

A conference in Berlin highlights Pakistan's repression of its Baloch minority

By Hans Noot, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (22.01.2020) – On 11 December 2019, Baloch Human Rights Council organized a conference in Berlin titled “Humanitarian Challenges in Balochistan.”

A number of speakers addressed the various facets of repression in Pakistan: the exploitation of the Balochs, the atrocities committed against the civil population, the threat of religious radicalization, and both the silence and passivity of the international community.

Speakers included:

Abdullah Abas (General Secretary Baloch Human Rights Council),

Taj Baloch (Chairperson Baloch Human Rights Council),

Qambar Malik (Information Secretary Baloch Human Rights Council),

Dr. Hidayat Bhutto (General Secretary World Sindhi Congress),

Ralph Bunche (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization),

Hans Noot (Human Rights Without Frontiers),

Sigried Krieg (Amnesty International),

Dr. Lakhu Luhana (World Sindhi Congress),

Nasseer Dashti (Executive Pres. of Baloch HR Council),

Mr. Fernando Burgés (Head of Policy Research UNPO),

Dr Ariel Ahearn (University of Oxford),

Mr Stephan Lampe (Berlin Rep. World Uyghur Congress),

Padima Dolma, Researcher

Dr. Zsuzsa Anna Ferency, Researcher

Mr Sefan Sibenrock (Spokesman Society for Threatened Peoples International).

Pakistan's exploitation of Balochistan

Balochistan, the southern region of Pakistan, houses the Baloch people. Much like the Kurds, the Baloch are split up into different nations: South-Eastern Iran, Southern Afghanistan, and the Baloch Province in Pakistan, which is the largest province.

During his [intervention speech](#) at the 41st session of the UNHRC on 3 July 2019, Jashamsaid Amiri, the representative of the Baloch Human Rights Council, highlighted the worsening human rights situation in Balochistan. He emphasized that “the security forces of Pakistan and the Ayatollahs in Iran have for decades been following a policy of disenfranchising the Baloch of their socio-cultural values. They have curbed their economic rights and political freedom. These have led the

Baloch down the way of destruction. The state brutalities have resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Balochistan”.

Poor living conditions

Ninety three percent of the houses in Balochistan have no electricity or running water. Sixty two percent of the people have no access to safe drinking water, which is a basic human right.

This province’s mortality rate of 758/100,000 is three times higher than the rest of Pakistan. Additionally, the neo natal death rate is 150/1,000. Forty nine percent of the women in Balochistan suffer from malnutrition and more than half of the children below five years old have stunted growth due to malnutrition.

The Baloch people have one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with only 2% of those living in rural areas able to read and write. They hold the world’s record for the highest percentage of children out of school, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty for generations to come. These individuals are set up for failure under a regime of social, economic, and political exclusion.

Atrocities

There is an air of fear in Balochistan of the Pakistani government. The State Security agencies, sometimes acting

through proxy death squads, bomb and raid villages, burn down houses, and leave the women and children to care for themselves. When their houses are destroyed and possessions stolen, women are then often coerced into sexual acts. These women must “choose” between either living alone with their traumatized children in the arid mountainous desert or fleeing the region altogether. There is an estimate of 50 thousand Baloch refugees in Pakistan alone, and another 100 thousand in the neighboring Sindh province. Many also flee to Iran.

For Baloch men, the story is a bit different. When they are present in a village that is being raided, they are either killed on the spot extrajudicially or abducted. As a consequence, they are forced to flee with nothing more than memories of their family in distress and the clothes on their backs.

There is a documented total of about twenty thousand Baloch men who have been forced to disappear since the turn of the century. I met a few of them in Europe. They told me that they had little hope of returning home to their loved ones although life was difficult for them in the diaspora.

Baloch men who were caught by the state and abducted have become victims to the so called “kill-and-dump” policy. In the past three years alone, this has claimed 4,723 lives. In 2017, people protested about seven thousand Baloch men who were “missing.” Since then, [Amnesty International](#) has reported that a thousand bodies have been found, sometimes in mass graves. Many of the bodies had a long vertical scar along the front of their torso and some internal organs missing, presumably due to organ harvesting. This signifies that some people in the medical world must be involved.

Some Baloch women pursue avenues for judicial redress. However, there are many barriers, as they need to find the cash to travel to Lahore and stay there for months on end. Those who do make it there then face an impenetrable bureaucracy. If they are not apprehended by the police while going through these long processes, their lack of funding and the absence of police support leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Some have asserted that the combination of murders, collective punishments, forced disappearances, abductions, and families forced to survive without husbands and fathers can be labeled as a form of genocide. This claim is strengthened when considering that the state vilifies victims who speak out against these practices, and that perpetrators get away with impunity under the umbrella of “national security.”

Extremist threats

Balochistan is governed by tribal political structures. Traditionally, these systems are not based on a form of politicized Islam but some Islamist forces have progressively instrumentalized the internal struggle between those who want independence from Pakistan and those who do not.

In 2016, Lashkar-Khurasan, an affiliate of ISIS, murdered six members of Zikri Baloch and was involved in an attack against Baloch resistance forces in Balnigwar. Islamist organizations such as Lashkare-Jhangvi (LeJ), Ahl Sunnat wa Jamaat (ASWJ), ISIS and Daesh have all begun taking roots in Balochistan as a

means of expressing defiance towards the Pakistan Military establishment.

Moreover, some forms of extremism have crept into the province. For example, in the aftermath of the [2013 earthquake in Balochistan](#), the Muslim charity organization Filah Isaniyat Foundation (FIF) was the most active in the field to provide relief work but in 2019, it was banned by Pakistani authorities for its links with the pro-independence movement and its alleged extremist nature.

The infiltration of radical Islamism has targeted and taken control of whole swathes of the school education system. It is therefore unsurprising that madrassas (private religious schools) are replacing the original secular schools from the Northern Pashtun region to the south. This is largely possible because secular schools are often attacked and threatened by extremists. There are 16,000 madrassas in Punjab and another 13,000 currently throughout Balochistan. One of the consequences is that Balochistan is increasingly becoming a breeding ground for terrorism. In fact, Pakistan is home to 146 of the UN designated terrorist individuals and entities.

The University of Balochistan is monitored by 700 military personnel and surveillance cameras all over the campus. Video footage is often used to extort money and to sexually harass female students.

Furthermore, Balochistan is no stranger to child marriages, sexual harassment, honor killings, and acid attacks against women. These human rights violations reflect the influence of

extremist groups in the area.

With all of these changes over the past few years, the Baloch people are witnessing their traditional socio-cultural values, languages, knowledge systems, and even their identity rapidly transforming into a violent form of religious extremism.

What future for Balochistan?

Balochistan is one of the richest areas of the world due to its wealth of natural gas, gold, silver, copper, sulfur, and other minerals, as well as the Chinese-financed deep-sea harbor in Gwadar. However, the Baloch people suffer extreme poverty because Pakistani authorities have full control of the revenue gained from this province.

Wealth from Balochistan's natural resources goes to Punjab, under the pretext of certain [controversial](#) mega-projects. One such project is the [Chi-Pak Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC), which is part of the [China Belt-and-Road Initiative](#). The CPEC is a threat to the Baloch people, who argue that they, as the original inhabitants, own the land. Unfortunately, the Chinese authorities are not sympathetic to the plight of these indigenous people. Business first.

Unfortunately, the international community and the media are curiously silent and passive about all the plagues hitting Balochistan. One explanation might be that 42 journalists who were attempting to cover these issues have been murdered since 2008. Another reason is the isolation of that region due to

the Pakistani government's response to alleged "[National Security](#)" threats.

The work of international human rights organizations and the UN in Balochistan is therefore all the more needed.