

Statement

Pakistan: Minister tasked with saving US airbase at the cost of the displacement of thousands

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The presence of Pakistan army personnel speaks to the fact that the breach of Jamali bypass was intentional and ordered from above.

It has been reported earlier that the US Air Force has denied the relief agencies use of the Shahbaz airbase for the distribution of aid and assistance. Soldiers of the Pakistan army, a federal minister and the administration of Sindh province are blamed for the incident involving Shahbaz Airbase at Jacobabad district in Sindh province in which it has been reported that flood waters were diverted in order to save the airbase. The diversion of the floodwaters is blamed for inundating hundreds of houses and the displacement of 800,000 people. According to the media reports, the Federal Minister of Sports along with soldiers from the army and a contingent of officials from the Sindh provincial government breached the Jamali Bypass in Jafferabad district of Balochistan province during the night between August 13 and 14 to divert the water entering the airbase which has remained in US Air Force hands since the war on terror started in 2001.

Mr. Ejaz Jakhrani, the Minister of Sports, while explaining the situation to the media said that if the water was not diverted the Shahbaz Airbase would have been inundated. Mr. Jakhrani himself was present along with the district coordination officer of the Jacobabad district, district police officer and other officials when the breach was made. It is reported in the media that Mr. Jakhrani was assigned to protect the air base by officials at the Pakistan army's headquarter as he was elected from Jacobabad district.

A former prime minister, Mr. Mir Zafar Ullah Khan Jamali said that in order to save Shahbaz Air Base, Jamali bypass was demolished and the town of Dera Allahyar was drowned. Mr. Jamali said that if the airbase was so important, then what priority might be given to the citizens. He blamed minister Jakhrani, DPO and DCO Jacobabad for deliberately diverting the course of the floodwaters towards Balochistan.

In the meantime, during the discussion in the standing committee of the Senate the federal secretary of health has revealed that health relief operations are not possible in the flood-affected areas of Jacobabad because the airbase is under the control of the US Air Force. The coordinator of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Centre, Dr Jahanzeb Aurakzai, told the committee that foreign health teams could not start relief operations in remote areas because there are no airstrips close to several areas, including Jacobabad.

The electronic media has also reported that since 2001 the government of Pakistan, during the regime of general Musharraf, turned over Shahbaz Airport to US forces fighting against terrorism on

a lease so it the responsibility of the government and the Pakistan armed forces to protect the agreement done in favour of US forces. The discussions in the media have also pointed out that the presence of army soldiers during the breach of Jamali bypass is a clear indication that the Pakistan army has been ordered to save the airbase from the floodwaters.

In the end, after the seven days of controversy surrounding the air base, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) said that the Shahbaz Airbase was under the complete operational control of the PAF and brushed aside reports that floodwaters had been diverted to save the base. Air Vice Marshal, Mr. Abdul Quddus, hurriedly arranged a visit of journalists to Shahbaz Airbase and asked them as to whether they could see any Americans? He told journalists that there are no drones and no Americans; seeing, he said, is believing!

However, there was no reasonable answer to the question raised that when almost the whole of Jacobabad district of Sindh and its adjoining district of Jafferabad of Balochistan province were under floodwaters why the airbase was not affected. This could only be due to the intentional breach of the Jamali bypass. The media was also very critical of the arrangement of the visit to Shahbaz airbase at a time when much more attention is needed to focus all efforts for the relief of the affected people. The visit by the journalists has been seen as a scripted stage play as when journalists were present a C130 cargo plane landed with 200 tons of relief goods which the people of that particular affected area badly needed. Such a plane has not been seen landing there in recent times so this was too much of a coincidence.

The federal minister and former prime minister have not retracted their statements that the floodwater was intentionally diverted to Dera Allahyar, Balochistan to save the air base.

There is rough estimation by the media about the displacement of 800,000 people by the divergence of the waters to the poorer areas. Over 150,000 people have been evacuated from Dera Allahyar and other areas. 350,000 people of Jafferabad district have been shifted to Dera Murad Jamali, Sibi and Quetta, parts of Balochistan, and over 300,000 people had earlier moved to Dera Murad Jamali and Sibi from the Sindh province particularly from Jacobabad.

There can be no doubt that the presence of the Pakistan army personnel at the breach of Jamali bypass indicates the fact that this was an intentional breach. This must be investigated along in order to ascertain who gave the orders. Those giving the orders must be prosecuted. The government of Pakistan must also probe the allegations of deliberate breaches; not only in the incident involving Shahbaz airbase but also those reported earlier where the agricultural lands belonging to senior ministers was protected from the floodwaters also by intentional breaches.

It is a gross contradiction that the United States of America is now one of the biggest donors of relief to Pakistan and it is therefore unacceptable that they are allegedly refusing permission to use Shahbaz airbase for the distribution of that relief.