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Balochistan mess will soon be over

Viewpoint

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Despite the bleak picture drawn by a former ambassador in one of his articles in a leading newspaper, things are not that much bad in Balochistan.

No doubt, the scale of grievances is high and sense of deprivations is quite pronounced but all that doesn't owe to the negligence on the part of the present PPP-led government at the Centre or on the part of Raisani-led provincial government of Balochistan.

The question now arises then what is the actual problem and if the problems are massive who is responsible for them and what are the solutions, short-term or long-term?

Before we proceed to address all these vital questions, we must ensure one thing that the entire situation should be adjudged on the basis of respective yardsticks relevant to Balochistan in particular and Pakistan in general. It means that we should not analyse the things merely on the basis of our wishes. Nor should we make an attempt to make Punjab the axis of this debate on the hackneyed plea that the people of Punjab are responsible for deprivations of Baloch people just because the people in political power or in the powerful armed forces' institution have come mainly from Punjab.

Let us first of all take up this issue that of Punjabis' role in Balochs' backwardness. The reason for giving it precedence over other related matters is that it would provide us sufficient insight into the entire Baloch situation.

And this explanation is quite simple. We just need to understand the role played by people with power and pelf, whether they belong to the class of chieftains or big capitalists or to institutions equipped with immense executive authority. If an objective assessment of facts were carried out, it would be revealed that the downtrodden have been suffering not only in Balochistan but also in other provinces. The lot of the poor and the bereaved is almost the same in all the provinces with varying percentages.

So, we arrive at the conclusion that the deprivations or injustices, if any, are not merely a Baloch phenomenon. And we also arrive at the conclusion that if the so-called establishment or other forces or individuals in political-cum-executive power can be blamed for contributing to the people's sufferings, the people holding the reins of tribal power as well as the power of big land-holdings just can't be exonerated. These tribal chiefs or big landowners also had the skill, especially in Balochistan to make it a case of Punjab as an unjust, cruel 'big brother'.

Some examples can give us more insight into the whole affair. Scores of authentic reports have come to the fore that tell us as to how a good few Sardars and Nawabs of Balochistan have not been allowing building of infrastructure in their areas. Some of them with name and fame have also been forcibly resisting the building of roads or opening of schools. As a matter of fact, awareness and empowerment of the masses has always been irksome for these tribal chiefs who had been practically administering the things like absolute monarchs with massive judicial (nay extra-judicial)-cum-executive powers. Not only that, these chieftains had also been maintaining private prisons and private militias that have no regards for the law of the land or for the laws obeyed by more than 90 per cent Pakistanis. Those raising a voice of dissent and opposition would be physically eliminated obviously in violation of the country's law. These oppressive and suppressive tactics have, in turn,

given birth to inner resentments, which could not be expressed openly before the chieftains. As such, the aggrieved people had only been giving vent to their resentments by putting all the blame on the Pakistani establishment and on Punjabis.

That led to a vicious circle of resentments and reaction with India adding fuel to the fire. That brought further mess and chaos. Thank God now that mess is going to be over very soon with a purely people's elected government in power whose head, Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani and whose party chief and President, Asif Ali Zardari, did not feel any reluctance in seeking apology from the Baloch people for military operations of the past.

No doubt, an apology is a gesture but it is more than any other ordinary goodwill gesture. Seeking apology was rather a sincere endeavour of Zardari and Gilani to appease the angry Balochs.

Such gestures do have lasting impact on minds and hearts. Even the formation of committees comprising representatives of almost all prominent parties including the one headed by an impartial figure, Senator Raza Rabbani, to find out solutions to Baloch problems, is a sincere, concrete effort in this direction that should not be made a victim of venomous rhetoric. Some other gestures are also indicative of the government's good intentions like, for instance, the release of Sardar Mengal from prison and the establishment of a consensus government in Balochistan. As for military operations, Benazir Bhutto Shaheed had very courageously and wisely pledged much earlier to put an end to all these operations.

The fact is that an atmosphere of trust is being built up although still many problems and mistrust is coming in the way nevertheless the lasting solution can come only through democratic consensus and with patience and perseverance that is being demonstrated by PPP leadership over and over again.

As for material and economic development of Balochistan, many projects are under way for example the Saindak Copper project, commissioning of power stations starting from one 150 MW power stations, gold exploration by Barrick Gold's in collaboration with Antofagasta of Chile, Motorway-8 to connect Gwadar with rest of the country and other mining projects.

Another good news for Balochistan is Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin's latest announcement that the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award would allocate funds to provinces not on the basis of population but on the basis of needs as well. Now this announcement is, by all means, meant for Balochistan.

The existing volatile situation demands that we should take up difficulties with hope instead of panicking the things that lead to despair, despondency and subsequent failures.
