

# INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

## Relief for ordinary citizens

By Naeem Sadiq

Have you ever seen an MNA or a minister, merrily engaged in responding to the call of nature (big or small), while squatting along a public wall? No one would believe it if you said 'yes'. Now take a round of the city, and visit Lyari, Shershah, Malir, SITE, Landhi, Orangi, Korangi, or any of the more densely populated areas, and you will find plenty of people unabashedly putting up this show in public. Do they perform this act because they 'wish to' or because they 'have to'? What are their other options? Away from home, the facility to relieve oneself within the bounds of a "char deewari" (typically called a public toilet), is simply non-existent for the 160 million people of this country. Many have come to consider boundary walls as officially designated locations to perform this essential biological function. If nothing else, they at least offer a one sided privacy to half of the population. Women, for various reasons, sensibly stay away from utilising this free out-door public wall facility.

Singapore for its population of four million people has 70,000 public toilets. Karachi for its 15 million people has less than 70. Public toilets have come to reflect the level of peace, civility and social norms of a city. Singapore now operates a "Happy Toilet" scheme that will rate public toilets with a five-star system similar to the one used for hotels. Toilets that meet the grade will soon be able to show off plaques bearing their star rating, and also qualify for the "Singapore Loo of the Year" award. When announcing the scheme, the president of the Singapore Restroom Association, said: "When toilets are clean, people are happy and healthy."

For sixty long years, we in Pakistan have been quite content with the usage of walls for performing these road side shows. Do our people not deserve just as much peace, civility, health and happiness as those in Singapore? While we push hard on big stuff (democracy, education, health, drinking water etc.), what stops us from simultaneously doing ordinary things that provide relief to ordinary people.

We spend billions on making elite islands, elite beaches, elite hospitals, elite commercial towers and elite malls, which cater only to a small affluent class, and have no consideration for the needs of ordinary citizens. They too need to cross the road, play on the beach, work for their livelihood and of course, visit a loo. Take for example the money spent on just one fancy KPT water fountain project. Plonked in the middle of the sea, purposely sprouting water, it could have provided exactly 1200 public toilets to this toilet starved city. Interestingly the monthly expenditure on the maintenance of this low priority piece of plumbing could also cater to the upkeep and hygiene of the 1200 (could have been) toilets.

Public toilets require participation of three key stake holders, the 3 Ps. People, Private and Public sector. The experience of the CPLC pilot project has amply highlighted the fact that one should not get into building public toilets unless these three pillars have been put into place. The government has a legal and moral commitment to provide basic services to its ordinary people. The government must therefore include public toilets in its city planning, provide suitable locations/land, and define basic rules for construction, maintenance and supervision of public toilets. It must also create formal mechanisms for provision of electricity, water, minimum hygiene standards as well as collection and disposal of waste.

Private sector organisations are getting increasingly conscious of their 'Corporate Social Responsibility', and have made worthwhile contributions in many areas of social development. But public toilets are still a no-go area. Too unspeakable, too low down, and meant for too ordinary people. It is time to change this perception and it can be done fast without any speeches or slogans. Just imagine the governor of a province or the chief minister using a public toilet next time he is out shopping with his family, and see

what high priority the whole subject acquires overnight.

The organisations building public toilets should also be given the right to use these locations for placement of advertisements and billboards. A prominent plaque at each public toilet must recognise the donor organisation by saying "Built and maintained by..." instead of inaugurated by such and such VIP.

The public toilet programme must recognise that public awareness, information and education on the use of public toilets is a key component, without which the whole system will come crumbling down. Voluntary citizens and organisations need to be involved to create such awareness programmes. Each public toilet must display (using local language and sketches) what pre-and-post actions a user must take to keep the toilet in a clean and hygienic condition. Even airplane toilets begin to fall apart when stretched to perform manoeuvres they are not designed for. Voluntary citizens in each locality could be sought to provide supervision, monitoring, reporting and feedback of how well the system is working.

It is time we demand a legislation that declares access to clean public toilets, a basic human right of all citizens. The law must additionally require all public places: parks, movie houses, hotels, courts, hospitals, schools, bus and train stations, petrol pumps, shopping malls and government offices frequented by members of the public, to essentially build hygienic toilet facilities as an integral part of the services they offer. Let the next grandiose water fountain find itself converted to 1200 public toilets for the well being and relief of the ordinary citizens of Karachi.

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