

Gilgit bleeds yet again

*Law & Order
Down*

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GILGIT is once again bleeding. The situation turned ugly on January 8 when Agha Ziaudin Rizvi, a prominent religious leader, was injured in an attack; he succumbed to his injuries on Thursday.

This incident angered the supporters of Mr Rizvi, and they unleashed a spree of killing and violence. The mob, spearheaded by weapon-brandishing youths, killed 12 people while property worth millions, including dozens of vehicles, was damaged and burned. Curfew was imposed and the military was called out to help the administration restore order.

The situation remains tense and the people are living in a state of fear and panic. Many, including women and children, are stranded at different places. They have no contact with their families and little hope of reaching them homes owing to the curfew. The shortage of food items and fuel for cooking and heating purposes in the harsh, cold weather is yet another problem the people have to face, not to mention the suffering of the sick, who have no way of reaching a doctor or procuring medicine.

The government has completely failed to protect the life and property of the citizens. It has not learnt from the experience of June 2004 when a weeklong curfew was imposed after bloody clashes erupted over the issue of the Islamiyat syllabus, and has not put in place any contingency plan to deal with such kinds of eventualities.

Disregarding the inconvenience to the people, and instead of cracking down on the trouble-makers, the Gilgit administration's routine method of handling similar crises is to impose a curfew in the area. This has become the way of governance,

the carpet instead of addressing them.

While the administration knows only too well that the area is prone to sectarian violence, it has not taken any concrete steps to prevent flare-ups of the kind witnessed recently. This reflects the apathy of the administration that has become hostage to a few miscreants with vested interests.

Gilgit-Baltistan deserves a full-time government. The present chief executive, the minister for Kana (Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas Affairs) cannot function from Islamabad. Executive powers must be transferred to locally elected representatives in Gilgit, and a strong governor appointed for supervision. There is no mention or any reference of Gilgit-Baltistan (Northern Areas) either in the Constitution of Pakistan nor in the interim constitution of Azad and Jammu Kashmir. The area remains a classic example of constitutional neglect.

The Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) elections ended without any real transfer of power to the elected members because the minister for Kana remains the chief executive, and constitutional and other rights for the people of the area remain low on the priority agenda. There are no signs of even introducing a local government system.

Kana continues to play the role of an obstructionist and enjoys undisputed monopoly over the area and its people. The ever-increasing legitimate demand by the people for an interim constitutional status, until the settlement of the Kashmir imbroglio, has been falling on deaf ears, despite a clear verdict by Supreme Court in 1999 on the issue.

Meanwhile, focusing on the present state of affairs, the administration needs to initiate a damage control exercise to bring the law and order situation

The administration should ensure the writ of law, instead of following a policy that is tantamount to one of appeasement. Miscreants and criminals must be nabbed and punished, and the victims appropriately compensated.

The military/civil administration that has an effective monitoring role in the Northern Areas, must be held accountable, and heads should roll for not ensuring security in the sensitive region. All efforts must be made to apprehend the attackers and pinpoint the reasons behind the assassination attempt. Likewise, nobody should be allowed to get away by giving the pretext of being caught up in the mob violence. What must also be eliminated is the dangerous trend of well-organized teenagers armed with lethal weapons carrying out executions behind the smokescreen of mob violence.

The history of Gilgit's sectarian violence goes back to the eighties. Not many know of the hundreds killed and the property worth millions destroyed. Neither is there any indication of how many of the culprits were arrested and how many punished.

This state of affairs is primarily the result of the low priority accorded to the area by successive governments who have adhered to a consistent policy of sweeping serious issues under

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in Gilgit strictly under its control. This can only be achieved if the administration makes an all out effort to apprehend those behind the present mayhem, without any discrimination.

At the same time, it should plan and distribute a comprehensive compensation package for the families of those killed and injured, and for those whose property and vehicles have been damaged in the violence. The curfew should be relaxed to enable the people to purchase supplies and to allow stranded individuals to reach their homes. Above all, the government must start working on plans to prevent the outbreak of future violence of this sort.