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Pakistan

A press conference that went ahead

- News from around the world -

Publication date: Monday 28 May 2007

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There were three attempts to stop a press conference that went ahead finally on 22nd May at Lahore Press Club. The press conference was organized by Anjuman Mozareen Punjab AMP Lahore unit (Punjab Tenants Association), the peasant movement that has fought against the Military Farms administration in Okara and other districts of Punjab.

But this time it was against Mr. Aleem Khan, a provincial minister in Punjab and one of the richest people person in Lahore. Mr. Aleem Khan was to be exposed by the villagers of Dher Pindi who wanted to tell the stories of the land occupation and that now the Punjab government has a plan to build a road in the middle of the village. That means after land grabbing, the village will be demolished.

The first attempt to stop the press conference was by some journalists from Lahore Press Club. We had booked the press conference for Sunday 20th May at 6pm. It was all ok until the evening of Saturday 19th May.

As I was one of the speakers of the press conference, I got a call from the manager of Lahore Press Club. He told me that the press conference will not go ahead and we had to cancel it because there was mismanagement and we had a "meet the press" appointment with the president of Azad Kashmir. I immediately realized that the "meet the press" with Raja Zulqernain, the president was in the afternoon and not at 6pm. I protested and said that we knew that it was not mismanagement but Mr. Aleem Khan who had pressurized the press club to cancel this press conference. He was confused and started protesting.

I then called the general secretary of Lahore Press Club Mr. Shoiab ul Din. He knew nothing about cancellation and was surprised. He called me after half an hour and requested me to postpone the conference until Monday or Tuesday while he sorted out the mess. I agreed, he is from the Progressive Panel of journalist and is much respected.

We had planned over 100 peasants to be in the press conference. All preparations had been finalized. It was a difficult decision but we agreed to postpone it till Tuesday and informed the Press Club Management.

On Sunday, I was in the Press Club building for another press conference organized by Joint Action Committee For Peoples Rights with Hina Jilani and I A Rehm, the leaders of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. This was to show solidarity with the advocate's movement. It was a packed press conference with dozens of journalists.

I was told that the attempt by some journalists to postponement of the press conference was heatedly debated by the journalists and many were against this action.

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Mr. Aleem Khan, the minister, apart from his property business, is also an owner of a daily newspaper called Sahafat (Journalism). He has also a plan to bring out a new paper called Waqat (Time) and a private channel called Waqt as well. He has employed some of the best journalists for these institutions. At the beginning of May 2007, he donated nearly a million Rupees (\$15000) to Press Club for buying a new air conditioning system and new carpets. It was under pressure from these journalists that our press conference was initially cancelled and then postponed.

Second attempt was by Fraz Choudry, a town mayor in Lahore Gulberg. He is brother in law of Aleem Khan, the minister. Two journalists came to Labour Party Pakistan office on Tuesday afternoon, four hours before the press conference was due. They asked me to speak to Fraz Choudry on telephone. After initial hesitation, I agreed to speak. We had nearly half an hour talk. His talk was a mixture of requests, threats and bribes. He asked me to cancel the press conference and see him afterwards. It was like offering a "Dehari" (a day's labour reward). I said I would see him but after holding the press conference. The press conference will not be cancelled I told him as my last word.

Final attempt was by some 30 gangsters sent by Aleem Khan to stop the press conference. They were armed. As five of us arrived at Lahore Press Club around 5.30pm, we saw some doubtful faces inside the Press Club compound. I thought they might be people from the village that I had not met earlier.

As we entered the main hall of Press Club, they all came inside the Hall. I had checked in the meantime and found out that they were not from us. We realized the danger and went out immediately to the room of the secretary of Press Club. Shoaib Ul Din was there. I asked him to get these people outside the premises of the Press Club. Some journalists were sitting there. They got very angry on hearing this and told me that how these gangsters dare come in the Press Club. "It means even press club is not safe for the working class to hold their views," one commented. The three security guards were called in and they went along with some journalist to clear the hall.

We were asked to come inside the hall. One big bus load of our supporters also arrived with over 30 peasant women. They came with their banners and they started chanting slogans. The gangsters were standing outside the Press Club.

Initially there was some panic among the newly elected leadership of the AMP. They were terrified and told me that these gangsters will kill them and will not allow them to go back. "Why cannot we cancel the press conference to save our skins," one told me. I flatly refused to cancel and said "if you do not hold the press conference now, that is what they wanted and the whole movement will die down, your village will be demolished."

Press Club management did not allow our all supporters to get in saying, "It is not a public meeting but a press conference." But after our intervention,

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they allowed some fifty to get in.

The attempt to stop the press conference made it hot news among the journalists. They were quite a few over there. Around 8 private channels and many journalists were keen to listen our side of the story.

Dher Pindi is a village just opposite the Lahore Air Port. A Park View Housing Society by Aleem Khan was just opposite this airport. The land became very expensive. He then went on rampage to grab the land of the poor peasants of the village. By hook and crook, he took over almost 250 acre of land belonging to the peasants.

This went on till 2006. Aleem Khan became the richest person of Lahore with the help of the police, army and judges. He gave plots to all those influential that could help him to take over the land of the peasants. He contested the general elections of 2002 and was able to win a provincial seat from Lahore, Later he "bought" a ministry of technology in Punjab.

The peasants were not part of any organization. After Lahore peasant conference, they contacted us and I visited the village several times alongside with the leaders of Lahore AMP. We decided in a meeting of over hundred present to form AMP Dher Pindi. We also decided to launch a movement against building the ring road of Lahore in center of the village. We also decided to raise the issue of land grabbing. We knew what could happen but decided to go ahead.

This was all told in the press conference. Several villagers told the press how they were put in jail before their land was taken over. One Safdar told the press that he had 133 canals (17 acres) of land. All occupied by Aleem Khan without paying him a single penny. Another old person showed his hand that is not functioning because of the bullets he had to face from the gangsters of Aleem Khan before he took over his land. It was stories after stories of beatings, bullets, threats and so on.

The gangsters had to retreat for the time being. They said that in seven days, they will demolish the village and the road will be built. But we have no option but to fight.

We do not know what would be printed in the press, if printed at all. But we have decided to hold a rally in the village to tell that we will not bow down any more.

Please send your solidarity message and raise the issue where ever it is possible. Please circulate this information as much as possible. Please help however you can.