

Tuesday, 3 September 2013

Will Nawaz Sharif purge Karachi of gangsters?



Pakistan's new government is planning another military operation in the country's largest city and commercial hub: Karachi. It is planning to purge it from a myriad of militant and criminal gangs involved in crimes of serious nature such as assassinations, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, land grabbing, drug pushing and gun running.

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan told parliament last week that a targeted operation will be launched in Karachi to bring back peace and tranquillity to the country's biggest industrial center and major port city. This has been somewhat of an elusive dream of every government for the last 25 years.

Karachi has been suffering from lawlessness and street crimes for over two decades, resulting in a colossal flight of capital and manpower to other parts of the world. Despite this, it is still the hub of industrial and commercial activities in the country, generating the bulk of country's revenue.

Mafia might

The criminal groups operating in Karachi have literally taken the city hostage as mafia gangs have been fighting an unending war against one another to gain control over profitable areas where they can extort money from shopkeepers and businessmen. However, for the most part, shootouts among gangsters take the lives of common people and passers-by.

Though the usual hustle and bustle in the city appears like any other mega city elsewhere in the world, people from all walks of life in Karachi dread going out on the streets alone at night for fear of getting mugged or killed. Most of Karachi's businessmen and industrialists, whether common traders or wealthy entrepreneurs, regularly and silently pay money to gangsters, yet they live under constant fear of receiving the demand-chit from some other powerful gang trying to take control of their area.

Militancy among political parties has been the biggest factor behind the breakdown of law and order in Karachi. According to the findings of the country's Supreme Court, most of the militant groups are funded by political parties, ethnic groups or sectarian outfits. The court initiated the investigation on its own, taking notice of deteriorating lawlessness and target killings in Karachi in 2011.

And, action

The Supreme Court found that all political parties, ethnic or sectarian groups, barring one or two either, had their own militant groups or funded them for political survival or to make "secret" money. The court ordered the then government of Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani to eliminate the militant groups among political parties and other organizations to purge the city of killings, muggings and kidnappings.

But the court's orders fell on deaf ears as the government preferred the political interests of its allied and opponent parties over those of the 20 million people of Karachi. No concrete measures have been taken to curb the patrons of the gangs of criminals and militants.

Over the past 25 years, Karachi has witnessed several military and police operations, but criminal elements could never be uprooted because of political funding of groups. Rangers and para-military forces were stationed in Karachi during those years to aid the police but crime rates actually went up instead of coming down.

The troubling situation in Karachi has not only badly affected the country's economic growth but has been a serious headache for successive governments. However, no government has ever been able to control the criminal groups because of political patronage to criminal elements and militancy among the political parties and sectarian groups.

Outside 'help'

Involvement of foreign agencies has been another major factor. Foreign money and arms has always been pumped in through secret or official channels to gangs. Last week, Director General of Rangers in Karachi, while making a statement before the Supreme Court, accused the leading political party in Karachi of involvement in smuggling and pilfering huge caches of arms into the city which was otherwise routed to Afghanistan during the last decade. But strangely, he took back his words the next day before the media.

In the past, top government officials have claimed to have solid evidence of secret agencies of neighboring countries committing subversive acts in Pakistan.

With yet another military operation on the cards, it was unclear as to what strategy would be adopted to make a difference this time. Critics have always held the weak judicial system and absence of political will to eliminate the terrorists as responsible for proliferation of crimes and terrorism. So far none of the terrorists and gangsters has been executed despite the fact that courts have awarded the death penalty. This is due to the moratorium on death sentences ordered by outgoing president Asif Zardari. This was conducted to comply with the demands of European Union. Zardari has been quoted time and again saying that as long as he was in office nobody would face the gallows in the country.

Interestingly, Pakistan's Muslim League led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has also maintained the moratorium on carrying out the death penalty. It is yet to be seen if Nawaz Sharif is able take Karachi back to the glorious age of the 80's where it was ranked as one of the top ten biggest industrial cities of the world and was ahead of many mega cities of the Middle East and Far East.

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