

### **Commission must continue**

IN January 2018, the Supreme Court appointed Amir Hani Muslim, a retired Supreme Court judge, the new head of the water commission with a mandate to ‘implement’ the recommendations of the previous commission that the apex court had formed in December 2016 in response to my constitutional petition.

In its one-year tenure, the Amir Hani commission made 276 visits across the province and held 117 proceedings. The visits helped the commission make ‘first-hand assessment’, and possibly resolve some issues instantly. Quasi-judicial proceedings, however, were held to thrash out complex issues in a transparent manner, involving all stakeholders — bureaucrats, technocrats, academia, civil society, lawyers, politicians, businessmen, and even laymen. The commission turned into a forum of first choice for many water-starved people, whether living in Tharparker’s deserts or Karachi’s posh localities.

Almost every city, town, and village of the province received benefits from its interventions. Some of the benefits accruing to the general public are: restoration of the 1,465 out of 1,800 dysfunctional reverse osmosis plants; rehabilitation of 200 rural water supply and drainage schemes, with 339 more schemes expected to be restored by June 2019; execution of a comprehensive plan to treat the 750 points where sewage mixes with freshwater bodies; forging of a cost-effective scheme to save Manchhar Lake from pollution; revival of 15 out of 33 sick water filter plants, with nine more plants to be revived by the year end; installation of 14 incinerators and a fraction heat sterilisation unit in various hospitals, with eight large-capacity incinerators to be attached to tertiary-care hospitals; and commissioning of nine water-testing laboratories by June 2019, with eight more to be added by December 2020.

Almost every city, town and village of Sindh has benefited from the water commission’s interventions.

Likewise, industrial effluents had been a major source of pollution for decades. The Sindh Environmental Protection Agency had completely failed to enforce its writ against the powerful industry. The commission’s relentless pursuit, however, bore results. The industry — including the powerful owners of sugar mills and distilleries — have given the time-bound written undertakings to instal pre-treatment plants, entailing the contempt proceedings for defaulters, and sanctions under the SEPA Act.

Under the aegis of the Commission, Hyderabad has also seen a surge in water- and sanitation-related activities. Hence, four of the six dysfunctional water filter plants having the capacity of 65 MGD now stand rehabilitated; the remaining two should be ready next year. Also, four effluent treatment plants are being restored, while the rehabilitation of a 400MGD pre-settlement lagoon in Jamshoro and overhauling of the city’s water distribution and sewage systems have seen a new spurt.

In Kotri, a new combined effluent treatment, built in 2010 at the cost of Rs700 million, had never got off the ground. As a result, industrial effluents continued to pollute the KB Feeder that supplies freshwater to Karachi. However, the plant is now scheduled to start by June 2019.

Karachi is riddled with many a malady which cannot be treated in one year. But the city got a robust head start from the commission and has opened up vistas for seeking long-term solutions to its water and sanitation problems. For instance, instead of wasting time on a congenitally defective K-IV project, the commission focused on harnessing the existing stocks of water. Thus, the 260MGD Dhabeji pumping station was made operational to augment the city's water supply by 100MGD.

Water-measuring metres were installed at the bulk-pumping stations to curb the theft/wastage of water, a whopping 190MGD. New chlorinators and modern laboratories were added to filter plants to improve water quality. The rehabilitation of water-filter plants involving major civil works has also been set in motion.

Likewise, treatment of sewage, a much-neglected issue, saw a revival under the commission. Thus, Sewage Treatment Plant-III (77MGD) was restored in June 2018. STP-I (100MGD) would start by July 2019. STP-IV (180MGD) should also operate by December 2020. Five industrial effluent treatment plants are scheduled to be built in the SITE, Trans-Lyari, F.B, Landhi and Superhighway areas.

The Defence Housing Authority has also been 'bound down' to stop releasing untreated sewage into the sea. More importantly, the KPT has undertaken to construct STP-V (100MGD) at Mai Kolachi Road in two years. Commendably, the head of commission secured this prime land (135 acres) which had been a subject of litigation between the KPT and the Sindh government. If all these schemes are executed as planned, the sea would be free from untreated effluents in two years.

Pushed by the commission, the provincial government has started procuring lands for constructing modern landfill sites in every district, including Karachi, though the pace is sluggish. However, the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board and its Chinese partner have improved their performance in Karachi. Sepa has also shown some improvements under the commission's watch, but surprisingly the former director general who was removed by Supreme Court has been reappointed by changing the rules

Some of the other important measures taken by the commission are: removal of encroachment from the nullahs; protecting the water-sanitation infrastructure from commercialisation of industrial plots; regulating water tankers, introducing online services for complaints/ reservation of tankers; providing awami tanks for water-starved communities; shutting illegal hydrants; securing water for areas like Baldia Town; preventing theft of sand and gravel from riverbeds/ channels; and ensuring clean water in some tertiary-care hospitals.

The provincial government has appreciated the commission's contributions and requested the Supreme Court to extend its term. The court accordingly endorsed the request in its order, dated Jan 14, 2019. However, since then, the fate of the commission, and by extension, of hundreds of schemes initiated/monitored by it, hang in the balance. Remember, the commission delivered because it enjoyed a unique set of advantages — judicial mandate, operational autonomy, clear objectives, a taskforce comprising competent officers/experts, and an indefatigable head. Therefore, given the water- and sewage-related issues confronting the people, only such a commission can deliver again.

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