

UN delegation snubbed by Pakistani officials as violence ravages Balochistan

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A United Nations team investigating the fate of thousands of alleged “disappeared” in Balochistan ended a 10-day fact-finding trip last week, during which it was snubbed by the military and other leading Pakistani institutions.

Balochi nationalist groups and human rights organizations allege that the country’s intelligence and law enforcement agencies have illegally detained thousands of people in recent years. While some have turned up as corpses, the fate of thousands of others remains unknown.

Pakistan’s government invited the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances to visit the country. But Pakistan’s principal intelligence agency, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), and the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) refused to have anything to do with the mission, as did Pakistan’s Supreme Court, which has conducted its own inquiries into the “disappeared.”

Balochistan has been the scene of an increasingly deadly nationalist-separatist insurgency since 2004. While the insurgent groups, which are led by various representatives of the local Balochi tribal-landowning elite, offer no viable progressive perspective for the workers and toilers of Balochistan, the insurgency has drawn on the deep-rooted grievances of the Balochi people. Although Balochistan has great natural resource wealth, the province is far and away Pakistan’s poorest. Moreover, the Pakistani military has responded to the insurgency—the fifth since 1947—with its customary brutality and indifference to elementary democratic rights.

In recent months, Balochistan has also been ravaged by sectarian violence. Scores of Hazaras, a Shia group from Afghanistan, have been killed in attacks carried out by Sunni fundamentalists, some of them with ties to Balochi nationalist groups.

While in Pakistan, the UN delegation urged the government to do more to address the problem of missing persons in the country. “Relatives of the disappeared persons have the right to the truth, the right to justice and the right to reparation,” one of the working group members, Olivier de Frouville, said during a press conference in Islamabad. “It is

the duty of the state of Pakistan to take all necessary measures to make those rights effective.”

As the delegation began its tour of Pakistan, reports of more disappearances were emerging from Quetta. “On Wednesday, two days after the UN mission arrived in Islamabad, residents in southern Balochistan alleged security forces had taken away two more men in vehicles,” reported the *Dawn*. The monitoring group, Baloch National Voice said another 14 men were detained at a military checkpoint on September 14. The bullet-ridden bodies of six of them have since been discovered, the group said. It added that the dead men had been blindfolded and that their hands had been tied behind their backs.

Pakistani human rights groups have long accused the country’s sinister intelligence agencies of kidnapping people and holding them without charges or killing them and dumping their bodies.

Last year, the New York-based Human Rights Watch released an extensive report documenting the widespread use of “enforced disappearances” in Balochistan. It detailed how Pakistan’s security forces have used kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial killings to terrorize the Baloch people. More than 300 bodies have been found dumped by roadsides or abandoned on waste-ground in the province since early 2011, according to Human Rights Watch. Many of the bodies bear cigarette burns, broken limbs or other signs of torture. Teachers, students and political and human rights activists have all been targeted by the security forces.

“How many will they kill?” Yusuf Baluch told the *Dawn*. Baluch found the mutilated body of his son, Asif, last year, several months after he was taken away in Karachi, which is in the neighbouring province of Sind but is home to large numbers of Balochis.

While the Balochistan provincial government claims that less than 100 people remain missing in in the province, Baloch nationalist organizations claim the total of outstanding “disappeared” is in the thousands.

The insurgency in Balochistan is a highly sensitive issue for the Pakistani elite and it should come as no surprise that

the UN delegation received a frosty response in Islamabad. When rightwing Republicans sponsored a Congressional committee hearing into the human rights situation in Balochistan last February, Pakistani politicians responded furiously, and the National Assembly unanimously passed an opposition-sponsored resolution to condemn the hearing. (See: US Congress to debate motion on “self-determination” for Pakistani Balochistan)

The UN team’s recently concluded visit prompted complaints from Pakistani lawmakers who said the group’s presence was a violation of the country’s sovereignty. Some government officials who spoke to the delegation downplayed the number of missing people, claiming that many of them were criminals in hiding, had joined militant groups, or had been kidnapped by non-state actors.

Despite the lack of cooperation from Islamabad, there is no doubt that sections of the Pakistani ruling elite are deeply concerned about the turmoil in Balochistan. Increasingly fearful that the situation in Balochistan could spin out of control, sections of the elite have been moved to act on the missing persons issue.

The Supreme Court has been investigating the disappearances and targeted killings in Balochistan for several months. Many hearings have been held, but as of yet not a single government or military official has been held accountable. On September 19, the court rejected a jointly filed response by Interior Secretary Khawaja Muhammad Siddiq Akbar, Defence Secretary Asif Yasin Malik and Chief Secretary Balochistan Babar Yaqoob Fateh Muhammad that denied security forces were responsible for the missing persons in Balochistan. Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry stated that the court would have to issue orders if the prime minister and president failed to settle Balochistan problem.

“The Chief Justice said if Balochistan is in jeopardy, then the whole country is in danger, the situation in the province is day by day deteriorating and there is no place for those who do not obey the orders of the court,” according to the South Asian News Agency. Earlier this month, Chaudhry warned that the province was a “volcano ready to explode” and said it was dangerous for outsiders to review Pakistan’s internal affairs.

The statement by the Chief Justice indicates the severity of the crisis in Balochistan and underscores the geostrategic significance of the province. Balochistan contains Pakistan’s richest natural resource deposits, including oil, gas, copper and gold. The province is also strategically located between Iran and Afghanistan, and contains the second most important supply route for the US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan. Balochistan’s strategic location and natural resource deposits have made it the subject of rivalry between

the major powers, above all the United States and China, with various U.S. strategic think tanks warning that the Chinese-built port in Gwadar could serve as a future Chinese naval base. Pakistan has also accused its archrival India of stoking the nationalist insurgency in Balochistan.

Under conditions where Islamabad has repeatedly come under heavy pressure from Washington to be even more supportive of the Afghan War and Pakistan finds itself caught between the growing frictions between its two most important allies—the U.S. and China—the Pakistani ruling establishment is increasingly fearful that the US could use the “human rights situation” in Balochistan as a means of coercing or punishing it, or even to justify a U.S. intervention.

Washington has a record second to none in cynically raising human rights abuses and the “right of peoples to self-determination” as a cover for its own imperialist brigandage.

Pakistani elite fears of U.S. attempts to manipulate the Balochistan issue for its own ends have been fed by the attempts of the various Baloch nationalist and separatist groups to win Washington’s favor.

Groups such as the Baloch Republican Party and Baloch National Front do not in any way represent the interests of Baloch workers, but rather those of Baloch tribal chiefs and big landlords. Such groups have repeatedly displayed their reactionary character by committing atrocities against innocent Pashtuns and Punjabis throughout Balochistan.

Only the revolutionary mobilization of the working class, united across national and ethnic lines can bring an end to the oppression, poverty and inequality that plagues Balochistan and the rest of the country.



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