

Islamabad (Pakistan): The people's land? - Informal Settlement Facing Demolition

Monday 3 August 2015, by [The News \(Pakistan\)](#) (Date first published: 28 July 2015).

Islamabad's Capital Development Authority's Eid present for the city's low-income residents comes in the shape of demolishing their homes and leaving them shelterless. Over the weekend, the CDA began these forced evictions, with the I-11 low-income settlement being the first target. As the operation began, hundreds of residents and rights activists came out to block the CDA bulldozers. Human chains were formed despite the arrests of dozens of activists in the settlement over the weekend by police. By Sunday evening, the CDA claimed it had demolished over 250 'illegal' structures. However, they could not raze the entire settlement. Earlier, the CDA had informed the Islamabad High Court that it would demolish 42 settlements across Islamabad. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar seems to think the operation is meant to target 'terrorists.' Such statements are no more than a smokescreen. No city in the world exists without poor populations - and its 'slums'. Islamabad, despite what its elite citizens like to believe, was a poorly planned city whose design incorporated no space to house its poor. Some of the settlements being targeted have existed for over 30 years and have regular electricity and gas connections. And have been voting since the 1980s.

That an order by a single-member Islamabad High Court bench is being implemented with such fervour shows there are greater interests at play. Islamabad is encountering a real-estate boom and the CDA wants to cash in on some of its most prime land. The small fact that hundreds of thousands of people have been living there for decades does not seem to matter. If one were to look into the IHC orders, they go against many laws passed to regularise informal settlements since the 1970s. In 1985, the Junejo government announced the legalisation of all informal settlements above 40 dwelling units. Punjab passed an act to regularise informal settlements in 1992, whose application was extended to settlements made prior to 2012 by the PML-N itself before the 2013 elections. How can the PML-N have one policy for Punjab and another for Islamabad? Moreover, why does the CDA exist if it has failed to provide adequate housing for the poor? State land is the people's land. If the state fails to fulfill its duty to supply low-income housing, do people not have a right to claim that land? This right is recognised by the many laws passed on the issue of informal settlements, including the National Housing Policy of 2002. With a number of highly controversial elite housing schemes cropping up in Islamabad, should the CDA not have different priorities?

* *The News*, Editorial

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* "The people's land?". *The News*, Editorial. Tuesday, July 28, 2015. From Print Edition:
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