space for new and young professionals and consequently there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of female journalists in Pakistan, but it has failed to address the sensitivities of female journalists and has not been able to provide a secure working environment for them. Despite being capable professionals, female journalists are facing undue discrimination within the industry, making it difficult for them to excel in their profession and hampering the equal dispersion of opportunities. The primary issues being faced by majority of the female journalists are sexual harassment, gender discrimination, lack of training and career growth opportunities.

[The News - April 16, 2011]

HR WATCH

Women & HR

SC Decision Disappoints Mukhtaran, Women Organizations

The Supreme Court decision to acquit five out of six accused in the high profile Mukhtaran Mai gang-rape case has gravely disappointed the internationally recognized icon of courage and resistance from Meerwala. The three-member bench of the apex court upheld the ruling of the Lahore High Court (LHC) of 2005 and acquitted five accused for lack of evidence terming the decision 'terribly unjust'. Mukhtaran Mai has now left the case to Allah with expressing deep disappointment in the justice delivery system in the country. She was told that the FIR was weak. She said that she has no faith left in the judicial system and is unsure to go for a review of the SC verdict adding that a final decision in this regard will be taken after consulting her lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan. Mukhtaran said that she had wanted to be present in the court for the hearing but her lawyer had advised her against it. Expressing serious apprehensions about her safety she said that she along with her family members could be harmed by the Mastoi tribesmen who live in the same area and are known for being ruthlessly vengeful.

Mukhtaran was gang raped on 22nd July 2002 on the orders of the village council as a punishment for her younger brother's suspected relationship with a woman from the rival Mastoi tribe. Later, investigations proved however that the boy had been molested by three Mastoi tribesmen. The leader of the village council and five others were convicted and sentenced to death by the Anti-Terrorist Court but later the decision was overturned by the LHC which released five out of six accused for gang-rape and commuted Abdul Khaliq's death sentence into life imprisonment; perhaps for lack of evidence. Mukhtaran said that despite the terrible injustice she is not feeling defeated and will continue with her struggle for gender dignity.

Meanwhile, civil society representatives and women rights activists gathered at the D-Chowk of the federal capital to protest the court verdict. Immediately after the decision was announced, representatives of civil society organizations and women rights activists convened an emergency meeting at the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) to register their protest. The judgment did prove that Mukhtaran was raped because one accused did get life imprisonment while others were acquitted but it is surprising to see that only one accused was punished and others were acquitted on a charge of gang-rape. The decision of Mukhtaran Mai case discourages survivors of rape and gang-rape to report. However Mukhtaran Mai, who stood bravely against all intimidation and harassment and has refused to buckle under life threats; has set an example. She has given a message of courage and hope to all women victims of our country. She is a role model for women of Pakistan.

[The News - April 22, 2011]

Mukhtaran Mai's Review Appeal: Activists Cry For Justice

If the apex court failed to do justice to the rape victim, it will be a major setback not only to the independent judiciary but also to civil rights campaigners. Insani Haqooq Itehad (IHI), a conglomerate of over a dozen civil society and women rights organizations, said the split judgment of two vs. one shows that the Supreme Court ruling is not merely a matter of technicalities of evidence and witnesses. The dissenting judge of the bench, Justice Nasirul Mulk recommended 10 years imprisonment to each of the five accused in the case. The judgment in this infamous case clearly shows that our criminal justice system is incapable of dispensing justice to victims of rape and sexual violence. Supreme Court's judgment includes spurious arguments which raise questions on the objectivity of reading an interpretation of the evidence by judges. It highlights the serious flaws in legislation, as well as in our criminal justice system which is obviously not geared to dispense justice to women victims of sexual violence. Before giving the judgment the judges should have consulted human rights activists and gender experts. There are some media outlets that are running a campaign against Mukhtaran Mai and do not want her to get well deserving justice. Gender bias has actually made the victim into a culprit, and neither has the government given Mai the protection promised by Interior Minister Rehman Malik.

Government is demanded to file a review petition with the SC on behalf of women of the country. Review must ensure a full and larger bench to hear review petition, immediate initiation of judicial reforms and introduce amendment to the Evidence Act. Besides, the government should establish modern DNA and

swab test laboratories along with strengthening the prosecution and investigation system. Plus to that corruption, forgery and use of political influence in the police and judiciary should be removed. TV channel anchors should avoid using wrong language for Mai in their shows along with defaming human/women right activists. Defamation suite against Dunya TV is also been filed.

[The Express Tribune - April 29, 2011]

Violence against Women: ‘Feudal Lords Support Karo-Kari’

Speakers at a seminar on “Role of Men and Gaps in Law to End Violence against Women” said that the inhuman culture of karo-kari in different parts of the country is being backed by powerful feudal lords. The seminar organized by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) saw speakers note that the culture of karo-kari in these areas was supported by powerful feudal and highlighted the role of social workers of Rod Kohi Development Organization (RDO), Lal Garh, in resisting the practice.

A couple from Ranjpur in Sindh where a married man and a married woman were accused, without any evidence, of having an affair, termed karo and kari respectively, and inhumanly beaten by relatives of the woman in a public square in broad daylight. Subsequently, the girl was divorced, kept in custody at an unknown place, sold and married off to another person against her will. The boy was forced to leave the area to save his life and avoid paying heavy fines, said Gorchani. RDO workers tried to persuade the local sardar and the woman’s family to undo the heinous act, but the move backfired and they were asked to keep silent under threat of dire consequences, including social boycott and closure of their NGO. However, the workers challenged the powerful elites behind the act and filed a written petition in the Lahore High Court, Multan Bench, and managed to recover the girl from illegal detention of the ‘buyer’, while highlighting the case through the media and other forums. The session’s court also ordered the police to give protection to the boy from local feudal lords.

[The Express Tribune - April 7, 2011]

Report on Domestic Violence: ‘Women Should Know They Don’t Need To Tolerate Abuse’

A team of social scientists at the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad (UAF) recently released a study on *“Domestic Violence – Rural-Urban Current Age and Age at Marriage Differential Impact on Women’s Physical Health in Punjab.”* The team observed that violence against women has increased considerably over the past five years. Generally, victims of domestic violence were found to be young and middle-aged adults. Several studies found an increased likelihood of abuse among women of age groups 15 to 19, 20 to 24, and 25 to 29 years. The report stated that married women in age group of 20 to 24 years are more likely to be abused than women aged 25 to 29 years. Women in age group of 15 to 19 years have an increased likelihood of falling victim to honor killings by blood relatives.

The study also revealed that the likelihood of domestic abuse decreases considerably in women above the age of 50. Those in age group 40 to 44 and 45 to 49 reported fewer instances of spousal abuse. An increase in domestic abuse in newly married women between the age group of 20 to 29 is also expected. The data indicates that this is exceedingly common in Southern Punjab and several areas of Sindh. The researchers stated that a girl’s marriageable age played an important part in the understanding the risk factors that influence domestic abuse. The younger the girl is at the time of her marriage the less she knows about her rights. Young girls often consider domestic abuse to be the norm and put up with it for this reason. Evidence from earlier studies concluded that girls who marry early (before the age of 18) are more likely to experience domestic violence. The study also found that instances of domestic violence were considerably fewer among women who married at a later age. Women who married after the age of 24 were 44 per cent less likely to be abused than women who married under the age of 19.

The research used a statistically valid random sample of 800 married women to classify the type of violence, frequency of the incident and severity of violence against married women in two district of Punjab. Out of the 34 district of the Punjab two districts, Faisalabad and Narowal, were randomly selected for analysis. From each selected district two teshsils representing an urban or rural setting were listed and these included Faisalabad city and Samundari from Faisalabad and Narowal city and Shakargarh from Narowal. Finally using a lottery method, an equal number of married households from each rural and urban area were randomly drawn. With regard to the age-at-first marriage, over two thirds of women (68.6 per cent) and less than one per cent of men had their first marriage before reaching the age of 20. The study revealed that “physical violence may cause deep scars on the victims and could permanently

damage or impair their mental health". The respondents were asked about health problems they had suffered due to physical abuse during the last 12 months. Many respondents reported physical violence incidences that resulted in medical conditions such as abdominal, thoracic injuries, bruises and welts, chronic pain, ocular damages, fibromyalgia and fractures.

The study concluded that gender based violence takes many different forms and there may be distinctive patterns or manifestations of gender violence associated with particular cultures, work status, number of spouses and marriages. The experts made a number of recommendations to overcome violence against the women and said that marriageable age of young women should not be less than 22 years. The report recommends that public and private institutions establish and implement model protocols for the early identification and referral of abuse victims in health care settings.

[The Express Tribune - April 18, 2011]

Child Rights

Need for Protection of Child Rights Stressed

Growing cases of violation of child rights call for the need for government, civil society and media to join hands for checking these violations. A seminar titled "Violation of Child Rights-Media Responsibilities" was held in collaboration with Sahil and Actionaid. The speakers stressed the need for improving child rights situation in the country. Speakers on the occasion said that the US, despite claiming so called champion of human rights, was still avoiding signing the UN Child Rights Convention. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (an international treaty that recognizes the human rights of children) is the most widely and rapidly ratified human rights treaty. Only two countries, Somalia and the United States, have not ratified this celebrated agreement.

Over 1.2 million children have become street children in society, having no roof to sleep under and passing their life without any care. The speakers expressed their grave concern over increasing number of street children in Pakistan. The speakers said the cases of violation of children's rights were reported almost on a daily basis. Trafficking, torture and abuse of children is rife in many parts of the country. They regretted hundreds of thousands of children were engaged in forced child labor, while the number of street children was also on a constant rise. They stressed free education, healthcare and shelter to citizens including children was the responsibility of the state. Huge numbers of children are working in hazardous; it was need of the hour that the government, the civil society and the media work jointly for improving the child rights situation in the society.

[The Nation - April 06, 2011]

Conflict Watch

Target Killings in Balochistan

Balochistan Target Killings: Silence over Professor's Death

One year later, insecurity prevails among teachers and students of the University of Balochistan and questions about the killing of Assistant Professor Nazima Talib are avoided. She was the first woman educationist in Balochistan to fall victim to a target killing on April 27, 2010. However, no arrangements were made at the university to observe her first death anniversary. So far, no progress has been made in the investigations of her killing. Banned outfit Baloch Liberation Army had claimed responsibility for the attack in response to the killing of a Baloch woman in the Saryab area of Quetta. Students are even reluctant to talk about this however; they held a fateha for the slain professor. Teachers also refused to comment over the killing. People are ruthlessly being killed. Everyone is insecure and mentally disturbed in the province. Under such circumstances, why would one endanger his or her life? Therefore; they opt to keep silence.

President of Academic Staff Association Balochistan University Kalimullah Barech said there was no progress in any of the murders. The teachers are left at the mercy of Allah. Many teachers have left the university out of fear. There is no improvement and the situation has gone from bad to worse. Talib's death was the university's third loss of a teacher to an incident of target killing. In 2008, Pro-Vice Chancellor of University of Balochistan Dr Safdar Kayani was shot dead, and Chairperson of Library and

Sciences Assist Professor Khurshed Ansari was gunned down in 2009. From 2008 to 2010, as many as 14 teachers have been killed in incidents of target killings.

[The Express Tribune - April 28, 2011]

The Contours of Target Killings in Balochistan

Despite the presence of paramilitary forces with their extended powers for years in Balochistan, killings continue to increase. Experts say the trend in Balochistan is an interesting study to gauge how effective paramilitary forces can be in controlling crime and the general law and order situation in places like Karachi, where there is debate over whether more power and resources should be given to the Pakistan Rangers as police fails to do the job. According to Balochistan police records, there were 256 incidents of targeting in Balochistan in 2009 that killed 200 people and injured 387. In 2010, 231 incidents were reported that killed 255 and injured 498. In the first three months of 2011, at least 39 incidents have occurred, which killed 38 and injured 66.

No target killings incidents except for one or two; are reported in the province's Pashtun-dominated areas, including Musakhel, Zhob, Loralai, Ziarat, Pishin, Harnai and Sibi. The claim was confirmed by Pakhtunkhwa Awami Milli Party's senior leader Abdul Rahim Khan Mandokhel. Most target killing and terrorism incidents are reported in the districts of Quetta, Mastung, Bolan, Noshki, Kalat, Khuzdar, Kech, Gwadar, Lasbela and Panjgur. Four types of target killings are reported in Balochistan: Attacks on people who have settled in the province, assassinations of policemen and Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, sectarian killings and murders of political workers.

Settlers: Settlers in Balochistan are numbered at least 461,328 and mostly comprise Punjabis, Seraikis and Urdu-speaking people. According to police statistics, based on inquiry and FIRs, at least 180 settlers have been shot dead between 2009 and March 2011. Officials admit that investigations into most target killings of settlers remain unsolved. **Security Personnel:** At least 120 policemen and 66 FC personnel have been killed between 2009 and March 2011. Despite clear evidence that police have suffered more, there is a severe lack of resources. It is very easy to blame civilian institutions for failing to curb crime. But the truth is we don't have the resources to even fight petty dacoits who have more sophisticated arms and equipment. **Sectarian:** Sectarian killings have been mostly targeted against Hazara Shias, who came to Balochistan decades ago from Afghanistan and Iran. Police and counter-terrorism officials say that anti-Shia militant groups are active in Balochistan. **Political:** Political party workers allege that they are being targeted not only by the state but by rebels as well. The heavily-armed rebels are against nationalists because they say that you talk about federation when we are here up in the mountains waging a battle against the state. Hundreds of Baloch men, including political workers, have gone missing in the province. Balochistan's security situation is interconnected with Fata and Afghanistan and violence is bound to continue unless things improve there.

[The Express Tribune - April 24, 2011]

Target Killings in Karachi

Target Killings: Karachi Deaths Exceed 109 In First Quarter Of 2011

Murders of persons who held a party ticket or were party sympathizers are categorized as target killings. At least 109 people were killed as a result of target killing in the first quarter of 2011, according to conservative estimates by the Karachi police. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), however, claims that as many as 260 people have been killed in Karachi so far in 2011, which is very close to the 267 people who were killed during the entire year of 2008. The phenomenon of target killing in Karachi has continued to rise since 2008 despite repeated assurances by the government over the years that measures are being taken to counter the menace.

According to a capital city police inspector who compiles figures, the discrepancy between the HRCP and police data is due to the fact that the law enforcement agencies (LEAs) rely on FIRs and case details provided by investigation officers. HRCP programme officer Tarranam Khan who tabulates data each month relies solely on multiple media reports. While data maintained by NGOs may inadvertently label other murders as target killings, the police inspector says it is true that the police might not describe a murder as target killing even when bodies with gunshot wounds are recovered from the city in a wave of ongoing violence, if it cannot be established for a fact. Targeted murders depict a complete collapse of the

system in which the government, the police and the judiciary are out of sync with each other. He criticized the government for making statements instead of empowering law enforcement agencies.

[The Express Tribune - April 2, 2011]

Target Killings and other Terrorist Incidents in Karachi during April

Following are the major incidents of target killings which took place in Karachi during the month of April:

- April 11: MQM-H Vice-Chairman Akhtar Hussain and three others, including a passerby woman, were gunned down while at least three others were injured in an incident of target killing within the limits of Ferozabad Police Station in Karachi.
- April 12: Three MQM activists and one ANP supporter were shot dead in two different incidents of target killings in Karachi.
- April 21: At least 18 people were killed and 41 sustained injuries in a powerful blast that ripped through Rami Club building near Ghaas Mandi area of Lyari locality in Karachi.
- April 26: Twin bomb blasts targeting two Pakistan Navy buses, carrying officials to work, in Karachi killed four persons, including one civilian female doctor and injured 56 others.
- April 28: At least six persons were killed and seven others injured after a bomb hit a Pakistan Navy bus in the Karsaz area of Karachi.

(The information has been compiled from different dailies)

Terrorist Incidents in April

S. NO.	DATE	PLACE	KILLED	INJURED
1.	April 1	Dabori/Orakzai Agency/FATA	9	-
2.	April 2	Landikotal Tehsil/Khyber Agency/FATA	4	12
3.	April 3	Dera Bugti District	3	-
		Sakhi Sarwar/Dera Ghazi Khan District/Punjab	41	100
		Darra Adamkhel/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	5	-
		Khyber Agency/FATA	7	-
4.	April 4	Lower Dir District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	8	-
5.	April 5	Tirah Valley/Khyber Agency/FATA	3	-
6.	April 6	Kohat District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	4	3
		Bezai Tehsil/Mohmand Agency/FATA	4	1
7.	April 7	Mohmand Agency Of FATA	54	-
		Darra Adamkhel/Kohat District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	6	-
8.	April 8	North Waziristan Agency/FATA	3	-
9.	April 9	Swat District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	7	-
10.	April 10	Tirah Valley/Khyber Agency/FATA	4	-
11.	April 11	Peshawar/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	4	1
		Kanrakai/Kurram Agency/FATA	3	13
12.	April 12	Mohmand Agency/FATA	8	12
13.	April 13	Angoor Adda/Swa/FATA	7	4
14.	April 14	Mohamad Agency/FATA	20	35
15.	April 15	Kurram Agency/FATA	3	-
16.	April 16	Laddah Tehsil/SWA/ FATA	4	-
17.	April 20	Mohmand Agency/FATA	10	5
18.	April 21	Sanghar District/Sindh	3	-
19.	April 22	Lower Dir District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	36	-

		North Waziristan Agency/FATA	25	-
20.	April 23	Orakzai Agency/FATA	6	-
		Bajaur Agency	5	-
		Sibi District/Balochistan	15	-
21.	April 25	Kech & Khuzdar/Balochistan	5	-
		Bara Tehsil/Khyber Agency/FATA	3	-
22.	April 27	Bara Tehsil/Khyber Agency/FATA	3	-
23.	April 28	Orakzai/Mohmand Agencies/FATA	36	-
24.	April 29	Chattar/Naseerabad District	4	-
25.	April 30	Darra Adamkhel/Kohat District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	3	-

This Information Has Been Obtained From the Website Of South Asia Terrorism Portal

Blasphemy Law & Minority Rights

Blasphemy Law: Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace

A member of the Faiz Centennial Committee who talked on the principle of compassion said that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate. To make compassion a luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world in order to break down political, dogmatic and religious boundaries is needed urgently. Each and every one has been equally affected by intolerance in the society and as a result, terrorism in the north, target killing in Karachi and bomb blasts all over the country has increased. So far in the country's history, 45 people have been convicted of blasphemy, out of which 17 were psychiatrically ill. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put the other there. However, there is a change in perception of tolerance in our society; tolerant enough towards the killings and injustice said by a student. A volunteer with the CFD said religious topics such as the Blasphemy Laws always get "extreme reactions".

[The Express Tribune - April 18, 2011]

Blasphemy Plea against Dr. Ajmal Dismissed

The Punjab Assembly speaker had formed a committee, chaired by the Minister for Human Rights and Minorities Affairs Kamran Michael after Christian workers of the SWM had protested in front of the Assembly. After hearing both the parties, the MD SWM is found guilty. Departmental proceedings may be initiated against him. The accused officer may be placed under suspension forthwith. Police department may also be directed to take legal action on the application moved by the complainant as warranted under the law/ rules. After the committee's findings, departmental proceedings had been initiated against the MD. The SP concerned was directed to lodge an FIR against the accused. The complainant and the protesters had demanded that an FIR be filed under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), punishment of which is death. However, the MD's offence fell under Section 295 for which the punishment was two-year imprisonment. The Christian community had been the worst victims of Section 295-C and had been protesting to repeal it. How could they justify demanding registration of an FIR under this law. The petitioner, the general secretary of the Sweepers' Union, had submitted that they had taken an application to the MD requesting him to lessen the working hours of Christians on account of Lent. Along with other leaders had appeared before the MD and requested again that their hours be lessened much like the ease granted to Muslims during Ramazan. The MD responded by making derogatory remarks against Christ and their fasts.

[The Express Tribune - April 7, 2011]

False Blasphemy Charges - Gojra-Like Carnage Narrowly Averted In Gujranwala

A Gojra-like carnage was narrowly averted after police took two Christian men, a church elder among them, into protective custody after some elements tried to spark violence by falsely accusing them of desecrating the Holy Quran and committing blasphemy against the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in Gujranwala. The ugly incident took place just after Friday prayers in the Azizabad Colony when some elements tried to

incite a mob attack on the residence of Farrukh Mushtaq Gill and his father Mushtaq Gill by making announcements on mosque loudspeakers. Activists of some religious outfits, led by several clerics, encircled Gill's house and tried to burn it down. Phillip Dutt, a local pastor, said that several hundred Christian families living in Azizabad and nearby Gulzar Colony fled their homes over fears of extremist violence, adding that his own family had moved to avoid any untoward incident. Accusations against the two men first emerged two or three months ago when burnt pages of the Holy Quran were found outside their house along with a statement, clearly identifying them as the ones desecrating the Holy Quran, with their postal address written over it.

The statement claimed that they had committed other such blasphemous acts in the past and would continue to do so unless someone had "enough guts to prevent them from doing so". Rejecting the allegations, Dutt said he knew both men well, adding that nobody in their right minds would do such a thing. They were "clearly being framed by someone who wanted to get even in some unrelated matter or out of sheer jealousy". A heavy contingent of police rushed to the spot and managed to defuse the situation. Security personnel were deployed around the house and its roof. Although a case was registered under Sections 295-B and 295-C of the blasphemy law in the Jinnah Road police station, the FIR was immediately sealed. Both men were shifted to an undisclosed location for their own safety. A sizeable number of people, local religious leaders, clerics and activists of various religious organizations again took out a protest rally to press the police to take action against the accused. A meeting was later held between Muslim and Christian leaders to resolve the issue. An eight-member fact-finding committee had also been constituted, comprising an equal number of Muslim and Christian leaders. An investigation would be conducted under the guidance of the committee and the matter would be resolved.

[The Express Tribune – April 17, 2011]

For Taking Down Banners – SIC Plans to Sue DCO for Blasphemy

The Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) will sue Lahore DCO Ahad Cheema for blasphemy. The decision was taken in a meeting of the SIC hierarchy in Lahore. A complaint in this regard will be submitted at a proper forum within two to three days. Blasphemy laws will be invoked for the purported desecration of the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) name inscribed on hoardings, billboards and banners of the organization which were removed on the orders of the DCO from various parts of the city. The SIC alleged that the administration shredded and flung to the ground posters carrying names of the leaders of freedom struggle. It was announced that a committee under JUP-F Punjab General Secretary Pir Syed Mohammad Iqbal Shah ex MPA would be formed to start legal proceedings. SIC Spokesman Muhammad Nawaz Kharal refused to comment on whether SIC was considering taking legal action against the DCO. However, the name of Holy Prophet (PBUH) and leaders of freedom struggle had been disrespected.

[Pakistan Today – April 21, 2011]

Killer of Blasphemy Accused Gets Death

Maqsood Alias Soodi had been convicted of killing Sajid and his brother Rashid and injuring police inspector Mohammad Hussain last year. The convict was also sentenced to 10-year imprisonment each under Section 7-C of the ATA and 324 of the PPC and a fine of Rs. 200,000. Under Section 337-D, he will pay Rs. 500,000 *Arsh* (compensation) to the injured inspector and serve a 10-year term. Last year, the Civil Lines police had registered a blasphemy case against the two brothers on charges of distributing handwritten blasphemous pamphlets and arrested them. Maqsood had killed the brothers near the City Police Office when a police team was taking them to the Civil Lines police station after producing them in a court.

[Dawn - April 19, 2011]

Pakistan Mission Seeks Blasphemy Case Details

The Pakistan embassy in Washington has sought details of a blasphemy case from the Foreign Office after a US national called for reinvestigation. A letter sent by US citizen Rod Makins said that the Faisalabad police had arrested a Christian man, Imran Masih for the totally fabricated and false charges of "burning pages of Quran" against him. The 27-year-old Christian youth was sentenced to life imprisonment on

blasphemy charges. The Foreign Office forwarded the query to the interior ministry which in turn called for details from the Regional Police Officer, Faisalabad.

[The Express Tribune - April 16, 2011]

Airing Apprehensions: ‘Monitoring Cell to Oversee Counting Of Hindus’

Hindus are represented by two senators, eight MNAs and 10 MPAs in Sindh and they are responsible for protecting and serving the community. If the community is not treated justly in the census, then they would hold their elected representatives responsible. Pakistan Muslim League-Q MNA Kishan Chand Parwani, who was elected on reserved seats, said that minorities in Pakistan are treated as “third-rate citizens”. Being considered a negligible minority, representation of the Hindu community in the country’s top bureaucracy is disappointing. The community, especially the educated class was requested to help others realize and understand the importance of the census. The census monitoring cell would watch the process closely and ensure that the Hindus are treated fairly. The incidents in which Hindu girls were forced to convert to Islam after marrying Muslim men were condemned. While the Hindus had trouble settling in Pakistan, India was not giving all of them visas either, so the minority community did not even have the option of resettling.

Meanwhile, Ayaz Latif Palijo acknowledged that there were communal problems in Pakistan and the status of minority communities had actually sunk even lower in the recent years. The trend is slowly starting to change. “A new Sindh is being created, in which protests and complaints are being replaced by an organized struggle for people’s rights and just demands.” Emphasizing the importance of the census for people in Sindh, the Hindu community would also be counted in the process and therefore, be able to get their due rights. The discrimination between Hindus and Muslims had been nurtured since partition. The religious leaders of the two communities are a hurdle in the way of greater assimilation. The present condition of Hindus is not just the Muslims’ fault. The Hindu landlords in the rural areas and the Hindu business community in the cities are equally responsible.

[The Express Tribune - April 2, 2011]

GOVERNANCE WATCH

Legislative Business

Bills Passed by National Assembly in April

- April 18, 2011 -- The Election Laws (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 29, 2011 – The General Statistics (Reorganization) Act, 2011

Government Bills Introduced

- April 11, 2011 – The Islamabad High Court (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 21, 2011 – The Companies (Amendment) Act, 2011

Private Members' Bills Laid

- April 19, 2011 – The Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 19, 2011 – The Insurance (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 19, 2011 – The Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 19, 2011 – The National Database and Registration Authority (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 26, 2011 – The Dewatering of Pakistan Act, 2011
- April 26, 2011 – The Capital Development Authority (Amendment) Act, 2011
- April 26, 2011 – The Civil Servants (Amendment) Act, 2011

Details are available on www.na.gov.pk

Federal & Provincial Governments

Government-Industry Energy Council Formed

Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani announced the formation of a Government-Industry Energy Council to address the energy issues of the country and to make far-reaching recommendations to the government. The government cannot tackle the energy related issues single-handedly and it definitely needs assistance to move forward. This would entail a team effort and forging a mutually rewarding and strategic partnership between the government and energy sector. The challenges have caused financial constraints to the country and the government is determined to face these challenges in the same way as it has done in the political arena. Energy is an essential drive for the country's economy to achieve accelerated GDP growth as the economy needed reliable, uninterrupted affordable supply of energy. Pakistan today is facing the overwhelming challenge of bridging its energy demand and supply gap, which is likely to double in the next 15 years and urge the need for the participation of all the stakeholders, including the private sector and the government. The Sui Field at the time of discovery in the Fifties was believed to have enough natural gas reserves which would last for two centuries. This is obviously no longer the case on account of rapid growth in demand and depleting reserves from this gas field. Despite several gas discoveries since then, the growth in energy demand was more than the gas supply from domestic sources.

[The News - April 11, 2011]

Rabbani Quits Additional Charge of Human Rights Ministry

The Ministry of Human Rights remains without a full-fledged minister after Senator Mian Raza Rabbani relinquished its additional charge and Defence Minister Ahmad Mukhtar was asked to look after it. There is no official word from the Prime Minister Secretariat or from Raza Rabbani; however, apparently there are two reasons for his unexpected decision to quit the charge: the dismal human rights record and continuous missing of persons, particularly from the troubled Balochistan. Rabbani is Federal Minister for Inter-Provincial Coordination and also holds the chairmanship of the Parliamentary Commission on the

Implementation of the 18th Amendment. About two months back, he was given the additional charge of the Ministry of Human Rights after he had taken oath as minister, along with 21 other colleagues.

[The News - April 17, 2011]

Devolution of Ministries: ICT Division Established

The departments given to the newly established ICT division include: Ministry of Education, Department of Libraries, Federal College of Education, Academy of Education, Planning and Management, Polytechnic Institute for Women, National Institute of Science and Technical Education, Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education and National Education Assessment Centre, Islamabad. According to the notification, the National Education Equipment Centre, Lahore and National Museum of Science and Technology, Lahore was both handed to the Punjab government. Pakistan Academy of Letters was handed over to the cabinet division, while Urdu Science Board, Lahore, National Book Foundation and Urdu Dictionary Board, Karachi were merged with the National Language Authority under the cabinet division. Inter-Board Committee of Chairmen were handed over to the Inter-Provincial Division, Islamabad. Pakistan National Commission for UNESCO was given to Economic Affairs Division, Pakistan Chairs Abroad, Centers of Excellence, and Area Study Centers, Pakistan Study Centers; Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centers were handed over to the respective universities and would remain under the cabinet division's supervision. Lastly, Private Educational Institutions Regulatory Authority was handed to the newly established ICT division.

[The Express Tribune, April 4, 2011]

Provinces Demand Financial Autonomy alongside Devolution of Health Functions

Experts participating in a PILDAT-Heartfile legislative forum on 'Health and the 18th Amendment' endorsed recasting of the Ministry of Health, as a Federal Health Division, with an appropriate executive authority to oversee responsibilities that can constitutionally be retained at the federal level following devolution of the Ministry of Health in the wake of the 18th Amendment. Dr. Sania presented the constitutional rationale for retaining a national role for health through the creation of a Health Division. For defining the mandate of the said division so that it does not end up performing tasks that are not its business, and doing little of what it is actually supposed to do, as has been the case with the current Ministry of Health. One of the immediate next steps proposed was pertained to grant of regulatory prerogatives to the federal government under Article 144 of the Constitution. The need to grant fiscal autonomy to the provinces so that they are able to effectively run the functions transferred to them in the post-devolution landscape was well-articulated by panelists representing the provinces.

[The News - April 20, 2011]

Revenue Admin under Provincial Control

After the Provincial Finance Department issued a notification in the light of the recent amendments to the Local Government Ordinance of 2001 and revenue laws, abolishing revenue and other posts in the districts governments and creating new ones for the revenue administration that would operate under the provincial government (Board of Revenue) through divisional commissioners. The revenue administration was devolved to the district governments by the Musharraf regime in 2001 and its return to the provincial government is being taken as a first step towards winding up the local government system introduced by the military ruler. The posting of officials for the new revenue system, and abolition of the posts in the existing district governments were also notified.

The Finance Department has notified abolition of 427 posts of EDOs, district officers revenue and deputy district officers, and creation of 334 posts of additional commissioners, additional collectors, assistant commissioners, collectors and registrars has also been issued. The abolished posts of EDOs include 36 each EDOs of revenue, literacy, and law and information technology. As many as 36 posts of DORs, 135 posts of deputy district officer (DDO) revenue (one at each sub-division), 36 posts of DDO-general, and 10 posts of DDO-colonies.

[Dawn - April 20, 2011]

Local Governance

SHC Seeks Sindh Government, CEC Explanation

The Sindh High Court put Chief Election Commissioner, Secretary Local Government and Advocate General Sindh on notice seeking explanation over the delay in holding the local body elections. A division bench after hearing preliminary arguments from the petitioner, issued notices to the respondents, and directed them to submit their comments on a constitution petition filed by a representative of Human Rights Commission for South Asia. Accusing the provincial government and the Election Commissioner of delaying and avoiding to hold local bodies' elections, the petitioner submitted that despite the fact that the tenure of previous local body government had completed its period in the last year, but the respondents were not willing to conduct elections while violating the constitution.

The elections were required to be held in the last year, but the provincial government was not ready to give schedules for new elections. The plaintiff pointed out an article 140(A), 32, 8, 5, 4 and Sindh Local Ordinance 2001, submitting that the provincial government was bound to conduct new elections as per required according to the constitution, but concern authorities reluctant to do so. The government and election commissioner are violating the constitution by adopting a delaying tactics in this regard. The petitioner also held appointments of administrators at the places of Nazims' as illegal stating that they were appointed for limited period, but the non-elected persons and government officials were running the local bodies affairs. The plaintiff submitted that the previous local body government had developed the city, and had launched several development programs.

[The Nation - April 15, 2011]

Proposals on New Local Government System Sent To CM

The rural and urban areas were united by Gen Musharraf through his local government system of 2001. Previously, they stood separated under the local government system introduced by Gen Ziaul Haq in the country in 1979. The system proposed by the special committee contained 'good' things of both 1979 and 2001 local laws. If approved by the chief minister, the new law would reintroduce district councils as well as municipal and town committees, eliminating the existing district governments covering both rural and urban areas. It would be entrusted by provincial government's "select" functions to the local councils, which were devolved under the Local Government Ordinance 2001. Devolution of power was mandatory under Article 140-A of the Constitution. And it had become more important because of the transfer of many federal functions to the provinces under the 18th Amendment.

The chief minister would give his opinion on the proposed law after a formal presentation. PML-N had started finding a new local government system that could replace the one given by the Musharraf government, soon after it assumed power in Punjab three years ago. Its then Local Government Minister Sirdar Dost Muhammad Khosa had prepared a draft law, which was thoroughly debated at different public forums. But the draft was rejected after the removal of Mr. Khosa and a new committee was formed to make it afresh without letting anyone know its proceedings.

Despite the submission of the draft for the future local council system in the province, the PML-N government did not look serious in holding the next local elections because of the prevalent 'unfavorable' conditions. Under the Amended Local Government Ordinance 2001 the elections could not be announced till the end of this year. Almost all field staff normally deputed to conduct the elections were busy in the ongoing census, which would take quite some time to complete.

[Dawn - April 16, 2011]

19 Mps May Be Hit By Hiraj's Dual Nationality Law

At least 19 members of the National Assembly belonging to the PPP, PML-N and MQM own apartments, businesses or have bank accounts abroad, their annual declarations of assets and liabilities filed with the Election Commission show. If a bill moved by the PML-Q in the National Assembly is passed, all these MPs would stand disqualified. The government did not oppose it because it says that five to 10 per cent MPs hold dual nationalities, and foreign accounts or properties and those who take oath of loyalty with other countries cannot safeguard Pakistan's interests.

Dr. Fehmida Mirza, wife of Dr. Zulfikar Mirza, Engineer Usman Khan Tarakai (independent), Sherry Rehman of PPP, Muhammad Jamil Malik of PML-N, Farahnaz Ispahani, wife of Pakistan's Ambassador to the US Husain Haqqani, of PPP, Dr. Arbab Alamgir Khan and his wife Asma Alamgir Arbab of PPP, Ch. Zahid Iqbal of PPP, Dr Talat Iqbal Mahesar of PPP, Anusha Rahman Khan of PML-N, Sohail Mansoor Khawaja of MQM, Farhat Mohammad Khan of MQM, Justice (Rtd) Fakhrunnisa Khokhar of PPP, Munir Khan Orakzai from tribal areas, Khwaja Asif of PML-N, Syed Ghulam Mustafa Shah of PPP, and Dr. Araish Kumar of PML-N are included in this list.

[The News - April 22, 2011]

Census 2011

ANP Gives Government a Month Deadline

Expressing grave concern on the irregularities surfaced in Karachi census, the Awami National Party (ANP) Sindh reiterated its demand of conducting census in the no-go areas of the city under the supervision of military. Briefing the newsmen after a detailed meeting of provincial executive committee of ANP, the provincial party chief Shahi Syed said they have constantly been receiving complaints of irregularities in the census and non-cooperation by the enumerators who were tampering with the record to benefit a particular party. Stressing the government to take notice of such irregularities he said certain elements were seen visiting different areas under the guise of enumerators and misguiding the people. He demanded Census Commission to order its staff to keep with them their identity cards or would be held and handed over to the law enforcing agencies. The PPP delegation at Mardan House had assured that our reservations would be removed but the party was never contacted again. Therefore, the ANP has decided to give deadline of one month to the government. During this, the ANP workers would hold demonstrations every Friday at the Karachi Press Club to remind the government of the deadline.

[Daily Times - April 11, 2011]

Army to Oversee Census in Grey Areas

The Population Census Organization is starting countrywide house listing process. The officials said that three tribal areas — Kurram, Khyber and South Waziristan — had been declared 'grey area' owing to security situation there. The army and law enforcement agencies would oversee the census process in those areas. In rest of the tribal agencies the enumerators in collaboration with the political administration would carry out the process in the stipulated period of time. Political agents concerned had requested to conduct house listing and population census process under the supervision of army in sensitive areas. All arrangements had been finalized for launching house listing exercise in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. The organization has trained 12,000 enumerators to conduct the exercise in the entire Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. In first phase the officials will conduct house listing and in second phase population census will be carried out. The house listing and population census would also be conducted in camps, set up for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the province as well as tribal areas.

[Dawn - April 5, 2011]

Nationalist Parties Oppose Census in Balochistan

Nationalist parties in Balochistan are actively opposing the house-listing census, which they say should be postponed because of security problems, presence of Afghan refugees, and displacement of people from Baloch dominated areas after the military operation in Dera Bugti in 2005, and then last year when the floods hit the province. The government had not initiated the house-listing census in five Baloch districts because of security threats. As many as 2.1 million Afghan refugees are taking shelter in Balochistan and it is impossible for officials to ensure transparency in such a situation. The law and order situation is going from bad to worse. Therefore, the house-listing census should be stopped until peace is restored. In a province where thousands of people are listed as missing, mutilated bodies are being found almost daily and a military operation is under way, how one can think about taking part in a census. First all the refugees should be repatriated, only then can a fair census be conducted, as nationalists do not accept the ongoing census since it is not being conducted in a fair and transparent manner. People are appealed to take part in the initiative, but had some reservations on the current house-listing census

because a huge population had been displaced from Nasirabad, Jaffarabad, Sibi and adjoining areas after the floods. Another 120,000 people were displaced from Dera Bugti during a military operation in 2005. Baloch insurgent groups had also threatened to carry out attacks on staff on duty for census.

[The Express Tribune - April 18, 2011]

Tharis Fear Exclusion of Migrating Families from Census

They are demanding extension of period by one-and-a-half-month and an increase in the number of staff deputed for census. A debate on census was arranged by the Constituency Relationship Group of Baanhn Beli at Tharparkar Auditorium. A large number of people from numerous villages of Tharparkar district, particularly Kohlis, Bheels and Meghwars would miss house count as they had temporarily migrated to irrigated areas for their livelihood. Why the administration had not chalked out a strategy for their house count and provincial government too, was not serious over the issue. The authorities were criticized over lack of transport facilities on katcha roads while questioning as to why interest was not being taken in the uplift of the area and why metal roads were not constructed.

[Dawn - April 10, 2011]

Census Staff in Balochistan Fear for Security

Contingents of Frontier Corps personnel have been deployed in the Pelaogh area in Dera Bugti and the Kahan area in Kohlu district to provide security to staff on census duty. Deputy Commissioners of all districts were told to contact the home department if they needed more security personnel. Only two areas have so far been declared sensitive while the law and order situation in other districts is stable. The personnel of Balochistan Levies Force and Balochistan Constabulary will also be deputed where needed. There are 30 districts in the province and deputy commissioners of each district will be monitoring the census process. Baloch insurgent groups have opposed the census and urged the people not to participate in the exercise.

[The Express Tribune - April 7, 2011]

Nationalist Parties of Sindh Show No Confidence

All the nationalist parties of Sindh under the umbrella of Census Monitoring Committee declared no-confidence over the transparency of the ongoing house-counting exercise, the first phase of census, being undertaken in Sindh. The leaders of Census Monitoring Committee, an alliance of 13 nationalist parties and civil society organizations made an appeal to all national & international forums to take cognizance of the malpractices in the on-going census operations in Sindh, which aimed at converting the Sindhi people into a minority in their own homeland. They demanded of the government to take corrective measures immediately and check the ill-intended conspiracies of an urban based party, a coalition partner of government, otherwise Sindhi people retain the right to launch a massive democratic struggle to safeguard their majority status and eternal rights in the federation of Pakistan. Most of the enumerators in urban localities and towns of Sindh are using blank papers and photocopied forms rather than the printed books prescribed and supplied by the Government.

[The Nation - April 16, 2011]

Census Criticism

Since criticism is coming in from such varied sources, the state needs to address objections and investigate areas where there is credible evidence that irregularities may have occurred. All stakeholders need to be taken on board, or else the results of the exercise will remain disputed. An accurate house count will pave the way for an accurate head count, which is scheduled for later this year. However, everyone must realize that the census is an essential exercise and complaints of anomalies should not be used as an excuse to yet again scrap the whole process. While it is true that the census is a technical exercise, it is also a fact that it is one with considerable political overtones and ramifications. There are genuine fears that misrepresentation will lead to changed constituencies as population numbers of certain areas could be artificially increased, while other areas could be overlooked. These fears need to be addressed as it is in everyone's interest that the census continues and is a fair process. Though changed demographic realities cannot be wished away and all parties should accept these changes based on solid data, gerrymandering for political gain is totally unacceptable and needs to be checked. The world over censuses is major undertakings and some criticism will always remain about the way the process is conducted. Criticism is welcome as there is always room for improvement. In Pakistan's case the state needs to lend an ear to genuine criticism and tackle areas where flagrant irregularities are said to be taking place.

[Dawn - April 18, 2011]

Census Organization to Share Data with ECP

In a rare exercise, the Population Census Organization (PCO) will share the data of house listing with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to pave the way for the electoral body's door-to-door enumeration starting. At a recent meeting at the ECP, Statistics Division Secretary Asif Bajwa agreed to a proposal by ECP Secretary Ishtiaq Ahmad Khan that its personnel carrying out the house-listing should also get filled an ECP form about the house-listing number and the CNIC number of the head of a family. Initially, the Statistics Division secretary was not prepared to share the civil registry data with the ECP. But, finally he agreed to help out the electoral body keeping in view the special circumstances it faced. Accordingly, all those taking part in the house-listing will be given a special form from ECP that would be delivered to each house for filling in the required information, which the electoral body would share with the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). On the basis of information in the form, NADRA would come up with the family tree-related information. This will enable ECP to ascertain information how many of the family had attained the age of 18 and if anyone had expired so that his name is deleted from the voter list. The ECP would pay Rs. 2,500 to each enumerator and the supervisor would be paid Rs. 3,500. The cooperation from the PCO would help the ECP save considerable time to go all-out for the revision of the computerized electoral rolls. The unearthing of 37 million bogus voters in the 2007 electoral lists would be effectively dealt with during the door-to-door enumeration. The matter echoed in the Supreme Court the other day and the apex court asked for early deletion of names of bogus voters from the list.

[The News - April 06, 2011]

BISP Updates

BISP Disburses Rs1.07b through Smart Cards

Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), ensuring cash grant system transparent, has disbursed a total amount of Rs. 1.07 billion among its registered beneficiaries through Benazir Smart Cards. The smart cards were introduced in four test phase districts; Mianwali, Mirpurkhas, Multan and Sanghar and 1, 72,751 cards have been distributed so far. After inception of BISP, Pakistan Post Office was taken onboard for disbursement of cash grant among deserving families but some complaints were registered by the beneficiaries. Therefore, Benazir Smart Card was introduced as an alternate payment mechanism to avoid any human involvement and ensure convenient, efficient and timely provision of BISP benefits to the deserving families.

The mechanism will be introduced in every district soon after completion of the poverty survey. BISP has also introduced another innovative way of Mobile Phone Banking for the first time for transparent transfer of BISP benefits to the poorest of the poor which would further eliminate any human involvement in disbursement of cash to the deserving. Free Mobile phones are being distributed among 1,92,000 registered beneficiaries in four districts; Larkana, Layyah, Battagram and Barkhan. The first-ever nation-wide poverty census is being conducted across the country providing equal opportunity to every citizen who is holding CNIC to get registered with BISP regardless of caste, creed and religion.

More than 70 per cent of the survey ensuring objectivity and using international best practices to minimize inclusion and exclusion errors has been completed in the country. The number of beneficiaries will reach up to seven million families after completion of the survey and the programme will ensure transparent cash transfer mechanism to all its registered beneficiaries.

[The Nation - April 04, 2011]

BISP Seeks Rs 100bn Allocation for 2011-12

Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) would seek Rs 100 billion allocation in the next budget 2011-12—as the number of beneficiaries of the programme has grown to 7 million from 4 million. Increase in the number of beneficiaries was due to 2010 devastating floods across the country. Distribution of cash grant under the BISP was carried out in a transparent manner—and the donor agencies including WB, ADB, USAID and others placed their trust in the equal distribution of money under the programme. Several foreign countries contacted Pakistan for initiating welfare programmes similar to BISP in their respective countries. Ensuring transparency in distribution of cash grant to poverty-ridden people, the US allocated \$174 million in the Kerry Lugar Bill.

During the current fiscal year, 2010-11, the Ministry of Finance has released Rs. 32.5 billion to the BISP against its budgetary target of Rs. 50 billion. After survey expenditure of more than Rs. 60 billion by the end of this fiscal year is expected. BISP has enrolled 10,000 families under Waseela-e-Haq programme and the organization is determined to providing the vocational training to 1.5 million families. Programme has the constitutional protection because the BISP Bill was passed from both the Senate as well as the National Assembly. Through provision of cash grant, the government tried its level best to defeat terrorism in the country. Due to BISP, 10 million women have made National Identity Cards (NICs)—while for the first time in FATA, more than 100,000 women have been issued with computerized NICs.

[Daily Times - April 27, 2011]

ECONOMIC WATCH

IFI's & Pakistan's Economy

19.4% Loans Provided to Pakistan at Risk: ADB

The Annual Report 2010 issued by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has pointed out that 19.4 percent loans disbursed to Pakistan are at risk as measured by the end of 2010. The report has highlighted that ADB has approved loans worth \$20.894 billion and disbursed to Pakistan loans worth \$16.217 billion by 2010 end. The risk associated with loans provided to Pakistan was higher and measured at 21.4 percent in 2009. However, this risk has decreased from 21.4 percent in 2009 to 19.4 percent loans provided by ADB in 2010 are at risk. As against the commitment of \$388.3 million in loans for Pakistan in 2010, the ADB disbursed \$799.1 million in loans to the country in 2010.

ADB has committed providing Pakistan loans worth \$1.178 billion in 2009 and disbursements have been recorded at \$1.093 billion in 2009. Loan disbursements to Pakistan have recorded a decrease of 26.9 percent in 2010 with total disbursement at \$799.1 million as against the disbursement of \$1.093 billion in 2009. Of the total financing of \$17.51 billion approved by the ADB, \$15.50 billion was for investment support, \$1.68 billion was for policy-based support, and \$327 million was for technical assistance. In addition, ADB's ongoing Trade Finance Programme supported \$2.77 billion in trade. "As the region moves beyond economic recovery to sustained growth, it must ensure that the evolving growth paradigm becomes more inclusive to benefit as many people as possible," ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda said in the report.

[Daily Times – April 21, 2011]

IMF Links Fresh Loan with Completion of SBA

For improvement in credibility, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has linked the fresh loan programme with successful completion of the ongoing \$11.3 billion Stand-By-Arrangement (SBA) for Pakistan. In case the government is able to successfully complete the current SBA, there is a possibility that the IMF will propose a front loan programme to Pakistan under which the government would be required to implement all the performance benchmarks at first to receive the loan proceeds. During the recently concluded talks with IMF and World Bank authorities, IMF authorities had asked Pakistan's economic team to first improve the credibility and implement four types of performance benchmarks or reforms agreed under the \$11.3 SBA. The reforms that the government has failed to implement under the SBA are broader tax reforms, including introduction of broad based integrated reformed general sales tax on goods and services, elimination of power subsidy and reforms of the power sector for ensuring sustainable public sector entities growth, limiting borrowing and expenditure management as well as passage of the State Bank of Pakistan Act for its autonomy.

IMF had suggested to Pakistani team that successful completion of the \$11.3 billion SBA would enable IMF authorities approach their executive board for obtaining permission for negotiating fresh loan programme for Pakistan. In case the government is able to implement the said four performance benchmarks in the upcoming budget 2011-12, there would be a scope for negotiating a fresh loan programme. It would be a challenging task for the government to achieve the fiscal deficit and inflation targets of 5.5 percent around 15 percent for the current fiscal year.

[Daily Times - April 20, 2011]

Pakistan to Start Repaying \$7bn to IMF from Next Year

Commencing next year and spread over a 36-month time band; Pakistan will start repaying US \$7.657 billion to IMF in shape of principal and interest payments against loan obtained from the Fund by the PPP government. Ironically, to repay its earlier loan the country has no option but to seek a 'fresh programme' to avoid pressure on the foreign currency reserves and to avoid defaulting on foreign liabilities. The government would have to start repayments of IMF loan, which it obtained under Standby Arrangement (SBA) programme, from the next budget 2011-12 and the first installment would become due by February 24, 2012. While the PPP-led regime would have the nation believe that the foreign currency

reserves stand at over \$17 billion, and are citing it as an indicator of 'economic prowess and recovery', the fact is that this figure includes the loan amount of \$7.1 billion, which Islamabad got from the Fund since November 2008 under SBA programme. Consequently, the foreign currency reserves will start depleting once the repayment of IMF loan starts from February 2012.

The IMF loan of \$7.6 billion for Pakistan was augmented to \$11.3 billion in 2009 but many insiders say that the Fund programme was suspended for the past one year as Islamabad had been unsuccessful in securing the last two tranches of \$3.2 billion and this 'failure' was termed as "a blessing in disguise" otherwise the foreign loans would have jumped up by at least another \$3.2 billion. It is relevant to mention that the IMF provided assistance to member recipient countries on the basis of Special Drawing Rights (SDR). The SDR is an international reserve asset, created by the IMF in 1969, to supplement the existing official reserves of member countries. SDRs are allocated to member countries in proportion to their IMF quotas. Pakistan's liabilities in terms of SDRs would be standing at 942 million for repayments of the IMF loan, which in accordance with exchange rate against US dollar would be hovering around \$1.386 billion in the next financial year.

[The News - April 21, 2011]

Facts & Figures on Pakistan's Economy

FBR Achieves 99pc of Nine-Month Revenue Target

Against a target of Rs. 1.016 trillion for the first nine months of the current fiscal year, Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has been able to collect Rs. 1.010 trillion up to 30th March, 2011. According to details, collection challans for 31st March, 2011 are being processed and the full month's figures would be available soon. For the March, 2011 target of Rs. 140.4 billion, current fiscal year, Federal Board of Revenue has already collected Rs. 134.1 billion up to 30th March, 2011. The collection of 31st March, 2011 is yet to be reflected in these figures. Nonetheless the attained collection shows a growth of 13.5% over the last year. As per historical trend, additional revenues are accounted to the government treasury as a result of the reconciliation. Current fiscal year, Federal Board of Revenue therefore, expects to meet its monthly as well as the 9 month's target as a result of the reconciliation exercise.

[The Nation - April 02, 2011]

Rising Fiscal Deficit: A Dangerous Trend

Since the past several years the country's economy has been afflicted by a chronic problem of high fiscal deficit. This is primarily on account of high government expenditure and low tax revenue collection. In the current fiscal year, the PPP government is facing the dilemma which was faced by successive political administrations in the past of fiscal deficit surpassing its target. Moreover, attaining the aforesaid deficit target is an uphill task for the ruling elite in the prevailing socio-economic environment dominated by spiraling food prices, hike in electricity and petroleum prices, and imposition of additional taxes, fragile law and order situation, strained ties with US, mounting poverty and unemployment. A rising trend in the fiscal deficit depicts a grim picture of a country's economy and is detrimental to its growth. In order to address this impediment, the government is compelled to raise revenue through unpopular measures, such as implement taxes, trim down expenditure on vital development sectors like education and health (as in the case of Pakistan) or borrow from domestic and foreign sources.

There are basically three schools of thought associated with deficit reduction. The first considers fiscal deficit as detrimental to economic growth due to its tendency to 'crowd out' private investment and thus increase savings-investment gap. The second states that a deficit is required to offset a crisis or a downturn, but as soon as the critical situation is over the budget should get 'back to normal'. The government should aim to balance the budget. The third and finally the last assumption pertaining to budget deficit is that running a deficit is not bad, provided it is not leading to hyper-inflation. The situation of Pakistan cannot take refuge in any one of the abovementioned criteria as we have been running a permanent fiscal deficit since decades. Rational balancing of the budget has never been a topmost priority of successive governments. Notwithstanding the surging inflation rate, which hit 12.91 per cent in Feb, money supply is expanding due to excessive money being printed by the central bank, further fuelling the deficit.

The fact is that the ruling party's policies and priorities are distorted and perplexing. The country is engulfed by a multitude of financial challenges hindering growth to a great extent. Yet, the economic managers seem to be making the same old mistakes repeatedly. They are setting ambitious fiscal targets which anyone with basic common sense would know are implausible to achieve. Addressing the massive fiscal deficit issue requires formulation of sound policies by the ruling party based on ground realities. Unless the tax sector is broadened and agriculture income tax is included in the tax net, sufficient revenue mobilization would be next to impossible. Simply, burdening the middle class through imposition of various taxes is not the answer to give a boost to revenue generation and curb soaring fiscal deficit. Other than that, it has been evident for some time that Pakistan's debt burden is extremely onerous.

The country's total foreign and domestic debt has increased to a record mark of Rs. 10.745 trillion by September 2010, while the debt-to-GDP ratio surged to 73.3 per cent, up from 63.4 per cent in September 2009. If the borrowing spree continues, Pakistan will not be able to service its external debt, which would lead the country towards default. The government should reduce fiscal deficit, minimize unnecessary expenditures, downsize the size of the cabinet at the centre and in the provinces and encourage investment and development to spur growth. In this backdrop, planning the next fiscal budget would be a daunting task for finance managers. If the government's borrowing level is not contained, the central bank would have no choice but to raise the already high discount rate causing further miseries to the business community. It is high time the economic managers take steps to eradicate the menace of tax evasion from society and bring under tax net wealth and agriculture income.

[The News – April 11, 2011]

Exports Reach New Peak

The country exported goods worth \$2.5 billion in March, \$727 million more than exports in the corresponding month last year. The March figure, the best milestone in history, breaks the two-month-old record of \$2.32 billion exports witnessed in January 2011. The country's imports rose almost four per cent to \$3.4 billion during the month in review – \$130 million more than the imports posted in the same month last year. The downside risk in the coming months may be rising petroleum products prices in the international market, which can widen the trade deficit as the country imports more than 85 per cent of its oil. Although major contribution came from textile and clothing exports, non-traditional sectors such as marble, chilled meat, and value-added petroleum products also helped achieve the record export figure.

Trade gap shrinks: Unprecedented exports also shrunk the gap between exports and imports by almost 40 per cent. The trade deficit stood at \$920 million, compared with last year's deficit of \$1.5 billion. Independent economists have warned the government that domestic fiscal problems may appear at the external front within a year. However, the healthy trend has so far checked the current account deficit-gap between total external receipts and expenditures. On the domestic front, the government remains unable to tap revenues, causing larger budget deficits. Notwithstanding, authorities are under pressure to provide subsidies on fuel and electricity. Cumulative numbers: Overall, in the first nine months (July-March) of the current fiscal year, Pakistan's trade deficit rose to \$11.3 billion, 1.7 per cent more than the deficit in the same period of the preceding year. The gap is still much below the initial estimates, as the government had estimated trade deficit at \$18 billion that was revised downward to \$13 billion later. Pakistan's exports stood at \$17.8 billion during the July-March period, \$3.7 billion or one-fourth more than the preceding year's exports. Imports during this period stood slightly over \$29 billion, showing a growth of 15.6 per cent over imports last year. In absolute terms, Pakistan's imports increased \$3.9 billion during the nine months. Authorities are expecting \$24 billion worth of exports by end of this financial year, almost \$3 billion more than initial estimates.

[The Express Tribune - April 10, 2011]

Government Eyes 4.2% GDP Growth in Next Fiscal Year

Economic growth target for the next fiscal year 2011-12 would be set at 4.2 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) along with creation of an independent commission to be announced in the budget for scrutiny of development and non-development expenditures of the government. Only targeted subsidies would continue in the next fiscal year and the ban on recruitments would also continue in the wake of economic crunch faced by the country. The Rs. 186 billion subsidy being given on electricity would be

withdrawn to maintain fiscal discipline while the government would have to increase the power tariff in the upcoming fiscal year. The government would also withdraw various subsidies amounting to Rs. 43 billion. In the next financial year the overall inflation would remain 12 percent due to the economic measures and cutbacks.

The government would have to enforce stingy policies to increase the GDP while it would also require bringing down to zero its borrowings from the State Bank of Pakistan. The provinces will be disbursed additional Rs. 360 billion under the 7th NFC Award. The fiscal deficit will have to be contained at 4.5 percent of the GDP since it is one of the conditions of an agreement between the government and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The tax to GDP ratio will be brought to 9.1 percent and the growth rate will be 4.2 percent in 2011-12. The tax collection target set for the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) is Rs. 1.952 trillion and the export target have been set at \$25.9 billion, while the imports are estimated to be \$39.1 billion, mainly owing to increasing oil prices in the international market. The trade deficit in the next fiscal year is estimated to be more than \$13 billion.

[Daily Times - April 27, 2011]

FDI Falls by 28pc in Nine Months

The State Bank reported that foreign direct investment fell by 28 per cent to \$1.082 billion in the first nine months of the current fiscal. The only improvement was witnessed in the portfolio investment, which recorded an inflow of \$235 million compared to an outflow of \$182 million during the same period last year. The foreign investment fled from the emerging markets in the beginning of the financial crisis but it rushed back as the developed economies were unable to offer attractive return. However, in case of Pakistan foreign investment from developed countries has fallen by 66 per cent to just \$356 million from \$1,045 million during nine months of 2010.

One of the major reasons has been the deteriorating law and order situation and series of bomb explosions, which rocked the country preventing the potential investors to take a look for better returns. Just four sectors attracted a combined \$687 million out of this total foreign direct investment in the country which accounted for 64 per cent of the total. It reflects that Pakistan has failed to attract investors despite some good reasons like stable currency and higher returns by local banks. The limited focus of FDI in the country could not be diversified and instead the most attractive telecommunications sector lost the charm as investment in this sector fell by 74 per cent to \$67 million against \$264 million of the nine months of 2010. The investment in oil and gas exploration also witnessed a sharp fall by 24 per cent to \$396 million compared to \$520 million of previously.

[Dawn - April 15, 2011]

FBR Needs To Collect another Rs. 576b

Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has to collect Rs. 576 billion in the last quarter (April-June) of the current fiscal year 2010-11 in order to reach the further downward revised target of Rs. 1588 billion. The FBR has already slashed the annual revenue collection target to Rs. 1588 billion from earlier revised target of Rs. 1604 billion despite imposition of new taxes worth of Rs. 53 billion in March through presidential ordinance. It might be mentioned here that the government had fixed Rs. 1667 billion revenue collections at the eve of annual budget for the ongoing financial year, however, later, due to the unprecedented floods in the country; the target was revised to Rs. 1604 billion. According to the FBR's official figures, the tax department has collected Rs. 1018.7 billion in the first nine months (July-March) of the current fiscal year. Therefore, the tax department has to collect Rs. 576 billion in last quarter to achieve the further revised target, which is a challenging target for the tax bosses.

[The Nation - April 14, 2011]

Record High: Remittances Cross \$1b Mark in March

The previous high for a single month was recorded in August 2010, when overseas Pakistanis sent home \$933.06 million. Remittances to the country have been on the rise over the recent months, assisted by joint efforts of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and two federal ministries, "to facilitate the flow of remittances through formal channels". In the first nine months of the current fiscal year, \$8.02 billion

have been remitted to the country by Pakistanis living abroad, up by over 22 per cent compared with \$6.55 billion remitted in corresponding period of fiscal 2010. In the annual plan for fiscal 2011, SBP had set a target of \$9 billion for remittances. However, growth in the transfers of funds has outpaced this target, with more than \$8 billion already sent to the country. Monthly average remittances in the July-March period come out to \$890.68 million compared with \$727.87 million during the same corresponding period of the last fiscal year, registering an increase of 22.37 per cent. SBP data also shows that remittances have increased from most countries, where significant transfers have been destined for Pakistan. The central bank has expressed confidence in the Pakistan Remittance Initiative (PRI) undertaken with the ministry of finance and the ministry of overseas Pakistanis, and forecasted that remittances may touch \$11 billion by the end of the current fiscal year.

[The Express Tribune - April 10, 2011]

Cut in PSDP Shrinks Withholding Tax Collection by Rs. 4bn

The collection of withholding tax from mega project contracts fell by around Rs. 4 billion due to cut in the size of the public sector development Program (PSDP) by the government. The collection of withholding tax from contracts declined to Rs. 38 billion during the first-half of the current fiscal year against Rs. 42.11 billion during the corresponding half of FY10. The government cut expenditure size on development Programs by at least Rs. 100 billion during FY11 to curtail the budget deficit. Earlier this year, the federal government pitched the PSDP at Rs. 421 billion, but due to the ongoing war against terrorism and subsidies given on various sectors, including the energy sector, the size of the public sector development Program was reduced. Officials of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) said that other reasons were also under scrutiny to identify decline in the withholding tax collection under this head. A recent report on the withholding tax in Pakistan released by the revenue body revealed that a list of around 2,300 federal government-funded projects was sent to the tax departments. It also identified that most of project directors were not filing their withholding statements. Expenditure on the PSDP has different components in terms of civil works, operational expenditure, salary and wages and others. The overall collection of withholding tax during the first-half of the current fiscal year stood at Rs. 151.3 billion against Rs. 134.1 billion during the corresponding half last year.

[The News - April 03, 2011]

Budget 2011-12

Budget Deficit for 2011-12 Estimated At Rs 950 Billion

Consolidated (federal and all four provincial governments) budget deficit is estimated at Rs. 950 billion in the forthcoming fiscal year 2011-12. The equivalent amount of deficit would be arranged through local and foreign borrowing. The local borrowing is to be done through bank borrowing and non-debt creating instrument like national saving schemes. The total volume of the expenditures is being set at Rs. 3.4 trillion and against this the revenues and resource availability of the government would be around Rs. 2.450 trillion. In the budget making exercise the total tax collection was estimated at Rs. 1.952 trillion and non-tax revenues of the federal government would be around Rs. 400 billion, in the next fiscal year 2011-12. The budgetary support and grants for social sectors, including Benazir Income Support Programme, Citizen Compensation Plan for Flood Affected Population, grants for other social projects like health and education and IDPs, would also help government to spend on such areas.

The consolidated budget deficit was being estimated at around Rs. 1 trillion during the ongoing fiscal year, the highest ever in the history of the country, as the government had informed the lending agencies that it would be able to keep the budget deficit at 5.3 percent of the GDP as against the pre-flood initial target of 4 percent of the GDP for 2010-11. The main reason behind increase in the budget deficit is additional flood related expenditures, additional security related expenditures and over and above the budgetary level subsidies for power and the POL sector. The PPP government is incurring heavy consolidated budget deficits continuously during the last few years and budget deficit in the last fiscal year 2009-10 was recorded at Rs. 929.061 billion, Rs. 680.4 billion-budget deficit in fiscal year 2008-09 and Rs. 777.169 billion-budget deficit in 2007-08.

[Daily Times - April 24, 2011]

Budget 2011: Finance Department Balks At Development Ambitions

The political leadership wants to announce a Rs. 200 billion ADP, compared to Rs193.5 billion announced for the last financial year. The Finance Department, however, is advocating an ADP no larger than Rs. 145 billion. The Finance Department had told the chief minister that the treasury was under tremendous pressure due to scarcity of funds, low recoveries, huge raises in salaries and large expenditures. The Punjab government had constituted a working group, headed by former finance minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar, to make recommendations on the size and resources of the next ADP. The government was forced to slash development funding by Rs. 65.5 billion over poor financial discipline, scarcity of funds, revenue collection shortfalls and several subsidy schemes.

In the upcoming ADP, Rs. 128 billion has been set aside for ongoing projects and Rs. 65.5 billion requested for new schemes. Equitable growth, poverty reduction, employment generation, social sector development and ensuring food, potable water and energy security are the stated focus of the development strategy. The budget process close to 85 per cent of the province's resource depends on federal transfers. The Punjab government was facing a shortfall in the revenue collection from indigenous resources. The political governments always wanted large ADPs but resource estimate seldom support the desired volumes. The ADP should match the resources and should not be more than Rs. 145 billion.

The Finance Department released Rs. 125 billion to the executing departments and agencies after 'rightsizing' the current ADP but the utilization reported so far remains only Rs. 54 billion, which is nearly 40 per cent of the released amount. The spending shortfall was owed to a lack of capacity, fear of accountability in case of irregular spending and laziness of the field officers in the executing departments and agencies. The Punjab government would not support an increase in the salaries of government officials in the upcoming budget as last year's raises had put a heavy burden on the public.

[The Express Tribune - April 29, 2011]

ELECTION WATCH

ECP Updates

IHC Urged To Order LG Polls in Capital

Justice Riaz Ahmed Khan of the IHC will take up the petition for preliminary hearing as the petitioner said the delay was in the violation of the constitution and Islamabad Capital Territory Local Government Ordinance 2002. Making secretary law and parliamentary affairs, secretary local governments and rural development, chief election commissioner and chief commissioner Islamabad as respondents the petitioner said that Islamabad should be governed by elected local government. The petitioner said that political devolution was initiated in 2000 that was aimed at transferring administrative and financial powers to the local governments in a bid to empower the impoverished. In 2001 legislation was made for local governments and in 2002 ordinance was issued for local government in Islamabad and the laws were given constitutional protection under 17th amendments in 2003. The petitioner further said after more than eight years of the legislation of local governments no step had been taken to establish the system in the federal capital. The petitioner wants the old bureaucratic administration is replaced with new local government system. The security of important offices could be handed over to the local government representatives. The court is requested to arrange local bodies' elections in Islamabad without any delay.

[Dawn - April 14, 2011]

ECP May Need Six Months to Clean Up Electoral Rolls

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) will take around six months to prepare the new electoral rolls, purging them of bogus entries. If the past practice is any guide, six months will be sufficient to prepare the new voters' lists. The fresh computerized rolls would be absolutely genuine because of the mechanism adopted. The numbers of the computerized national identity card (CNIC) of voters will appear in the lists. Among over 81 million voters, who supposedly cast their ballots in the 2008 general elections, over 37 million are non-existent as the National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA) doesn't have their identity cards. The bogus voters mostly relate to double or triple entries in the electoral roles of several persons. In fact, they should have one entry at any place. The second reason for the inflated voters' lists was that the names of hundreds of thousands of electorate, who have died, have not been erased from the rolls. Third, there are still a large number of voters especially belonging to rural areas, which have not got CNICs but had got their votes registered on the basis of old ID cards, which had been manually prepared. Strangely, the electoral rolls, prepared by NADRA on the basis of 1998 population census, which were used in the 2002 general polls, had 70.22 million voters. At the time, the ECP had pointed out that of them 25 million voters didn't have ID cards, but its plea was not attached any weight. There was a wide difference between the rolls of the ECP and NADRA. The Supreme Court recently directed the ECP to eliminate bogus votes from the electoral lists.

[The News - April 10, 2011]

Committee on EC Approves Rules

The Parliamentary Committee on Election Commission elected Minister for Religious Affairs Syed Khursheed Shah as its chairman and approved the rules and regulations of the committee. The Parliamentary Committee on Election Commission held its first formal meeting at the Parliament House in which rules and regulations were approved through consensus. Under the approved rules and regulation for the functioning of the committee, the chief election commissioner and four members of the Election Commission would be retired judges of the higher judiciary. The Prime Minister and opposition leader, after consultations, would send three names for an appointment to the Election Commission and the Parliamentary Committee will select one of candidate from three names.

[The News - April 16, 2011]

REGIONAL POLITICS & PAKISTAN

Pakistan's Foreign Relations

Bridging Trust Deficit: Afghanistan, Pakistan Upgrade Peace Commission

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who now heads the High Peace Council, would bring security chiefs into the joint commission. The commission was originally set up to include foreign ministers from the two countries. The first tier of the upgraded commission will include the chief executives, foreign ministers along with chiefs of the military and intelligence services of the two countries. And the second tier will comprise senior officials of foreign ministries, military and intelligence services.

Pakistan will be crucial to any attempts to stabilize its western neighbor, although the two countries have had an uneasy relationship. The idea of setting preconditions for talks with the Taliban was opposed. President Karzai said the meeting with Gilani, which also involved Pakistan Army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and ISI chief Lt-Gen Ahmed Shuja Pasha, marked an important step forward for both neighbors. The move to upgrade the commission with US counterpart Barack Obama during a phone call was discussed, and it had the full backing of Washington.

Pakistan's role as a facilitator was also important whatever Prime Minister Gilani said was a 'fundamental shift' of Pakistan from its past views. Both Karzai and Gilani said Saudi Arabia and Turkey could be involved in aiding future talks. Turkey is working to open a political office for the Taliban in Istanbul, which could help facilitate negotiations to end the war. Karzai said talks with the Taliban would be addressed within the framework of the joint commission. Pakistan's ambassador in Kabul described the Kabul conclave as 'very significant'. The two leaders resolved that they would not allow a third country to exploit the situation arising from the Afghan war.

[The Express Tribune - April 17, 2011]

Pakistan-India Trade Talks: 'Denying India MFN Is A Non-Tariff Barrier'

Islamabad's biggest historical complaint against India on matters of trade had been New Delhi's excessive red tape on trade with Pakistan, which the government argues is the single biggest impediment to trade between the two countries. Pakistan's commerce secretary has now publicly admitted that Pakistan may be guilty of something similar. However both countries have agreed to remove non-tariff barriers to trade. Bilateral trade between India and Pakistan is heavily skewed in India's favor. Of the total \$1.5 billion in trade between the two countries, nearly \$1.2 billion are Indian exports to Pakistan, making Pakistan's trade deficit with India close to \$900 million a year. Informal trade is estimated to be between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion, leaving most economists to believe that trade between India and Pakistan would skyrocket upon the removal of trade barriers. In retaliation for India's non-tariff barriers to trade, Pakistan has refused to grant India MFN status, something that the country is required to do under its treaty obligations to the World Trade Organization. India also restricts trade with Pakistan by imposing heavy tariffs on the imports of a list of 850 items.

MFN status, a widely misunderstood label, simple means treating every trading partner the same as one treats its "most favored nation", or in other words, not discriminating against any one trading partner. A non-tariff barrier to trade is one where a country imposes restrictions such as unreasonably high regulatory standards or lists of permissible items which constrict the free flow of trade between two nations. The Indian team is particularly keen to open up land routes between Kasur and Ferozpur on either side of the Wagah border to facilitate the cotton trade between the two countries. Pakistan does not produce enough cotton for its needs and imports one million bales annually from India, most of which comes through the slower, more expensive route of sea ports.

[The Express Tribune - April 28, 2011]

China Offers \$10-15bn Investment in Energy Sector

The Chinese are keen to invest \$10 to \$15 billion for the development of power sector in Pakistan. Cao Guangjing, the head of Three Gorges Corporation, the Chinese state owned corporation dealing with construction of power infrastructure meeting with Federal Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs, Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh said his company desires to work closely with Pakistan for the development of energy sector. The Federal Minister said this was a beginning of a new era of cooperation between Pakistan and China and we were looking forward to have a consensus on all issues including the problem of equity of all stakeholders of the Pakistan statecraft in this manner.

The Chinese delegation about the prevalent rules and laws; for bidding in Pakistan and would ensure that bidding for the many projects should be made in a transparent manner. The delegation would talk to the Law Division also to have a final word on it and would have also words with Water and Power Divisions to have a considerate view on it. The projects that were discussed in the meeting were Kohala Hydro Power, Bhunji, Bhasha, Dashu in Upper Indus Valley, and other Hydro Power projects in lower Indus valley. CTGPC signed an agreement with a private Pakistani firm, Associate Technologies (Private) Limited to invest \$1.2 billion in 720 MW Karot Hydropower Project. The Karot project would be completed in four years and help Pakistan to overcome load shedding problem. It was for the first time that a Pakistan private company had signed an agreement with a state owned Chinese enterprise in the power sector. The minister also offered Chinese Corporation to invest in the Thar Coal power project as well as large scale manufacturing of solar panels and wind energy turbines in the country.

Guangjing said Karot Hydropower Project was a very important project and would help in resolving Pakistan's energy problems. China Three Gorges Project Corporation also offered to develop multipurpose hydro electric projects through direct financing model based on Public Private Partnership and boot. The President gave advice when the briefing was informed that Joint Development agreement was due to be signed this month for the 120 Megawatt Taunsa Hydro electric projects where the discharge was 10,000 cusecs and Chairman WAPDA stated that the discharge at Sukkur was over 12,000 cusecs.

[Daily Times - April 7, 2011]

Indian Politics

India Plans Panchayat Polls in Occupied Kashmir

New Delhi has planned to carry out Panchayati elections in the Occupied Kashmir during the upcoming summer in a farcical move to divert focus of the Kashmiris from growing uprising ahead of summer. The Indian rulers are haunted by a nightmare that another uprising may rock the Occupied Kashmir in the forthcoming summer. Indian hierarchy in collaboration with state puppet administration has cleverly planned to engage Kashmiri populace in farcical Panchayati elections synchronized during the fearful timeframe of coming summers. Last year, the Indian military brutally killed more than 140 unarmed young stone pelters as her security forces failed to control widespread agitation.

The Panchayat polls were held four times in the Occupied Kashmir in 1969, 1972, 1978 and 2001 while in most of the States of India have been held 11 to 12 times. Elections in the occupied territory have always been held to dupe the international community into believing that the Kashmiris have reconciled to the Indian unjustified rule while the people of Kashmir in response to farcical move have been wise enough to foil the Indian attempt by boycotting the polls. In 2001, the Panchayat polls in Jammu and Kashmir were held in a quite ridiculous manner. Very few Sarpanch and Panch constituencies in Kashmir Valley actually went to polls.

Though on announcement of conducting Panchayati elections in April 2011, there was much furor in the Legislative Assembly as the parties on the opposition benches. The Panchayat laws are amended in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution. However, the ruling party, National Conference remained hell-bent upon holding the elections in the summer and rejected the demand. It also turned down the PDP's proposal to postpone the polling as the situation in the territory was not conducive for the activity. In the initial stage the President of the State Congress, Saifud Din Soz had also opposed the holding of polls but surprisingly after sometime without any reason he gave his approval to the proposal. This attitude of the Congress Party vindicated the contention that the polling is being conducted for achieving ulterior motives. As predicted by the political analysts, it is an Indian ploy to divert the attention of people from undertaking agitation during the coming summers by engaging

them in Panchayat elections. It is also an effort to give an impression to the international community that India is sincere in delegating powers to the Kashmiri masses at grass-root level. The Indian ploy of deviating people from the focus of their genuine liberation struggle is bound to fail. Veteran Kashmiri Hurriyet leader Syed Ali Gilani has given a call of boycott and the Chairman All Parties Hurriyet Conference Mirwaiz Umar Farooq is expected to follow the suit. Let the people of Kashmir demonstrate, once again, that they are not going to allow India to pass the year comfortably with its illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir.

[The Nation - April 02, 2011]

India's Defence spending to swell to \$80b by 2015

In order to step up military build-up against China and disrupt security-balance in South Asia, rulers in New Delhi have planned to spend an estimated \$80 billion on military modernization programs by 2015. India is expected to maintain this position in the coming years, with plans to spend an estimated \$80 billion on military modernization programs by 2015. While exposing India's nefarious designs the report further mentioned that at the same time, the Indian Ministry of Defence has laid out an ambitious agenda to substantially increase the country's capacity to produce military hardware by the end of the decade. The huge defence spending plan is aimed at destroying regional peace and stability besides posing a real threat to emerging superpower China and to crush uprising, which is spreading its tentacles across India.

Experts termed the ambitious Indian defence policy as "a wakeup call for Asian powers" and said that it reflects the truce face of India. According to them, more than 100,000 troops are already involved in anti-Maoist operation that is in progress across five states - West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and Chhattisgarh. In a desperate quest for military advantage along its border with China, India is intensifying its military cooperation with the United States and Russia and stepping up its military penetration of small border-states adjoining China and India. In the past decade India had bought arms worth US\$50 billion from the United States, Russia, Britain, Israel and France, making it the biggest arms importer in the developing world.

In addition, India signed large contracts to purchase American maritime reconnaissance aircraft, British trainer jets, French submarines, and Israeli unmanned aerial systems. Interestingly, the Indian government is increasing its defence budget and is not bothering about what is happening to the common man. Two-third of India's 1.1 billion citizens continues to live on less than £1 a day. Despite spending most of the national resources for defence purchases, India would not be able to control the Naxalite movement and other uprisings because the deprived and depressed states in India have no other options but to fight for their just cause, analysts observed.

[The Nation - April 05, 2011]

Myanmar – Post Election Scenario

Myanmar's President Says Government Must Show Goodwill toward Minorities

Myanmar's new President has said his government must convince the country's many ethnic minorities of its good intentions toward them. The state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported that President Thein Sein said the government must convince minority groups living in border areas of its goodwill so they will co-operate in development efforts and loosen ties with neighboring countries. Myanmar's sizable ethnic minorities have struggled for decades to win more autonomy but their efforts have been met by military suppression. The groups, such as the Karen and the Shan, have support networks in neighboring countries, especially Thailand. Although Thein Sein's words appeared conciliatory, Myanmar's army continues to carry out operations against ethnic rebels. The newspaper, which serves as the government's main outlet for information, said Thein Sein spoke at a "special projects implementation meeting". The central government has tenuous control of many parts of the country where minority groups are strongest. It has reached cease-fire agreements with 17 ethnic minority rebel groups since 1989 and most have been allowed to keep their weapons and maintain some autonomy over their areas. Myanmar had been under military rule since 1962. The government claims it has made a transition to democracy, but critics say the process was a sham designed to serve as a front for continued army rule.

[Daily Times - April 25, 2011]

US Senators Urge Tougher Myanmar Sanctions

The United States should reject calls to ease sanctions on Myanmar junta members and instead name a special envoy to give the measures more bite, four US senators said in a letter released. With the regime's recent moves and persistent human rights abuses, conditions do not currently exist to meet the necessary criteria to consider an easing of sanctions," they wrote to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Dianne Feinstein, Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chair Barbara Boxer and Republican Senator Mark Kirk signed the letter.

The lawmakers also urged Clinton "to exercise the authority for additional banking sanctions against Burma's leaders explicitly provided by Congress" in a law meant to pry Myanmar open to democratic and free-market reforms. A rare election in November and Suu Kyi's subsequent release from house arrest have reignited a debate about the measures, and the European Union is poised to decide in April whether to continue sanctions against the regime. The NLD has no voice in a newly opened parliament dominated by the military and its proxies. It was disbanded for opting to boycott the vote because the rules seemed designed to bar Suu Kyi from participating. Supporters of the trade and financial sanctions say they are the only way to pressure the military rulers of Myanmar, where there are about 2,200 political prisoners. The United States said last month that calls to ease sanctions on Myanmar were premature.

[Asia One News - Apr 01, 2011]
