

A 'global city' vs the environment

By Ardeshir Cowasjee

THE entire civilised world is greatly concerned with where the environment is going and the world with it. The dangers facing are massive. As an entity, the government of Pakistan seems to be oblivious and carries on in its own merry way.

However, there are a few of us who realise the implications of global warming and all that goes with it. Credit must be given to one of our private television channels which, on Earth Day, April 22, showed an Urdu translation of former US Vice-President Al Gore's award winning documentary, 'An Inconvenient Truth'. Gore's message is quite simple: if you and I do not reduce and cut back our consumer oriented and environment unfriendly lifestyles, climate change will overwhelm us and bring unpleasant and radical changes in life as we know it.

Knowing the calibre of our home-grown politicians, it is doubtful if any of those who regulate our lives have bothered to watch it. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz was given a copy of the documentary by a delegation of civil society groups, spearheaded by the World Wildlife Federation, who met him a month or so ago to discuss the deteriorating water situation in Pakistan. Has he had time to see this documentary? If by some miracle he has seen it, has it made even a small dent in his resolve to transform Karachi – the former 'Pearl of the East', now flooded with katchi abadis, hard hit by electricity load-shedding, drowning in uncollected garbage, stinking with raw sewage which streams directly into the sea – into what he terms a 'world-class global city'?

The world-class global city (a concrete unlivable jungle poisoned by pollution) mantra of the federal government has been taken up by the Defence Housing Society of Karachi which is hell-bent on the construction of a 14-kilometer 'Waterfront Development Project' along a public beach that does not belong to it, which will cater to the rich and infamous and be totally awam-unfriendly. On alternate Sunday evenings, concerned citizens have organised demonstrations on the beach road (near McDonalds) which so far have had no impact. The Sindh Environmental Protection Agency continues to ignore the environmental impact assessment of the conversion of the shoreline as ordered by the Sindh High Court.

Get-rich-quick schemes are infectious – in Karachi, as in all other cities of this blighted country. The concept of beach exploitation, with the prime ministerial blessings, has been picked up by the Dubai-based 'limitless' which proposes to develop a new 68,000 acres 'city' along the Manora, Sandspit, Hawkesbay and French beaches, stretching inland to occupy the coastal fishing villages, KDA Scheme 45 and even PAF Masroor base. An amazing presentation of this 'Karachi Waterfront' can be downloaded from <http://www.youtube.com>

Then we have our local government and its schemes for various elevated expressways, in

particular the one planned to run 24 kilometres from Jinnah Bridge to Quaidabad to which numerous groups and concerned citizens have objected (my column of April 8). The government has heeded some objections. Land is not to be taken away from the Karachi Gymkhana or the 'posh' hotels or the Christian cemetery, all of which lie along its route, and the existing rights of way will be used. A committee of 'experts' (mandatory under the Environmental Act 1997) is being formed to review public comments.

The City District Government has cleverly sidestepped several issues raised. Why has a \$ 350 million contract been awarded without competitive tendering? What are the financial details of the somewhat murky 'annuity-based' BOT? How does the expressway fit in with the overall traffic management plans for the city? Why is the administration not first tackling the massive violations of traffic rules, unlawful parking, encroachments on our roads, and many other traffic planning-related issues? Why are public/mass transport systems not being given priority? Why is inter-port (Karachi Port Trust/Port Qasim) traffic not being conducted by an economically more sound railway system?

Lending credence to the fact that the elevated expressway is already a fait accompli ('finder's fees' have already reportedly been paid), and that the Environmental Impact Assessment is but a window-dressing in pretence of complying with the law, is the fact that the City District Government parks' officer, Liaquat Ali Khan of the silken outfits, a couple of weeks ago started chopping and transplanting some 2,000 trees from the centre portion of Sharea Faisal.

The Japanese care about the environment and they apparently care more about Karachi than its administration. They are prepared to give us funds to build five steel bridges in the city (runs into billions of rupees) but only if we first conduct an environmental impact assessment. Unlike the City District Government, they do not believe that an "EIA is a professional study only professionals should be allowed to participate in professional discussion" (a quote from the CDGK response to the Institute of Architects, Pakistan, on the subject of the elevated expressway).

At the end of last month, the press reported extensively on the signing of an implementation agreement for a \$ 160 million "landmark project being set up at Port Qasim, Karachi, that will allow natural gas imports into Pakistan for the first time in the country's history." The 'project' comprises a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) re-gasification terminal being set up by Excelerate Energy of Texas, USA, for Pakistan Gasport Limited, a local company whose principal sponsor is the Associated Group, the largest single producer of LPG in Pakistan.

The 'project' envisions the berthing of a re-gasification vessel which will be charged through smaller LNG carriers coming up the Korangi Creek, past residential localities, fishing villages and other port traffic. The re-gasification process will convert the liquid gas to high-pressure gas on board the ship and deliver it directly into the Sui Southern Gas Company Limited network. Such a process has numerous environmental downsides, and is fraught with the hazard of an LNG leak forming a vapour cloud whose explosion and fire could destroy habitations and structures many miles away (download 'LNG Vapour Cloud Danger to our Communities' at <http://timriley.com> to verify the perils).

It may be of interest to the citizens of Karachi to know that the California Coastal Commission unanimously rejected a proposed \$ 800 million Cabrillo Port 72-million gallon floating LNG terminal approximately 14 miles off the coast of Malibu. The final environmental impact statement for the project acknowledges that it will cause significant impact to air and water quality, public safety, marine wildlife, views, recreation, noise and agriculture – impacts that cannot be mitigated or avoided. Residents of coastal California have been lobbying for months against the venture.

The citizens of Boston are fighting to end the dangerous passage (commercial traffic, roads and bridges are closed during this time) of LNG tankers into Boston's inner harbour. These LNG tankers have been termed 'floating bombs' vulnerable to terrorist action.

Excelerate Energy is now constructing a deepwater port 12 miles outside Cape Ann in Massachusetts (outside US territorial waters).

Why can't our gas port be built far away from human habitation? A Japanese-type environmental impact assessment needs to be conducted for the entire project.

It should be clear that many of the tensions and conflicts that exist in Pakistan are related to environmental problems generated by "islands of prosperity" in "oceans of poverty", to quote from an address made by President General Pervez Musharraf in February this year.

As is being increasingly perceived around the world, especially in the European Union, climate change, brought about by destruction of the environment and progressive decimation of living species, is no longer merely an economic or environmental issue. Margaret Beckett, the first woman foreign secretary of the UK, recently stated, "Anyone wanting to trace the links between what science is telling us about physical impacts and the broader ramifications for our security would do well to read a startling report that appeared last Monday. The Military Advisory Board is a group of the most respected retired Admirals and Generals in the United States. . . . They are about as far as you can get from the old stereotype of a tree-hugging environmentalist. And yet in that report they state, categorically, that projected climate change poses a serious threat to America's national security. It is, they say: 'a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world.' In other words, an unstable climate will make the very kinds of tensions and conflicts that the Security Council deals with, day in day out, yet more frequent and even more severe."

Now, who, repeat who, amongst what is erroneously known as the ruling elite is capable of heeding all that we read and know? Regrettably all are selfish and all adhere to their individual one point agendas.

arfc@cyber.net.pk