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Pakistan

We don't own Okara Military farms,' Pakistani army admits

- News from around the world -

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For the first time, the Pakistan Army has accepted that they do not own Okara Military Farms agriculture land.

In a hearing before the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) on December 31, the Okara Military Farms commandant Brigadier Rana Mohammed Fahim told a hearing that the Punjab government owns the Okara Military Farms.

The NCHR has asked government, military, tenant and civil society representatives to appear before it in a hearing on the Okara Military Farms dispute, which has been ongoing for 18 years.

The statement from the Okara Military Farms commandant supports our position in the 18 year-old land rights campaign that the army does not own the land. Military officials have never admitted this fact on record before.

I approached the NCHR in 2016 to take notice of the ongoing human rights violations in Okara.

Thirteen tenants at the farms have lost their lives during this mass movement by small farmers for ownership of land they have been cultivating for over 100 years. Around 1,900 tenants have been jailed over the period, including over 200 peasant women. Three of the main leaders of the Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (Punjab Tenants Association) are in jail, including AMP general secretary Mehar Abdul Sattar, who is serving a 10 years jail sentence on fake cases. Sattar is also joint secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a network of peasant organisations in Pakistan and a member of La Via Campisena. Another prominent AMP leader Younas Iqbal is also in jail.

AMP leader Malik Salim Jakhar was released last week on bail by the Supreme Court of Pakistan after spending almost four years in jail. He was framed in 84 fabricated police cases since 2006. AMP media adviser and elected Union Council chairman Noor Nabi was released in the last weeks of December 2018 after spending almost 19 months in jail. A local journalist, close to the movement, Husnain Raza spent 23 months in jail before he was released last year.

Most of these leaders were arrested on false police charges, of murder, attempted murder, dacoity, theft and blocking roads. All these cases were registered after tenants refused to pay the share cropping rent since 2001.

Despite the brutal repression of the AMP, only 10 percent of the tenants have agreed to pay this rent. Ninety percent are still resisting.

Over 68,000 acres of land are being cultivated by tenants in different parts of Punjab in public sector agriculture farms. Tenants demanding land rights have been victims to all sorts of state repression but the movement still continues.

The Pakistan Army's acceptance that it does not own the land at Okara is a step towards the success of our campaign for land rights.

The military has accepted the NCHR as a mediator to solve the issue. The next hearing at will be on January 17.

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Army officials told the NCHR that they would wave off all the 18 years of bad debts to tenants who are not paying the share cropping rent but they have to pay that now.

The AMP representatives have told the NCHR that they do not owe share cropping rent to the Okara military administration since it does not own it. They told the NCHR that the Punjab government is the one that owns the land and should talk to the tenants directly. They said that the land should be distributed among the tenants working here for over a century.