

Fatal safari highlights desert people's miseries

THE death of PPP leader and former MPA Khalilullah Khan Laaber in the wilds of Cholistan due to thirst two weeks ago has once again highlighted the miseries the desert people have been facing for the last one year.

Laaber, 55, died of thirst during a hunting venture when the vehicles he and his friends were riding on developed faults in the desert. When a rescue team spotted them after a day's search, Laaber was breathing his last while rest of the team members were half-dead.

The account of the 'fatal' safari was revealed to Dawn by one of the survivors:

Laaber and his five friends — suspended MPA Farooq Khar, his brother-in-law Murtaza Khar, journalist Shakeel Anjum, Munna Sheikh and Moni — set off from Multan for Cholistan to hunt deer and partridges. From Derawar Fort near Ahmadpur East they hired the services of two desert guides, Hakeemullah and Imam Bakhsh, and started the safari on two vehicles at about 2.30 pm.

Hardly after a two-hour journey one of the vehicles developed fault at Toba Dandwali. Farooq Khar, Moni and guide Imam Bakhsh stayed there while rest of the party went ahead because the deer can be easily found before 12 at night when they come out of their shelters in search of water.

After another two-and-a-half-hour travel, the second vehicle also broke down near 'toba' (pond) Gurareywala in the interior of the desert. Alarm bells rang for the hunting team as there was no habitation nearby.

At that point the hunters had two options — make to the rangers' post near the Indian border which was 10km away and surrender them-

selves for illegal hunting or walk back to Kheersar village, 40km away, where water was available.

The visitors went for the first option but guide Hakeemullah shot down the idea on the ground that the rangers had shoot-on-sight orders. So the party left for Kheersar.

It was 7 pm. The guide told the members that if they kept on walking briskly and uninterrupted they would reach the destination by 10am. However, at 2am the former MP had exhausted.

After the guide told them that they would be in serious trouble in the desert heat if they did not reach the village before noon, the team held a discussion and decided to leave Laaber and Murtaza Khar, who was also moving slowly, behind. The other three moved briskly so that they could seek some help for Laaber and Khar from Kheersar. The two were given a litre of water each and told to follow the same track if they could.

The next 'casualty' was Munna Shiekh who collapsed after a two-hour walk and fainted. "His collapse sent shockwaves among us as we apprehended a similar fate," said Shakeel Anjum who was still under the shock of this nightmare journey.

With a pledge to fight the death Shakeel and Hakeem gathered all their energies and moved swiftly. At that time they were left with a small quantity of water.

"On our way we twice came across lethal Khapra snakes of Cholistan but they failed to terrify us in the face of looming death due to thirst," Shakeel added.

When they reached Kheersar at 9am, more trouble was in store for them. The village was deserted because its inhabitants had left the area in

search of water and food. Helmets were locked and animal remains were lying here and there. Tobas had dried up. "We started breaking the locks but failed to find water. After a long search we spotted a fibreglass water tank. It had little water which was littered with dead insects. We extracted some water and soaked our throats".

In the meantime, the three who stayed with the first out-of-order vehicle at Toba Dandwali got worried in the morning when the hunting team did not return. They managed to bring their vehicle back into operation and reached the Derawar Fort. There they arranged four jeeps, more guides and water and started searching their missing companions.

The rescue team spotted Laaber, Khar and Munna 10km away from Kheersar where they had taken shelter under bushes by spreading their shirts over them. Laaber was breathing his last while other two were unconscious.

In the evening the team found Shakeel and Hakeem. The survivors remained bed-ridden for the next three days as neither they could walk nor talk.

Cholistan received last downpour in 1998. Thereafter it received scattered rain on a couple of occasions which failed to make any difference.

As the drought continues to aggravate with rise in mercury, the desert and its affected people area getting little government attention. The Bahawalpur administration which did not make in-time arrangements to save the Cholistanis and their livestock is yet to set its priorities right. In March it spent a huge sum on multi-event 'Jashn-i-Rohi' (the festival of Cholistan). The same amount could have been used to mitigate the sufferings of the displaced people.