

On the upcoming WSF in Karachi

## World Social Forum: Tremblor Causes Shaky Start to Asian Meet

Saturday 21 January 2006, by [EBRAHIM Zofeen T.](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2006).

KARACHI, Pakistan, Jan 20 (IPS) - Of the many disruptions caused by the Oct. 8 temblor, that killed 87,000 people and left 3.5 million homeless, one was the postponement of the Karachi chapter of this year's polycentric World Social Forum (WSF).

As things stand, the sixth WSF is underway (Jan19-23) in Bamako, Mali and will be closely followed by the Jan 24-29 event in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas. The Karachi WSF is now tentatively set for March 24-29.

Karamat Ali, head of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research and member of the Pakistan Organising Committee of the WSF, is relieved at the postponement. "The attention of the whole nation, including that of civil society, was diverted to handling the (earthquake) situation and it just didn't seem appropriate to think about this event."

This annual event, a colourful jamboree where the voiceless get a chance to be heard, started in 2001 as a response to the World Economic Forum (WEF). Because it is primarily attended by civil society it acts as an effective counterweight to the WEF.

"There is a brighter side to the rescheduling," says Ali. He foresees a larger participation with more people joining up after having attended the forum at the other two venues. "We can get some of the heavyweights who had earlier committed to either Bamako or Caracas to attend. Their participation will lend the Asian WSF a stamp of credence."

People like Dalai Lama and Tariq Ali have already agreed to come and "when distinguished people participate there is bound to be a following," says Ali.

There is also hope that there will be a good number of delegates from Africa since the Bamako event would be well over too. "This would be refreshing for us as we have very little exposure to African issues here in Asia," he adds.

To suggestions that interest in the WSF may have waned because of the postponement, causing many international celebrities with tight schedules to cancel attendance, Ali said he was sure that WSF-Karachi will draw huge crowds and prominent figures from within Pakistan and the

region anyway.

"I don't know why we are so fixated about getting celebrities anyway à isn't WSF all about giving voice to the poor, marginalised and people from the grassroots?" said an irate activist.

"Why should there be a disconnect?" argues Mohammad Ali Shah of the Fisherfolk Forum and who is also acting as convenor for the fisherfolk and peasants group. He hopes to get some 5,000 fishermen to the event. "It should be open for everyone, the voiceless as well as the ones who are known and heard often. It should be an equal platform for everyone."

Shah sees the WSF as an opportunity to air grievances "at an international forum". "We hope to organise a huge rally and talk about issues like the injustice regarding allocation of water resources and the contract system in fishing."

The POC initially expected 50,000 people to attend, but after the postponement, they now have a more realistic figure of 20,000-30,000.

Curiously, while the response from international organisations as well as local grassroots groups have been tremendous, that from the bigwig Pakistani civil society organizations (CSOs) has been somewhat lukewarm.

Interestingly, in a country which is steeped in religiosity and blamed for its fundamentalist stance, not one religious party, political or otherwise, has even attempted to register.

WSF supporters say that while there are people's movements in Pakistan, they are not as strong as in the neighbouring countries. "For this very reason it is important to hold such an event in Pakistan," says Imran Shirvanee, a journalist with strong leftist leanings and who is also heading the media committee.

The event is expected to be political and even initiate revival of progressive movements involving students and labour that were ruthlessly crushed in the 1970s by the Bhutto regime and replaced by retrogressive ones during the eleven-year rule of the military dictator Ziaul Haq that followed.

"It's bound to breathe life into political movements since the forum is about acting together. It's not just another gathering where people network alone," says Ali.

"We started holding meetings, some 15 to 20 of them over the last two months with various labour federations and made them aware of the WSF, the struggles going on in other parts of the world, how the WTO regime and the international financial institutions are affecting us and why poverty is on the increase," said Farid Awan who is organising participation by labour groups.

Awan does not hope for miracles but, like Ali, he is happy that a process of debate, discussion and exchange can germinate. "We have a

chance to get together on one platform and then put pressure on the government. Something good is bound to happen," he says optimistically.

Organisers are already having sleepless nights setting up this mega event and the least of their troubles is getting visas for nine members of the Indian organising committee who can help with expertise gained at the Mumbai WSF in 2004.

The largest delegation at the WSF in March will be from India — 5,000 Indian participants, followed by some 500-600 Bangladeshis. The organisers wish the visa process was less cumbersome, especially for Indians. "There should be a policy decision that anyone coming for the WSF should get visa on arrival like they do in Bamako and Caracas," says Ali.

"If the government can issue 8,000 visas to Indian cricket fans, surely they can do the same for the forum's participants," says Ali. "We started the visa process in Aug. 2005 and had spoken to the prime minister who seemed very supportive. But we had to postpone that meeting due to the earthquake and reschedule it."

Meanwhile, it has been decided to hold a one-day Pakistan Social Forum in Lahore on Jan. 24, to show solidarity with the WSF events taking place all over the world. "We hope we can get visas for our Indian guests by then so that they not only get to attend the Lahore event but can also stay on and help with organising the Karachi WSF."

Themes to be debated at Lahore are already interesting and contentious — natural disasters and the role of state, debt and global forces, trade, unjust distribution of water resources, military operations in Balochistan and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) among others.

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