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**Pakistan**

# **This is our land, declare 20,000 peasants**

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**Anjuman Mozareen Punjab will organize a massive peasant convention on 6th April at Kulyana Military Estate Okara in Punjab on the occasion of the second death anniversary of three peasant leaders killed by the gangsters of the Military Farms administration on 6th April 2009.**

**Amir Ali, Mohammed Abbas and Abdul Rahim were killed on 6th April 2009. Thousands of peasants and women will join this convention to demand land rights. The main demand is the right of land that we are tilling since 100 year.**

Okara Military Farms, Punjab, Pakistan, April 17, 2009: I am on the platform of the historic peasant convention at Okara Military Farms on the international day of peasants today. Thousands of peasants are pouring in at the convention with red flags demanding land ownership rights over 68,000 acres occupied by the military establishment - land the peasants have been cultivating more than 100 years.

More than 15,000 peasants [the crowd later swelled to 20,000 - FT] are already inside the huge ground which is covered by tents. Nearly one third of the participants are women and they are most active in the convention.

## **Red flags flying**

There are hundreds of red flags flying. There is group of dozens of youth who are wearing long red dress with slogans calling for land ownership. There is a group of students from Lahore University of Management. There are private TV channels like GEO, ARY, Dawn, Royal, Dunia, Waqt, AAJ and some others are covering the event live. Never before so many TV channels covered a program of the peasants.

This rally was preceded by four public meetings at Okara, Depalpur, Renalkhurd and Lahore which attracted over 11,000 peasants.

Mehr Abdul Sattar opened the convention with a firm demand of land ownership. He said Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif both had promised to us land rights. This is high time for them to fulfill their promises. He demanded to restore all the workers of Okara Military Farms who had their jobs terminated during the movements of the Mozareen. He said that the politicians of the area have tried to take over our movement, but they have not succeeded. This is a movement of peasants and workers, he said.

## **Peasant leaders killed**

Salim Jakhar made a very good presentation in Punjabi language and told that we do not need stud farms but the land we are cultivating. He belongs to Kulyana Military Estate where three peasants leaders were killed and 27 injured by agents by the agents of military officers on April 6, 2009.

After that incident, The spokesperson of PMLN government of Punjab, Senator Pervaiz Rashid, called is to assure us that Mian Nawaz Sharif and Mian Shahbaz Sharif are committed to their promise of distributing land among tenants. Badar Nisa Bibi from Kulyana Military Estate spoke about the women's bravery during the movement. She said we

need the land and nothing else. She demanded the arrest of the killers of tenant farmers.

Nadeem Ashraf vice president AMP gave a deadline of May 21 to accept their demands otherwise there will be long march.

## Background

Early in 2007. Salim Jhakar came to the Labour Party office along Nadeem Ashraf, a local union Mayer from Renalakhurd and vice president of Anjaman Mozareen Punjab. Salim Jhakar from Kulyana Military Estate Okara wanted to join the Anjaman Mozareen Punjab and to start a campaign at his Estate. However, he has never been to any political meeting and was never member of any organization.

Nadeem Ashraf told me that we had the initial discussions but it is better if we have this together in detail. I asked them to explain me in detail the whole issue of Kulyana Military Estate. We had a long chat and here is what came out of it.

## A trap

Some 14,000 acres of land was leased out to former military top officials in Kulyana Military Estate. During the fifties and sixties, the land was allotted on the name of stud farms. The military officials had to breed the horses for the services of the army on these leased out land. Those who were working in these state lands for over 100 years became the tenants of the new owners. Earlier, it was cultivated under the occupation of the Military Farms Administration. It covered 6 villages. There was no school, hospital or even a graveyard in all these villages living under military shadows. In 1985, the former military top officers tricked the tenants to become lessee and changed their status from tenant to lessee. The peasants were happy that they are not paying the market rate contract amount and were paying less than that. It was all a trap. This was during the Zia dictatorship period.

The same manoeuvre was tried in early 2000 in other areas of Okara Military Farms under general Musharraf dictatorship. It did not work and tenants refused to become lessee and movement started for the ownership of the land with a defiant mood and slogan of "ownership or death". Seven peasants died of state repression during the years of 2001-2004. This did not touch the peasants working on contract basis at Kulyana Military Estate and they remain aloof.

Salim Jhakar told us that there were discussions but our elders told us to be happy what we have got. So the Kulyana estates remain silence during the most militant struggle of Punjab peasantry.

We were not hurtful for this behavior but instead asked him what motivated them to contact us now? He told us that the youth like him wanted to start a campaign for land rights and the contract amount is increasing day by day. This has become almost the market rate and we are living a very difficult life and want to do something. "You tell us what to do and we will do it" was his plea. We disagreed and told him to be part of the discussion and we will frame some demands and will start a campaign. Nadeem asked him to organize some study circle of the peasants for us to speak. Nadeem, one of the main leaders of the movement was also a member of Labour Party Pakistan.

## Beginning of the peasant rebellion

This was the beginning of the Kulayana Military Estate rebellion. We discussed to organize a demonstration in Lahore. Salim asked me how many should come. I told him may be around 200 would be ok and we will organize our own mobilization from Lahore. Over 500 came to Lahore for their first ever demonstration in mid 2007. The majority of them were women.

Salim wanted the movement to take up the issue of the ever increasing contract amount while we were arguing for land rights campaign. May be, he was not mentally ready and thought about this demand as too radical which can not be achieved. We had series of meeting and Nadeem started going to Kulyana Estate very often and became a teacher of the area.

He was very keen to attend the meetings. More peasants started to come with him. Salim joined Labour Party Pakistan and was elected as peasant secretary LPP Punjab at their congress in early April 2008. Salem was in his early thirties and had not been to any college but had completed his school. A very sober and very talkative person, but would love to attend the meetings. I was really impressed by his interest in political discussions and his commitment to start the movement.

The contract amount started coming down as the movement started in the area with AMP committees being set up in all villages. In early 2009, The AMP leadership decided to organize a new movement for land rights with public meetings and peasant convention in all the areas where the tenants were working at Military Farms. The January meeting at Renalakhurd attracted over 2000 and the February meeting at Depalpur attracted over 3000. But the first ever peasant convention in Kulyana Estate on 26 March 2009 was the largest of all with over 5000. Over 1000 were women. It was the best organized peasant convention of all. The seating arrangements were very well done. The security measures were excellent. The sound system was perfect and above all almost all the peasants from the area were mobilized.

Fortunately, one private television channel ARY live coverage forced all the other main channels to send their television crew to the peasant convention on urgent basis. There a lot of red flags. This motivated the speakers to show their best to mobilize and show solidarity with the peasants. It was one of my best peasant conventions where the participants really wanted to hear and also to raise slogans. For many, this was their first ever public meeting where they have gone for themselves. It was revolutionary mood with revolutionary speeches for the demand of the land ownership. I termed the audience as revolutionaries for generations. The women speaker set the mood of women participation and the leading role they have to play.

On March 29, the Lahore peasant convention at Bengali Military Farms was also the largest with over 700 in attendance. Salim Jhakar did not come but the secretary Abdul Ghaffar came and he spoke very well. The movement for land ownership in all the military farms in Punjab was gaining momentum.

## The counter-revolution

Then comes the counter-revolution. At village 28 RB in Kulyana Military Estate, the lease of a 50 acre agriculture land was ended. The contractor of Afsar Khan, a former brigadier of the army who had leased this land wanted to give this land to a tenant whose family was working here for over 100 years. Roushan Shah an agent of the military top officers who had grabbed over 1400 canal land by just occupying it, wanted to occupy this land as well. He abducted one tenant Manzoor in the morning of 6 April with the help of over 30 criminals mostly absconders in different criminal cases. When the local AMP leaders went to resist without any arms and demanded the release of the kidnapped

tenant, he opened fire killing three and 27 injured.

I heard the news in Lahore an hour later from Salim Jhakar. We immediately informed the press and spread the news among LPP and supporters of the movement. By the afternoon, thousands of tenants had gathered to block the main GT Road for over two hours. When the top police officers assured the arrest of the murdered on urgent basis, the blockade ended.

I addressed a press conference the same afternoon in Lahore and LPP with the help of the other Left parties organized a joint demonstration of over 200 at Charing Cross Lahore.

## **Visit to Kulaya Military Estate**

Four of us arrived at Kulaya Military Estate on April 8 to express our condolences. Bushra Khaliq, Nazli Javed and Arif Shah from LPP were with me. While we arrived at Chack 18 RB, thousands of peasants were waiting for us for some time. The main leadership of AMP were sitting there in grief with the loss of the three brave peasant leaders. Salim Jhakar village was not this one but a village next to this village. He was there with his head down but with full of anger. Only few hours before the incident, he called me late at night and asked me if we can send some women comrades to help in organization of women committees in each village. I agreed to speak to women comrades but said that it is the only way to sustain the movement.

We were asked to speak. It was difficult to speak to the bereavement peasants. I said, "we are full of sorrow but not weak, we are full of grief but not frail, we are sad but not feeble. We have lost three but many more are ready to take their place. Those who killed the three, wanted to kill the peasant movement, but the look at you, you have come here in thousands to express your determination to continue the struggle. You have showered the bullets in the mishope to frighten us but who is at the run? You! And, not us. We are here to stay. They wanted to show that they can kill the movement by bullets and we have shown that ideas can never be killed.

Mehr Abdul Sattar, Bushra Khaliq, Nazli Javed and Nadeem Ashraf also expressed views to continue the movement on a very peaceful but militant manner.

## **Firsthand account of killings of peasant leaders**

We went to the house of Mohammed Abbas and Abdul Rahim, the son and father; both were the first to lose their lives. I was told by a leader of the committee who had still bullets in his head and leg, "we are four local leaders of AMP, and we were all in the front line. We were leading the peasants to demand for the release of the abducted one. We had arms but we decided not to use that. We were going to the place where the abducted leader was kept. The other side had a lot of modern weapons. None of us was afraid of that. Abbas was leading the way. He was 35, a tall handsome father of four. His father Abdul Rahim was also with him. He was over 70. We were all raising slogans against the gangsters. We were not afraid of the guns. When the gangsters started firing at us, we did not run backward, we were still moving forward. The gangsters were hiding in trenches. So was our courage that we went into the trenches and forced the gangsters to leave the place. They had the guns, we had the courage, they had to run while some of us were hit by the bullets and we were still marching ahead. It was a tale of an absolute courage by the peasants to fight the gangsters supported by the former military generals.

There were eight injured and two dead from Abbas' family alone include one of his sister. The whole family was the main basis of AMP in this village. When I saw Abbas' picture, I realized who he was. On March 26, he was on the platform as security in charge. He had a wooden stick in his hand and was very alert who was coming on the platform and why. He wanted us to be in absolute safe atmosphere.

"All of us had the bullets in our front portion and not on our back, a proof how we faced the bullets". The local AMP leader told us. Amir Ali, the third one to die was 45. His brother told us at his house that he always wanted to be in front line. He was very brave peasant leader. He always wanted to fight for land rights. He was over 6 feet tall and every one liked him.

We had brought red flowers for the graves of these brave peasant leaders. We went to the place where they were buries. It was only three graves. There was no grave yard in the whole area.

## Military banned from villages

The AMP has decided in a meeting with our presence that no military officers or their gangsters will ever be allowed to enter in these villages any more. Their land cultivated by so called allotters will be distributed among the martyrs, injured and the neediest one in these villages. A place next to the graves where there is still some crops is been identifies as the new graveyard for the whole area.

The three martyrs have given a new momentum to the movement. The peasants have decided themselves how this land that they have cultivated for over 100 years will be distributed and for whom. They did not need the approval of any officials or the government. They are the government for themselves in the areas.

## New Leadership

Salim Jhakar has emerged without doubt a new leader of the peasant movement alongside with the old layer. While he was speaking at Depalpur peasant convention, he said in the end, "I stop because I forgot my speech". Maybe he wanted to say that now I finish my speech but he was not a person to make speeches. When I spoke at the convention after him, I told the gathering, "Salem Jhakar may forget his speech but not his fight for peasant rights" this made the whole convention to clap for Salim.

I had a word with him afterwards and asked him not to say what he said, and that he should end his speech without saying that he forgot his speech. At his home base in Kulyana Estate Peasant convention on 26 March 26 he was more careful. He read a written speech and after successfully finishing his speech without forgetting, he looked towards me with great pride and honor. I was happy that he was making progress.

On April 8, 2009, I saw a totally different Salim Jakhar, he has lost his best fighters but not his fight. It was his suggestion to distribute the land of the army officers to the peasants. He was like the governor of Kulyana Military Estate and we need more such governors to form a government of workers and peasants in future.