

OPINION THE NEWS INTERNATIONAL

A ministry of climate change?

Urban/urbane

By Ahmad Rafay Alam

The first duty of a state and the government that administers it is to protect the lives and property of its citizens. This is the basic equation. Good governance can be gauged by the ability of state machinery to respond and deliver to these imperatives.

Adapting to and mitigating climate change, energy and the environment are the most pressing issues facing Pakistan today. Let me be perfectly clear: They Eclipse Everything.

It is now universally accepted that we are experiencing the beginning of an age of climate change. At the moment, the very face of earth is being altered by rising tide, drying riverbeds, flash floods, and desertification. Last year, the floods in Balochistan alone affected two million people in over 15 districts. Upstream movement of seawater into the Indus Delta has destroyed the eco-system of the area – the lunatic decision to develop Budal and Bhuddo islands notwithstanding – and rendered sterile over two million hectares of cultivatable land in along the coasts of Thatta and Badin. A mass migration of thousands of displaced families is happening right now. These migrations will increase and spread all over Pakistan once climate change places heat stress on cash crops like wheat, sugar and cotton and farming communities begin the search for cultivatable land. Women, children and the economically distressed are disproportionately at risk.

In the Frontier, the loss of forest and tree cover – due to climate change and the timber trade – has increased the risk and vulnerability of flash flooding. In our cities, the air already contains dangerously high levels of toxins, chemicals and pollutants. Poor construction in slums and katchi abadis (where every other urban dweller in Pakistan lives) cost lives because they can't stand up to increased precipitation events, hurricanes and cyclones. Last June, 44 people lost their lives after a dust storm and pre-monsoon rain smashed through Karachi's creaking infrastructure. In Rawalpindi, the local administration has actually declared a state of emergency and is nervously expect the Leh nullah to flood and breach its banks this monsoon.

There are also international aspects to climate change. International agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) have created a carbon credit trading regime. There exists enormous potential within Pakistan for industry to upgrade their manufacturing process and make it more environmentally friendly and, at the same time, acquire benefit from a robust trade in certified emission reductions. The global nature of climate change is also forcing the international community to re-examine its connectedness. The re-examination has revealed that climate change and the environment are no longer issues that can be compartmentalized. It is now increasingly accepted that climate change is no longer an environmental issue. It is now accepted that climate change is a development issue. This understanding now links climate change to issues like trade and commerce. We simply cannot continue to ignore the fact load shedding and climate change are two sides of the same coin.

In response to these threats and the now impossible to ignore issues of climate change and the environment, our current government setup – that is, the framework put in place to protect our lives and property – includes the ministry of environment at the federal level, environment departments at the provincial level and environment offices at the local level. The state has passed the Pakistan Environment Protection Act, 2007, and the responsibility of enforcing its provisions falls on the shoulders of a Federal Environment Protection Agency in Islamabad and EPAs in each of the four provinces.

At the moment, it's unclear whether our federal minister is coming or going. Hameedullah Jan Afridi, the minister, is from Bar Qambal Khel and was returned to the National Assembly as an independent candidate by the people of FATA. Last week, Minister Afridi threatened to resign if the government continued military operations in the tribal area. The ministry, which used to be the ministry of environment and urban affairs, is run by one secretary, three joint secretaries, a director-general (environment) and an inspector-general (forests). The secretary and joint secretaries are all professional government servants who have risen through the ranks of the civil service. However, they do not have technical backgrounds. The technical capacity of the ministry falls mainly under the DG(E), who, incidentally, is a qualified urban planner. These technical experts are

mostly ex-cadre and form the knowledge and experience base that filters information and policy options to our decision-makers. There are, however, numerous vacancies in these ex-cadre posts.

The ministry, departments and offices have been active in formulating environment policy. However, this has affected their ability to carry out and implement any projects.

Over at the EPA, one of the three posts of director under a director-general (environment) lies vacant (the able officer was ordered back to Lahore and put in charge of WASA by Shahbaz Sharif). One of the remaining directors is apparently a political appointee currently fighting the skeletons in his closet. The EPA is the frontline environmental regulator and, by this logic, should be an independent of influence. However, because of a legislative overlap, the EPA falls under the ministry of environment. As a result, if the DG EPA needs funds for, say, a laboratory or to upgrade the capacity of his enforcement officers, he has to apply to the secretary, environment. How can the EPA be thought of as an independent protector of the environment if it isn't even financially independent.

An officer at the EPA once told me that the federal EPA is nothing more than a consultancy firm that answers questions put to it by various National Assembly and Senate standing committees, foreign donor organisations and NGO. If a standing committee wants to know whether there are any NEQS (National Environment Quality Standards) for ambient air, it will request the DG EPA for an answer. If an NGO is interested in getting foreign funding for an environment protection or awareness building projects (the new area of great interest and excitement in the NGO world), it'll either come to the EPA for statistics and information or blame it for the state of environment in the country.

Provincial EPAs suffer their own variety of institutional defects. It still isn't clear whether provincial EPAs need to be independent from provincial environment departments (Answer: Of course they should be independent, fool!). In Lahore, the EPA Punjab and the environment department are tenants of the same building (quite non sequitur that the building happens to be the National Hockey Stadium). But the pièce de résistance here is that the Pakistan Environment Protection Act, 1997, hasn't been amended to reflect the existence of the local government system introduced in 2001. As a result, there is no official link between provincial and local-level environmental protection efforts. Or, if it is, it is understandably confused by this lacuna.

At the local level, and I speak from experience in Lahore, the WASA, which is responsible for sewerage and sanitation, thinks itself an associated concern of the irrigation department rather than an agency of the LDA. The solid waste department has been devolved to the local governments, but there is no coordination between them and WASA. How on earth can the city, which produces hundreds of tonnes of solid waste a day, much of it dumped into sewers, even think of having a waste-recycling programme if the people who deal with the trash aren't communicating with the people who deal with the sewers? Recent newspapers articles reveal that a gastroenteritis epidemic has hit the city. A main cause of this is old and cracked sewage pipes leaking into the water mains. Despite a devastating earthquake and strict judicial action against illegal buildings, there is no comprehensive energy- efficient and sustainable building code anywhere in Pakistan. Last year, after the deadly windstorms in Karachi the local administration responded by banning billboards!

The point of my analysis is to describe out how our state machinery is currently set up and preparing for the challenges of climate change, environment and energy. It really doesn't matter if whether the ministry, departments and offices are staffed with the best and brightest officers if the institutional set up they are operating in render them totally incapable of dealing with the cross-sectoral nature of these issues. As things stand, our state machinery simply cannot cope with climate change.

The system needs a complete overhaul. A ministry of climate change is needed to coordinate the government's efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of the inevitable. At all levels, from international to union councils, we need a ministry of energy that will coordinate out petroleum needs, commerce, trade and foreign negotiations. By ignoring its responsibility, the government will negate the fundamental equation. By not bringing the environment to top priority, the government is not protecting the lives and property of its citizens.

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