

Business Standard

How a 10 billion-tree plan is restoring Pakistan's lost forests

18 December 2020



Pakistan's arid climate and rocky deserts may seem an unlikely place to look for a green revolution, but the nation of more than 200 million people has begun one of the world's largest reforestation programs.

The government is in the first phase of planting 3.25 billion trees at an estimated cost of around Rs 105 billion (\$650 million), Malik Amin Aslam, minister for climate change said in an interview. Prime Minister Imran Khan wants to extend that to almost 10 billion by the time his term in office ends in 2023.



Trees and plants are grown along the M9 highway in Karachi. Photographer Asim Hafeez/Bloomberg

"We are trying to unleash a green economy," Aslam said by phone.

The task is enormous. Pakistan is among the six countries that face the biggest impact from climate change, according to the United Nations, with risks of floods, melting glaciers and droughts. Its forest cover is now among the lowest in the world – about 5% of the land, compared with a global average of 31%, according to UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

“Unfortunately, we never cared about them,” said Khan at a tree-planting ceremony in July. “After independence from the British, we have lost forests instead of adding to them.”

Pakistan is planting trees that need relatively little water, like the *azadirachta indica*, a fast-growing mahogany commonly known as the neem tree. Neems typically don’t need to be watered after the first five years, while the other species that have been chosen only need extra water for the first few months, according to Tabish Hussain, a government-employed forester in Karachi.

Khan has been advocating reforestation since his days as a professional cricketer more than three decades ago. He has added nine new national parks, the first additions since independence in 1947. As provincial ruler of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province he oversaw a billion-tree planting program that raised the region’s forest cover to 27%, from 20%, in the five years to 2019.

When Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman visited Pakistan for the first time last year, he was invited to add some soil with a shovel and to water a plant at Pakistan’s Prime Minister House. On Aug. 9, Khan asked everyone in the nation to plant a tree, with a target of 3.5 million for the day.



Trees and plants are grown at the Northern Bypass in Karachi. Photographer Asim Hafeez/Bloomberg

Despite Khan’s efforts to raise public awareness, economic pressures continue to beset the nation’s [forests](#). The need to feed the world’s fifth largest population means that most fertile land has already been turned over to food grains like wheat or cash crops like cotton. Trees are also cut down to make firewood, though the government has tried to curb the practice in recent years.

Critics say the government may struggle to undo the damage to the nation’s [forests](#).

“It’s not enough,” said Lahore-based climate policy consultant Dawar Butt. “The government has other agendas as well.” He said that while the central administration has the environment as a top priority, “actual environment-related laws are broken by state institutions.”

Often in the past, many energy and infrastructure projects skipped public environmental-impact hearings and many construction programs still do, Butt said.



Workers prepare plant pots at a forest nursery on the M9 highway in Karachi. Photographer Asim Hafeez/Bloomberg

The nation has also been investing heavily in coal, one of the biggest polluters. With Chinese backing, Pakistan inaugurated its biggest coal mine last year and produced a record 20% of its electricity from the fossil fuel in the fiscal year through June. It generated only 3% from solar and wind. The government has set a target of drawing 30% of its power from renewables by 2030.



A Sindh forest department team member works at the mangrove plantation island along the Karachi coast sea belt in Karachi, Pakistan, on Friday, Nov. 20, 2020. Photographer Asim Hafeez/Bloomberg

In addition to restoring some eco-systems and absorbing planet-warming carbon emissions, the tree plantation drive has provided thousand of jobs in a country that struggles with unemployment. “I am hopeful that we can save our nation,” said Khan. “You go to Dubai, its all a desert, they don’t have trees. God has given us everything; we just need to take care of it.”

Source: https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/how-a-10-billion-tree-plan-is-restoring-pakistan-s-lost-forests-120121800148_1.html