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Unseen Shadows: The Crisis of Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the grave human rights crisis of enforced disappearances in Balochistan, Pakistan, a region marked by decades of political unrest and insurgency. It examines the historical context of the Baloch conflict, beginning with colonial legacies and continuing through post-independence insurgencies, to explain the root causes of the current situation. The practice of enforced disappearances, predominantly carried out by state security forces, targets political activists, students, journalists, and civilians, leading to widespread fear and repression. The impact on families and communities is profound, leaving survivors in a cycle of trauma and economic hardship. Despite international human rights frameworks and Pakistan's legislative efforts to criminalize enforced disappearances, the lack of accountability and impunity for security forces remains a significant challenge. The paper also reviews the international response, highlighting the role of human rights organizations and the need for stronger legal reforms and political dialogue to address this crisis. It concludes with recommendations for fostering justice, accountability, and reconciliation in Balochistan.

KEYWORDS

Balochistan, enforced disappearances, human rights, political conflict, insurgency, security forces, accountability, international law, justice, Pakistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Enforced disappearances in Balochistan, Pakistan, have escalated into a significant human rights crisis, characterized by systematic abductions carried out by state security forces. Families are left in limbo, deprived of their loved ones, and subjected to a cycle of trauma, grief, and fear. The crisis reflects deeper political, economic, and social tensions that have plagued the province for decades. This paper will explore the historical roots of the Balochistan conflict, the scope of ongoing human rights violations¹, the international response to these abuses, and potential pathways toward justice and accountability.

Since 2003, human rights organizations have estimated that approximately 7,000 people have been forcibly disappeared in Balochistan. These disappearances affect not only political activists or insurgents but also ordinary civilians, students, journalists, and human rights defenders, making the crisis pervasive across social strata².

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BALOCHISTAN CONFLICT

Balochistan, the largest and least developed province of Pakistan, has a long history of unrest and rebellion against the central state, driven by a sense of marginalization and injustice. This section outlines the historical underpinnings that have shaped the current conflict and led to the prevalence of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances.

Before British rule, Balochistan was a region with fragmented tribal structures, where tribal leaders held significant autonomy.

¹ Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, "Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan," Annual Report (2022), <http://vbmp.org.pk/reports>.

² Dawn, *Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan: Families Seek Justice*, (Mar. 16, 2021), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612848>.

British colonialism introduced new governance systems, often pitting local tribes against each other to maintain control. The colonial strategy of divide-and-rule led to long-term disunity within Balochistan. The British drew arbitrary boundaries, disregarding local ethnic divisions, and imposed their administrative framework on an already complex socio-political fabric.

The British legacy continues to influence Balochistan's conflict. The Durand Line, the border demarcation between British India and Afghanistan, cut through the traditional Baloch territory, dividing the Baloch people between modern-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. This artificial boundary contributed to the Baloch's ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-determination³.

Upon gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited the colonial legacy of territorial and ethnic tensions. Balochistan was reluctantly incorporated into Pakistan in 1948, when the Kalat state, one of the princely states in the region, was annexed by the Pakistani government, despite the resistance of its ruler. The forced annexation sowed seeds of resentment that have fuelled multiple insurgencies.

The first insurgency erupted in 1948, followed by others in 1958, 1962, 1973, and the current phase, which began in the early 2000s. Each uprising was a response to the central government's military aggression, political exclusion, and economic marginalization. While the Baloch sought greater political autonomy and control over their resources, the state responded with military operations that further alienated the local population.

³ Dawn, *Missing Persons in Balochistan: A Silent Crisis*, (May 29, 2019), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1485334>.

Balochistan has experienced several waves of insurgency, each exacerbated by different political and economic grievances. The second major insurgency in the 1960s was a response to Islamabad's efforts to centralize power and the nationalization of local resources. During this time, the Pakistani government began large-scale extraction of Balochistan's natural resources, such as gas and minerals, without adequate revenue-sharing with local communities. This fuelled resentment as Balochistan remained one of the least developed provinces, despite being rich in resources⁴.

The third insurgency in the 1970s was the most intense, involving large-scale military operations. It was ignited by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's dismissal of a democratically elected provincial government in Balochistan. The military's use of force, including aerial bombings, led to widespread displacement and suffering. The conflict continued until 1977, when General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime offered limited political concessions.

The current insurgency, which began in the early 2000s, is rooted in grievances over the exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources, particularly the Gwadar port and other development projects that the local population views as benefiting outsiders more than the Baloch people. Armed groups, such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), have emerged as key actors in this conflict, demanding greater autonomy or outright independence for Balochistan.

Balochistan's strategic significance goes beyond its borders, as it lies at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, bordering both

⁴ International Commission of Jurists, *Enforced Disappearances and Extrajudicial Killings in Balochistan: Testimonies of Victims and Families* (2011).

Afghanistan and Iran. The region's geostrategic location makes it a focal point for international interests, including the U.S., China, India, and Iran. China's investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes the development of Gwadar port, has further complicated the conflict. Baloch insurgents view these projects as exploitative, benefitting foreign investors and the Pakistani state at the expense of the local population.

India has been accused by Pakistan of supporting Baloch insurgent groups, further intensifying the conflict's regional dimensions. Similarly, Iran has expressed concern over Baloch nationalist movements spilling over into its own Baloch-majority region. The geopolitical stakes complicate efforts to resolve the conflict and exacerbate local grievances.

3. CURRENT SITUATION: ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Enforced disappearances in Balochistan have become a deeply entrenched form of state repression, particularly against individuals perceived as dissenting voices or potential threats to state control. The Pakistani military and intelligence agencies, especially the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Frontier Corps (FC), are frequently accused of orchestrating these disappearances with little fear of legal repercussions. This systematic practice has fostered a pervasive culture of fear, as families and communities grapple with the uncertainty of their loved ones' fates while navigating the constant threat of further repression.

The practice of enforced disappearances in Balochistan typically follows a set pattern. Security forces often conduct abductions during military operations, particularly in areas suspected of harboring insurgents. These operations frequently occur in

remote villages or during nighttime raids, where individuals are taken from their homes without any formal charges, arrest warrants, or judicial oversight. Victims are also commonly abducted from checkpoints or public spaces, with no explanation given to their families⁵.

Once abducted, the victims are held in secret detention centers, the locations of which remain undisclosed⁶. These facilities are often run by the military or intelligence agencies, and they operate outside the purview of the judicial system, with no records or acknowledgment of the detentions. The detained individuals are often subjected to physical and psychological torture, with methods ranging from severe beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, and even sexual violence. The goal of such torture is to extract information, coerce confessions, or instill fear in the victim and their community.

In many cases, the families of the disappeared are kept in the dark about their loved ones' whereabouts. When they inquire with local authorities, they are met with silence or, worse, intimidation and threats. This atmosphere of intimidation has made it exceedingly difficult for families to seek legal recourse, as pursuing justice is often seen as inviting further scrutiny or punishment from the state.

One of the most chilling aspects of enforced disappearances in Balochistan is the widely reported "kill and dump" strategy. This tactic involves the extrajudicial killing of disappeared persons, whose mutilated bodies are later found dumped in remote, uninhabited areas. Often, these bodies show signs of extreme

⁵ Asian Human Rights Commission, *Pakistan: Balochistan - Disappearances in Focus*, AHRC-STM-016-2010 (Jan. 26, 2010).

⁶ Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, *Annual Report on Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan*, (2022), <http://vbmp.org.pk/reports>.

torture—burn marks, broken bones, and gunshot wounds are common. Such discoveries are frequently accompanied by denials of involvement from state authorities, though the systematic nature of the practice suggests otherwise.

The "kill and dump" strategy serves multiple purposes. On one hand, it eliminates individuals whom the state deems to be threats, including suspected insurgents, political activists, or outspoken critics of the government. On the other hand, it sends a powerful message to the broader population. The brutality of these killings is meant to serve as a deterrent to others who might consider speaking out against the state or joining separatist movements. Families and communities are left in a state of fear and helplessness, aware that any attempt to seek justice could result in further violence.

4. CASE STUDIES

Sammi Deen Baloch's advocacy has become a symbol of resistance against enforced disappearances. Her father, Deen Mohammad Baloch, was abducted in 2009, and since then, Sammi has led a movement to bring international attention to the plight of missing persons in Balochistan. Despite threats and intimidation, Sammi has continued to speak out, addressing the United Nations and various international forums about the ongoing crisis⁷.

Her advocacy represents the courage of many families in Balochistan, who, despite immense pressure from the state, have persisted in their demands for justice. Families like hers are often stigmatized, both by their communities and by the authorities,

⁷ Sammi Deen Baloch, "Advocating for Justice: My Story," *Human Rights Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2023.

who accuse them of supporting insurgency.

Additionally, the recent case of Muddasir, a 16-year-old student abducted in 2022, highlights the vulnerability of youth in Balochistan. His disappearance sparked outrage across the province, leading to protests organized by the Kech Bar Association⁸. The case underscores the indiscriminate nature of enforced disappearances, where even students and children are not spared. Muddasir's family, like many others, has struggled to obtain information about his whereabouts, reflecting the systematic lack of accountability in such cases.

The impact of enforced disappearances extends far beyond the immediate victims. Families of the disappeared are often plunged into uncertainty, suffering both emotionally and economically. The absence of a family member, particularly if they are the primary breadwinner, can leave households struggling to make ends meet. In addition to the financial burden, the psychological toll is immense; many family members report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and chronic anxiety.

The broader community is affected by the pervasive fear created by enforced disappearances. Activists and ordinary citizens alike are silenced, afraid that any expression of dissent could lead to their own disappearance. This stifling atmosphere discourages political participation and undermines civil society, contributing to a cycle of repression and violence.

5. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

⁸ The Balochistan Post, "*Balochistan: Another Youth Falls Victim to Enforced Disappearances*", (September, 2024), <https://thebalochistanpost.net/2024/09/balochistan-another-youth-falls-victim-to-enforced-disappearances/>.

The practice of enforced disappearances in Balochistan represents a grave violation of international human rights norms. Despite Pakistan's commitments to upholding human rights through international treaties, the state's actions in Balochistan reveal a significant gap between its obligations and the reality on the ground.

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (**UDHR**): Article 3 of the UDHR guarantees the right to life, liberty, and security of person. Enforced disappearances, which involve arbitrary deprivation of liberty and, in many cases, extrajudicial killing, directly violate this fundamental right⁹.
2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (**ICCPR**): Pakistan ratified the ICCPR in 2010, committing to uphold the rights enshrined in this treaty. Article 6 protects the right to life, while Article 7 prohibits torture, and Article 9 safeguards individuals against arbitrary arrest and detention. The widespread practice of enforced disappearances in Balochistan violates each of these protections¹⁰.
3. Convention Against Torture (**CAT**): Enforced disappearances often involve torture or inhumane treatment, further violating Pakistan's obligations under the Convention Against Torture, which it ratified in 2010. Torture survivors report horrific experiences, including electric shocks, beatings, and sexual violence¹¹.
4. International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance^{**}: Although Pakistan has not yet ratified this convention, its principles offer critical guidance for addressing enforced disappearances. The convention calls for

⁹ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 1948.

¹⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966.

¹¹ Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984.

the prevention, investigation, and punishment of such acts, and emphasizes the right of families to know the fate of their loved ones¹².

6. THE ROLE OF SECURITY FORCES

In Balochistan, Pakistani security forces, particularly the intelligence agencies such as the Inter-Services Intelligence (**ISI**) and the Military Intelligence (**MI**), along with paramilitary forces like the Frontier Corps (**FC**), have been consistently implicated in severe human rights abuses. Enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture are frequently reported as part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent and maintain control over the region. These practices are often carried out with near-total impunity, further deepening the sense of alienation and resentment among the Baloch people.

The role of intelligence agencies in Balochistan's security operations is paramount. The ISI and MI are often accused of orchestrating disappearances, particularly targeting individuals believed to be associated with insurgent groups or political movements advocating for Baloch autonomy. These agencies operate in the shadows, with little public scrutiny or accountability, making it difficult to trace the chain of command or hold individuals responsible for human rights abuses.

The Frontier Corps, a paramilitary force that operates under the control of the Pakistani army in Balochistan, has also been heavily involved in counterinsurgency operations. The FC is tasked with maintaining law and order in the province, particularly along its borders with Afghanistan and Iran. However, its activities often go beyond mere law enforcement. The FC has been accused of

¹² International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006.

conducting raids on villages, detaining individuals without due process, and being complicit in extrajudicial killings and the use of torture. Due to its military connections, the FC also enjoys significant autonomy and lacks civilian oversight, contributing to the culture of impunity that allows such abuses to persist.

One of the most significant issues regarding the role of security forces in Balochistan is the lack of oversight. Both the intelligence agencies and paramilitary forces operate outside the purview of civilian law enforcement institutions, and their actions are rarely subject to judicial review or independent investigation. This autonomy creates a legal vacuum, where security personnel can engage in human rights abuses with little fear of being held accountable.

For instance, when victims' families attempt to file complaints or report disappearances, they are often met with resistance or threats from local authorities. Law enforcement agencies such as the police are either powerless or unwilling to challenge the actions of the military and intelligence agencies. In some cases, local police are even complicit in these abuses, collaborating with security forces to carry out disappearances or suppress investigations¹³.

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, established by the Pakistani government to investigate missing persons cases, has faced severe criticism for its lack of effectiveness. Despite receiving thousands of complaints, the commission has resolved only a fraction of the cases. Furthermore, its operations are shrouded in secrecy, and it has been accused of siding with the state, dismissing cases without

¹³ Balochistan National Party (BNP), "*Political Marginalization and Resource Exploitation*," Balochistan Report, 2022.

thorough investigations, or delaying hearings indefinitely. This weak institutional framework has failed to deliver justice for the victims or hold security forces accountable for their actions.

7. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

The international community has played an important role in bringing attention to the human rights crisis in Balochistan, but the response has been limited in terms of concrete actions to hold Pakistan accountable for these abuses¹⁴.

Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International¹⁵, Human Rights Watch, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have been at the forefront of documenting abuses in Balochistan. Their reports serve as a critical resource for international advocacy and have helped to raise awareness about the issue in global forums¹⁶.

For instance, Amnesty International's 2022 report on Pakistan highlighted the persistence of enforced disappearances in Balochistan and called on the Pakistani government to take immediate action to end this practice and provide justice for the victims. Similarly, Human Rights Watch's annual reports have consistently documented the impunity with which security forces operate in the province¹⁷.

In 2021, Pakistan's National Assembly passed a bill criminalizing enforced disappearances, a significant step towards addressing the issue. However, the implementation of this legislation has

¹⁴ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Pakistan: UN Experts Urge Action to End Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan* (Nov. 20, 2019), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/11/pakistan-un-experts-urge-action-end-enforced-disappearances-balochistan>.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Pakistan: Human Rights Concerns," 2023 Report.

¹⁶ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan," 2019 Report.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Pakistan: Events of 2022," World Report 2023.

been slow, and many human rights advocates remain skeptical about its effectiveness in holding perpetrators accountable. Enforced disappearances have continued unabated, and the government has been criticized for failing to take concrete steps to address the crisis.

8. CHALLENGES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the key challenges to addressing enforced disappearances in Balochistan is the lack of accountability for security forces¹⁸. The judiciary, which could play a crucial role in investigating and prosecuting cases of enforced disappearances, has been criticized for its lack of independence and susceptibility to political pressure. Families who seek justice for their disappeared loved ones often face intimidation and harassment, making it difficult to pursue legal remedies.

Moreover, the state's narrative of national security often trumps human rights concerns. Many cases of enforced disappearances are dismissed as necessary counterterrorism measures, while international pressure on Pakistan has been limited due to geopolitical considerations¹⁹.

9. WAY FORWARD

Addressing the crisis of enforced disappearances in Balochistan requires comprehensive reforms at both the national and international levels. A multifaceted approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, increasing international advocacy, and empowering local communities is essential for

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *Pakistan: "Disappearances" Continue in Balochistan*, (Dec. 10, 2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/pakistan-disappearances-continue-in-balochistan/>.

¹⁹ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *"Population Census of Balochistan,"* 2021.

ensuring justice and accountability.

A. Strengthening Legal Frameworks

While Pakistan has taken initial steps towards criminalizing enforced disappearances, there is an urgent need to ensure the effective implementation of these laws. This includes providing adequate resources to investigate and prosecute cases, as well as establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor the conduct of security forces. Strengthening the rule of law is essential for preventing future abuses and rebuilding trust between the state and the people of Balochistan.

B. International Advocacy and Pressure

The international community, including human rights organizations, foreign governments, and international bodies such as the United Nations, must continue to pressure Pakistan to address the issue of enforced disappearances. This could involve imposing diplomatic or economic sanctions, launching independent investigations into human rights abuses, or supporting local human rights organizations.

C. Empowering Local Advocacy

Local human rights organizations play a crucial role in documenting abuses and advocating for the rights of victims. International NGOs and foreign governments can support these organizations through funding, training, and capacity-building initiatives. Empowering local communities to seek justice for their disappeared loved

ones is essential for creating sustainable change²⁰.

D. Fostering Dialogue

Finally, there must be a concerted effort to foster dialogue between the Baloch people and the Pakistani government. Political solutions, rather than military force, are key to addressing the underlying grievances that have fuelled the conflict in Balochistan. Initiatives aimed at promoting reconciliation, increasing political representation, and addressing economic disparities could help build trust and reduce the appeal of insurgency.

10. CONCLUSION

The enforced disappearances in Balochistan represent a deeply entrenched human rights crisis that reflects the region's complex history of political marginalization, economic exploitation, and armed conflict. Decades of unaddressed grievances have led to a brutal cycle of repression, where state security forces, operating with impunity, use abductions, torture, and extrajudicial killings to silence dissent and maintain control. The devastating impact of these practices extends far beyond the victims, inflicting profound trauma on families and communities who are left in a state of perpetual fear and uncertainty.

Addressing this crisis requires a holistic and multifaceted approach that goes beyond military responses and repression. The Pakistani government must prioritize meaningful reforms, including enforcing legal frameworks to criminalize enforced disappearances and ensuring accountability for perpetrators within the security forces. Domestic legal efforts, such as

²⁰ United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, *General Allegations and Urgent Appeals: Pakistan* (Sept. 15, 2021), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/disappearances>.

strengthening the judiciary's capacity to investigate these abuses, must be complemented by international advocacy, which pressures the state to honor its human rights obligations.

At the same time, empowering local human rights organizations and supporting the voices of families and activists is crucial for fostering transparency and pushing for justice. These grassroots movements, combined with international attention, can create a pathway toward accountability, offering hope for those affected by the disappearances.

Ultimately, resolving the crisis in Balochistan requires addressing the root causes of political alienation, economic exclusion, and cultural disenfranchisement. By fostering genuine dialogue, promoting political inclusion, and respecting the rights of the Baloch people, the government has the opportunity to build a foundation for long-term peace and reconciliation. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the cycle of enforced disappearances be broken, paving the way for justice, healing, and a more equitable future for Balochistan.