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Reuters

Pakistan feudalism boosts Taliban cause

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By Kamran Haider

A bill aimed at redistributing Pakistan's rich farmland is doomed to fail, like others before, because powerful feudal interests are opposed, even as the vast rich-poor gap gives the Taliban a powerful rallying cry.

Land reform has become all the more necessary for nuclear-armed Pakistan which is facing a mounting insurgency by the Taliban who have exploited grievances of landless peasants in an effort to assert their rule.

Millions of peasants, who in many places work as virtual slaves, have long demanded reform, but to no avail.

"It's to reduce the wide disparity of income and opportunity between rich landlords and poor tillers of the soil and to maximize the agriculture output," said Farooq Sattar, a mover of the bill and leader of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) that dominates the politics of the commercial hub of Karachi.

Tenants in Pakistan work the land for no pay because of debts owed to landlords, often incurred generations before. It's a classic system of share-cropping, where landless tenants hand over between two-thirds and half of their crop to landowners just to pay the interest.

"I want my kids to have a good education. They should have all necessities like others. I want my land which I cultivate for myself, my kids and family," farmer Mohammad Iqbal, standing near a cotton farm in the south of Punjab province, told Reuters.

Politicians and landowners often work hand in hand and block any move that disturbs the feudal structure from where they draw political and economic strength.

"You can ignore such reforms only at the cost of modernization and industrialization of your country," Rashid Rehman, political analyst and editor of Daily Times, said.

Mainstream parties, like President Asif Ali Zardari's Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League faction led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, are dominated by feudal lords who won't back reform.

"Land reform can only be implemented by either a strong revolutionary military leadership from the top or through a grassroots level movement," Rehman said.

The Taliban have in the past used the growing fissure between landless tenants and powerful landowners to win over hearts of poor people and dub their bloody drive as struggle against social and economic inequalities.

"By delaying (land reform), you're providing extremists and militants fuel to inflame insurgency on the basis of class division," said Sarwar Bari, head of the private Pattan Development Organization.

Nearly 62 percent of Pakistan's 170 million population depend on agriculture for their livelihoods which accounts for over 21 percent of its \$17 billion gross domestic product.

Just 37 percent of Pakistan's rural households own the land they farm, mostly in small plots that make up 15 percent of Pakistan's total land area.

Pakistan's fragile economy suffered a blow this summer as floods swept through a large swathe of land, causing \$9.7 billion in damages.

The United States wants economic and political stability of the nuclear-armed Pakistan for its fight against al Qaeda and Taliban militants and peace in Afghanistan.

Efforts to redistribute farmland among the peasants were introduced twice in Pakistan -- in the 1950s and 1970s. But those reforms were not fully implemented.

Unlike Pakistan, India -- now an Asian economic power -- enacted land reform soon after independence in 1947.

