

DAWN

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Housing project on NARC land opposed

ISLAMABAD: The Pakistan Academy of Sciences (PAS) on Thursday opposed a proposal of the Capital Development Authority (CDA) to establish a housing society on the land of the National Agricultural Research Centre (NARC) at Chak Shahzad.

Scientists associated with the academy at a press conference appealed to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to intervene and stop what they said a conspiracy to convert the 1,395 acres into a residential and commercial area. It was also alleged that PML-N lawmaker Tariq Fazal Chaudhry was behind the conspiracy. However, the MNA denied the allegation.

It may be mentioned that the CDA has submitted a proposal to the prime minister to allow it to convert the land into a residential and commercial sector to generate revenues.

Dr Amir Mohammad, the founder and first chairman of the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council (PARC), told mediapersons that agriculture was the only sector which can address the issues of economy.

"If we want to progress in the field of agriculture and meet the requirements of the increasing population, we have to continue research work in the field of agriculture."

He added: "We should further develop NARC instead of setting up a housing society on the land reserved for research." He said there were also laboratories and equipment which cannot be shifted.

Dr Mohammad Anwar said PAS was established in 1955 and had been working to resolve

problems related to the development of science.

"As many as 70 per cent people of Pakistan are directly or indirectly associated with agriculture so the main emphasis of the government should be on this sector," he said.

PAS secretary general Dr Zabta Khan Shinwari said agriculture research was the only means for attainment of food security. The new crop varieties and technologies developed by NARC are generating regular benefits worth billions of rupees.

"The development of rust-resistant wheat has generated benefits worth Rs2,000 billion since 1980. Due to the efforts of the National Reference Lab of Poultry Diseases, Pakistan has been declared a bird flu-free country and Middle East has lifted a ban on the import of poultry products from Pakistan," he added.

A representative of the PARC, Aftab Sheikh, said the lease of the 1,395 acres expired in 2005 and since then requests had been sent to the CDA for the renewal of the lease but the civic agency never replied.

"We are still paying the rent and the CDA receives it without any objection. It is impossible to shift the NARC to some other place," he said.

General secretary PARC Scientist Association Azizullah Shah said his association had contacted the ministry of food and agriculture to resolve the issue. "The ministry has assured us that it will defend the case against the CDA," he said.

Mohammad Nadeem Iqbal, who has been

doing organic farming and got training from NARC, alleged that MNA Tariq Fazal Chaudhry was one of the masterminds behind the project.

"Mr Chaudhry has 100 acres adjacent to NARC and wants to get benefits. According to the master plan of Islamabad, Zone IV has to be used for agriculture purposes only. The CDA has failed to take action against influential personalities who converted farmhouses into residential areas and now are eyeing on the land of NARC," he said.

When contacted, MNA Tariq Fazal told Dawn that though he had a piece of land in Chak Shahzad, it was almost two kilometres away far from the land of NARC.

"My land is almost 70 kanals and that of NARC about 11,000 kanals, so it is illogical to associate my land with the project. Moreover, I have inherited the land from my father and will not sell it at any cost." He said it was the plan and vision of the CDA to make a mega project on the land.

An official of the CDA requesting not to be identified said: "The federal government wants to start the project and that is why the prime minister has approved the project. Those behind the project are of the view that NARC should be shifted out of the city because the land at Chak Shahzad can generate billions of rupees," he said.

CDA spokesman Ramzan Sajid said he was not aware of the matter. However, he confirmed that the lease of the land expired in 2005 and could not be renewed. — A Re