

Pakistan: Report lifts veil on military and intelligence apparatus' repression in Balochistan

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11 August 2011

A report released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) late last month is a devastating exposure of the brutal and inhumane tactics Pakistan's military and security agencies are using to suppress Baloch secessionists and nationalists in the country's poorest province.

The 132-page report documents the widespread use of enforced disappearances in Balochistan and reveals how Pakistan's sinister security forces use kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial killings to terrorize the long-suffering Baloch people into submission. The report is a damning indictment of the PPP-led central government, under which Pakistan's security services continue to commit atrocities in Balochistan and elsewhere with impunity.

Entitled "We Can Torture, Kill, or Keep You for Years: Enforced Disappearances by Pakistan Security Forces in Balochistan," the report is based on interviews with a hundred individuals, including relatives of the "disappeared," persons who had been secretly detained and then released, local human rights activists and lawyers and witnesses to kidnappings and killings perpetrated by Pakistani security forces. An appendix to the report contains detailed descriptions of 45 cases of enforced disappearances, the majority of which were reported in 2009 and 2010. Teachers, students, political activists, and journalists have all been targeted by the state.

"These cases show that Pakistan's security forces, particularly its intelligence agencies, targeted for enforced disappearance ethnic Baloch suspected of involvement in the Baloch nationalist movement," the report notes. People are often targeted for their tribal affiliation, especially after a particular tribe was involved in clashes with Pakistan's armed forces.

It is unclear exactly how many enforced disappearances have been perpetrated by Pakistan's security forces in recent years. Baloch nationalists claim that thousands are missing.

In some cases, representatives of intelligence agencies admitted their responsibility for abductions to Balochis searching for missing family members. Relatives of the disappeared overwhelmingly blame Pakistan's intelligence agencies and the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) for kidnapping their loved ones. Many of those abducted for belonging to or having links to groups like the Baloch Republican Party (BRP), Baloch National Front (BNF), Baloch National Party (BNP) and Baloch Student Organization (Azad) (BSO-Azad) have never been seen again.

While the nationalist insurgency in Balochistan is rooted in oppression and discrimination, none of these groups express the interests of ordinary Balochis. Their reactionary nationalist orientation makes it impossible for them to appeal to workers and toilers throughout Pakistan and internationally. Various Baloch nationalist groups promote anti-Punjabi and anti-Pashtun sentiment in Balochistan and launch communal attacks against Punjabis and other non-Balochis residing in the province. The right-wing character of such groups is underscored by their increasingly explicit attempts to gain the political support of US imperialism.

Since the establishment of the Pakistani state through the communal partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, there have been five nationalist insurgencies in Balochistan. The current insurgency has been raging since 2004. In 2005, prominent Baloch nationalists Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and Mir Balach Marri presented a 15-point manifesto to the Pakistani government, demanding greater control of the province's resources and an end to the construction of military bases. The conflict intensified in 2006 after Bugti was killed by the Pakistani army, which had trapped him in his cave hideout.

Pakistan's western-most province, Balochistan constitutes almost 45 percent of the country's land mass. But, largely desert, Balochistan is sparsely populated, accounting for about 5 percent of Pakistan's total population. The majority of the eight million people residing in Balochistan live in rural areas. The Baloch represent the largest ethnic group in the province and Balochi is the most widely spoken language, but there is also a sizable Pashtun population, especially in the northern districts of Balochistan. Thirty percent of the province's population claim Pashto as their first language.

The most remote part of the province, Eastern Balochistan, contains the country's richest (though mostly untapped) natural resource deposits, including oil, gas, copper and gold. The report notes that Eastern Balochistan is "the area where the struggle for power between the Pakistani state and local tribal elites has been most apparent."

Balochistan is strategically located between Iran and Afghanistan, and contains the second most important supply route for the US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan. The strategic location and abundant natural resources of the province have made it the subject of an intensifying rivalry between the major capitalist powers, above all the United States and China, both of which seek to dominate the region so as to control and exploit its resources. In May, Pakistan proposed that China take control of the newly-built Arabian Sea port facility in Gwadar, located in southern Balochistan. The port has long been the focus of US strategic concerns because it could potentially allow China to transport oil and natural gas from the Middle East overland to western China, thereby bypassing the Straits of Malacca and other ocean "chokepoints." China financed the construction of the Gwadar port, leading to repeated warning from US strategists that it could ultimately serve as a Chinese naval base.

While Balochistan is rich in natural resources, it remains by far Pakistan's poorest and least developed province. 27 percent of children under the age of five in the province were found to be malnourished in 2010. Nearly half of the province's population suffers from "extreme educational poverty," having received less than two years of education.

"A vast majority of the people in the province—mainly in its Baloch-dominated central and southern regions—live below the poverty line with next to no means of earning a livelihood. They have minimal access to

education, health, roads, electricity and other means of communication,” noted a recent report in the *Dawn*, a Karachi-based English-language daily. “Most of them have never heard about a flush toilet, a sewerage disposal system and running tap water. Their ramshackle abodes are as basic as the temporary shelters in a badly run refugee camp and their belongings as nominal as those of any asset-less group of people in a war-ravaged African country.”

These miserable social conditions are the result of decades of abuse and neglect by the federal government, and have long fueled resentment among ordinary Balochis and fostered nationalist sentiment among the local Baloch elite.

“Militancy in Balochistan has been fueled by ethnic Baloch anger over the Pakistani government’s efforts to harness local mineral and fossil fuel resources, maintain large numbers of troops in the province, and construct the Gwadar deep-sea port at the mouth of the Persian Gulf with non-Baloch workers,” states the HRW report.

Throughout Pakistan’s history, the national bourgeoisie has trampled over the democratic rights of the country’s workers and toilers, with civilian law enforcement authorities and military-intelligence agencies routinely perpetrating human rights violations against individuals even in those periods when the country has not been under military dictatorship. However, as the report notes, “the proliferation of enforced disappearances by the security forces has been a relatively recent development.”

Indeed, Pakistan entered a new era of human rights abuses following the US-led imperialist invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 2001. Under the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan made a strategic reversal, withdrawing its sponsorship of the Taliban regime in Kabul and providing logistical support for the neo-colonial invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Under Musharraf, Pakistan provided US imperialism with offshore torture sights. Moreover, hundreds, if not thousands, of ordinary Pakistanis were kidnapped by security forces and handed over to the US, often for money. Many of these individuals remain missing, their distraught families anxiously awaiting any news of their whereabouts.

While initially aimed at suspected Taliban-aligned militants, Pakistani authorities soon adopted these illegal and brutal methods against Baloch nationalists.

Confident of the support they enjoy from both Pakistan’s military and civilian leaders, security forces in Balochistan kidnap people in broad daylight, often in crowded public areas, and in the presence of many witnesses. The cases documented in the HRW report include victims who were dragged away from shops and hotels, university campuses, and places of work.

The ruthlessness of the security forces is demonstrated by their targeting of young children involved with Baloch nationalist groups or with relatives associated with such groups. According to the report, “On March 5, 2010, 14-year-old Nasibullah Langao and 12-year-old Abdul Waheed, students from Ismail village in Hudda district, were allegedly disappeared after they started making inquiries about the killing of Langao’s uncle, Abdul Majid Langao.” An active member of the Baloch National Front, Abdul Majid had been shot dead by FC soldiers and men in civilian clothes in front of multiple witnesses when he answered the door at his house just days before. “The men took away Abdul Majid’s body as well as various pieces of property from the house. In response to protests in the village, the body was eventually returned to the family, but not the property.”

According to their families, the boys Nasibullah Langao and Abdul Waheed have not been seen since they were snatched from the street in broad daylight a few days after they went to the Frontier Corps and police to find out what happened to Nasibullah’s uncle and to retrieve his belongings.

As in the Pashtun-dominated northwest tribal areas, the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies have used torture and extrajudicial killings to mercilessly suppress the nationalists and to intimidate the local population.

“The methods of torture,” says the HRW report, include “prolonged beatings, often with sticks or leather belts, hanging the detainees upside down, and food and sleep deprivation.”

HRW interviewed Bashir Azeem, a medical doctor and the secretary general of the Baloch Republican Party, who vividly described the gruesome torture he was forced to endure during his last illegal detention in 2009: “There was no floor in the cell, just the dirt ground, and a plastic bottle for urinating. They soon brought me for another interrogation. They hung me upside down by the feet, and kept asking who was financing us, and where the militants were. The following days they continued torturing me in various ways. They pushed pins under my nails, put a chair on my back and sat on top of it, and put me for 48 hours into a room where I could only stand but not move. When they took me out, my legs were so swollen that I collapsed on the floor and fainted.”

Some of those abducted are murdered while in custody, their bullet-ridden bodies turning up alongside roads around the province. The corpses often display signs of severe torture.

According to the report, “There is increasing evidence to substantiate the fears of many families that disappeared relatives who have been missing for months or years have been killed in custody.” Local groups have discovered 180 bodies in recent months, mostly of men who were reportedly kidnapped by the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) in cooperation with Frontier Corps paramilitaries.

“The bullet-riddled body of 14-year-old Baloch Student Organization-Azad activist Mohammad Khan Zohaib was also found in Khuzdar, on October 20, 2010,” notes the report. “According to Baloch human rights activists, Zohaib’s relatives said that FC soldiers had abducted him in July 2010.”

Many released detainees, witnesses to kidnappings and arrests, and relatives of the victims have been threatened by the authorities for seeking information and demanding justice.

A 2007 hearing on nearly 200 cases of enforced disappearances submitted to the Supreme Court by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan led to the release of information regarding the whereabouts of 99 individuals and highlighted the role of the army and intelligence agencies in the abductions. Hopes were raised among some Balochis, who believed that the Supreme Court and higher courts would begin to take action to locate the disappeared and punish the perpetrators. However, Musharraf dismissed the chief justice and several other justices, partly to forestall judicial activity on such cases, but mainly because he feared they would not rubber stamp a staged election which was to be held later that year.

“Under President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan’s military ruler from 1999 until 2008, the situation deteriorated markedly,” declares the HRW report. “Two assassination attempts on Musharraf in 2005 and 2006 during visits to Balochistan resulted in a crackdown on Baloch nationalists by the armed forces and Military Intelligence (MI), its lead intelligence agency in the province. These operations ultimately led to the killing in August 2006 of influential tribal chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti and 35 of his close followers.”

Hopes were raised once again with the coming to power of a civilian government in 2008 led by the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP). PPP leaders paid lip-service to provincial autonomy and pledged to improve social conditions in Balochistan through a series of half-measures including giving local government authorities a greater share of resource-industry revenue and increased funding for development. However, these limited measures have been rejected by Baloch nationalist leaders who’ve stated that they do not adequately address their core grievances or enable greater provincial autonomy. Social indicators in the province have not

improved in the slightest since 2008.

Moreover, the PPP government has refused to take any action to stop the practice of enforced disappearances. “The national government has done little to end the carnage,” said HRW’s Asia director, Brad Adams. “President Asif Ali Zardari has to realize it cannot just be wished away.”

The HRW report has been contemptuously dismissed by the Pakistani army. “It is a one-sided report and we outrightly reject the conclusion drawn by this report,” said army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas.

While the grievances of the Baloch people are entirely legitimate, the various nationalist and separatist groups who claim to defend their interests are themselves responsible for numerous atrocities. Besides attacking gas pipelines, railway lines and electricity networks, militant Baloch nationalists have carried out ethnically motivated and sectarian killings, especially in Quetta. Their main targets are overwhelmingly ordinary Punjabis and Pashtuns, who they deride as “settlers.” Punjabi-owned businesses and schools have been attacked throughout the province, with many educators viciously assaulted and murdered simply for their ethnicity. At least 100,000 people are believed to have fled Balochistan since 2008 due to communal violence.

The nationalist perspective of groups such as the BRP and BNF does not in any way express the interests of Balochi workers and toilers, but rather those of a tiny tribal elite. The eradication of oppression, poverty and inequality in Balochistan and throughout the country will only be achieved through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class and rural toilers, united across ethnic and religious lines and armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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