

Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU)

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The Balochistan Conflict: Towards a Lasting Peace.

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The Balochistan Conflict: Towards a Lasting Peace

Senator Sanaullah Baloch¹²

Introduction

Balochistan is a province straddling Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan inhabited by twelve million Baloch people. Historically autonomous and culturally distinct from other areas of Pakistan and Iran, Balochistan has never enjoyed political and economic autonomy. The province has been a source of constant conflict and instability for decades because of its geo-political position and natural wealth. The province has been subject to frequent military operations in 1948, 1956-60, 1960 and in 1973-77. Unrest in Balochistan province, over political autonomy and wealth distribution, has risen dramatically since President Musharaf took over Pakistan in October 1999. Federally controlled development projects and the establishment of military garrisons in Balochistan have further aggravated the prevailing anger among Baloch nationalists. Islamabad's fresh offensives to suppress the Baloch struggle for greater autonomy and control on natural resources resulted in killings, displacements, disappearances and unprecedented intimidation. The resurgence of the Taliban in Balochistan and military operations against moderate Baloch political forces are further affecting the region's political developments. Issues of greater political autonomy, democratization, fair representation and constitutional safeguards with international guarantees could satisfy the long-suffering population of Balochistan. Appropriate consideration and wise decisions could prevent the region from continuing to suffer a major human tragedy.

Geo-Politics of Balochistan:

The Baloch country is strategically situated at the tri-junction of South Asia, South West Asia and Central Asia. Balochistan the largest administrative province of Pakistan (43% landmass of Pakistan) shares a 1,173 km border with the Iranian province of Balochistan (Sistan-Baluchistan) and shares an 832 km border with Afghanistan the west. Balochistan has almost 1,000 km long strategic coastline which extends nearly to the northern shores of the strategically important Straits of Hormuz. Between 1870 and 1910, Baloch land was divided and gifted to Iran and Afghanistan by British colonial boundary commissions to appease the regimes against a suspected Russian advance towards the warm waters of Balochistan.

Balochistan will be the future passageway to the emerging energy-hungry India, China, and Asian Pacific markets. The energy corridor from the Gulf to China and from Central Asia to the open seas presently has to go through the heart of Baluchistan. Politically its geographical location with neighboring Iran has enhanced its importance for the US. Its vast border with Afghanistan makes Balochistan a key player in "War on Terrorism". The

¹ The views expressed are entirely those of Senator Sanaullah Baloch and should not be construed as reflecting the views of the PSRU, Department of Peace Studies or the University of Bradford.

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US operations against the Taliban after 11 September were mainly carried out from the bases situated in Balochistan. Pakistan's nuclear and missile testing sites are located in the province. China has also succeeded in accessing Balochistan warm waters to influence the Indian Ocean and Middle East in the future.

Musharraf's Balochistan Policy

Unlike the military rule of Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88) who had an overt policy of oppression and controlled development, the Musharraf regime is pursuing policy that is more blatantly aimed at the absolute domination and control of Balochistan. According to the ICG September 2006 report, the current regime has relied on religious parties to extract support and legitimize its rule: "reliance on the Pushtoon religious parties to counter its Baloch opposition has strengthened Pushtoon Islamist forces at the cost of the moderate Baloch".

All the glitzy mega-projects launched in Balochistan including Gwadar port, the Mirani Dam, the coastal highway, cantonments, and the extraction of copper and gold deposits, do not envisage any participation or direct benefit for the province. After 1999, and the formation of the government in 2002, the establishment of military garrisons and the Gwadar deep-sea port project have raised fears among Baloch of an influx of economic migrants which may lead to demographic imbalance. Furthermore, the political representatives and the people at large have faced the worst human rights violations for many years. On the pretext of countering militancy, killings, enforced disappearances and mass arrests have become the order of the day in the province. The Pakistan government's military action resulting in the violation of domestic and international conventions and human right violations has escalated to unprecedented levels.

All moderate democratic forces in the province are facing suppression at the hands of the Government. After the killing of Nawab Bugti, the military government seems determined to uproot all nationalist forces to pave the way for the "Talibanization" of the province. Religious party leaders who teach Jihad and promote a pro-Taliban agenda are untouched, while moderate political representatives like Akhter Mengal and hundreds of Balochistan Nationalist Party leaders are behind bars on the pre-text of "maintaining public order". Other pressures include the threatening presence of the military and paramilitaries, unprecedented check-points intended to deter the Baloch nationalists from demanding their autonomy and just rights, disproportionate use of force such as indiscriminate aerial bombardments on civilian areas and major routes of human movements accompanied with the heavy artillery shelling which is causing huge loss of property besides human lives. Musharraf policies towards the Federal units and particularly towards Balochistan are a mounting crisis for the Federation.

Crisis of Governance

Since 1948, all successive civil and military regimes had used calculated policies to keep the people of Balochistan poor and their region dependent on Islamabad. The people of the province have had little say in decision-making or in affairs of governance. In the last 56 years, thirteen non-Baloch Governors have been appointed to govern Balochistan, each of who has failed to respond to the needs and demands of the people and enforced state policy of repression towards Balochistan. Repeating the same policy the Governor, Inspector General Police, Inspector General Frontier Core, Heads of military and civil

intelligence agencies and provincial secretaries have been sent from outside with clearly assigned tasks to create intertribal and intra-tribal rivalries among Baloch tribes, patronizing religious parties and leaders in order to replace the liberal and secular Baloch leadership. The systematic and intentional exclusion of people of Balochistan from state structures, and from the economic and political power base have also created a sense of alienation and discontent among Baloch masses.

Islamabad's handpicked MMA and PML provincial government along with non-Baloch bureaucrats have thrown the province into a vicious cycle of debt and interest repayment burden. The provincial budget 2005-06 had a deficit of Rs 13.24 billion.

In spite of the fact that huge amounts of money have been announced by the Pakistan government for mega development projects in the province, the people do not own the development agenda and their participation has always been ignored. The State Bank of Pakistan placed Balochistan on the top list of borrowers (Rs 15 billion overdraft) and of financially mismanaged provinces. Billions of rupees worth of land in the coastal area have been allotted to outsiders for pennies, which could have been properly auctioned and spent on education, health, social infrastructure and debt repayment for the province. Education, health care and civil administration are in total disarray. There is an immense sense of insecurity among general population as the law enforcement agencies are involved in illegal manipulations and patronization of miscreants, anti-social elements and drug traffickers.

Mining contracts for the province's copper and gold deposits were awarded to Chinese and Chilean companies without consulting the provincial government. Balochistan only gets two percent royalty out of its wealth but Islamabad and Beijing shares 48% and 50% of the profits respectively. Not a single human resource centre or college has been established in the mineral rich part of province to produce a future work force which could benefit Balochistan directly.

Socio-Economic Conditions

Balochistan ranks highest in Pakistan for infant and maternal mortality rate, the country have 100 deaths per 10,000 live births, whereas Balochistan has 108/10,000. The country's maternal mortality rate is 350/100,000 and the province has a frighteningly high 600/100,000. With disturbing figures for poverty, Pakistan's Integrated Household Survey 2001-02 revealed that Balochistan has the highest poor population with 48 percent and the worst in rural areas with 51 percent living below the poverty line. Lack of health and educational institutions further endangers the lives of thousands of people in Balochistan. The years of military operations, ill-conceived development policies and priorities, and poor governance have resulted in Balochistan being the most backward province. In spite of being a resource-rich region, it lacks very basic facilities and infrastructure. As compared to the 75% in country only 25% population in province have access to electricity,

The province, which has been supplying natural gas to the rest of the Pakistan for power generation, industry, fertilizer-production and domestic consumption has only 3.4 percent of gas consumers as compared to 51 percent from Punjab alone, which contributes only 4.75 percent gas. The province contributes Rs 85 billion per year through gas revenues but receives only Rs 7 billion from the federal government. According to UNDP Human Development Report 2003, Dera Bugti the wealthiest district of country in term of gas

production ranked last among the 91 districts of the country on the Human Development Index.

According to the Social Policy and Development Center (SPDC), “An overview of the development scene in Balochistan is discomfiting and the extent of relative deprivation in the province is appalling”. The percentage of districts that are classified as “high deprivation” are 92% in Balochistan, 62% in NWFP, 50% in Sindh and only 29% in the Punjab. The SPDC review also revealed that the percentage of the population living in a high degree of deprivation stands at 88% in Balochistan, 51% in NWFP, 49% in Sindh and 25% in Punjab. According to poverty-related reports the percentage of the population living below the poverty line stands 63% in Balochistan, 26% in Punjab, 29% in NWFP, 38% in rural and 27% in urban Sindh.

Balochistan also has the lowest literacy rate because of the “literacy control” policy of the Federal government, which believes that an educated and politically conscious Baloch population will not allow the looting of Baloch wealth. Seventy-six percent of primary schools in the province are shelter-less, 60% of primary schools have only one untrained and unqualified teacher. However, a 30% growth of religious schools has been recorded in Balochistan during the term of office of the MMA and Musharraf-led PML coalition. Baloch youths are kept deprived of almost all forms of contemporary educational institutions and few institutions have been established even in the capital city of Quetta capable of educating an elite and dominant class. The systematic denial of basic education and education-related facilities in Balochistan clearly indicates the disrespect and apartheid policies of Islamabad.

The highest unemployment is also recorded in the province due to lack of basic infrastructure, a financial bias against Baloch entrepreneurs, and the lack of industries and agriculture in the private sector. In the government sector, Baloch youths are also denied access to services and non-Baloch and recently settled populations from other parts of Pakistan have a greater say on important positions. The Baloch and local population are denied access to even the unskilled jobs in the Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) which dominates the energy resources in Balochistan. In Dera Bugti, the heavily guarded compound of Pakistan Petroleum Limited is a no-go area for Baloch nationals.

Balochistan Demands?

The Baloch Nationalists Alliance comprised of four parties unanimously presented their draft demands to a Pakistan Parliamentary Committee on Balochistan in November 2004. The issues raised in the draft were the proposal of a serious and urgent resolution aimed at creating a confidence-building environment. However, the Committee refused to give serious and timely consideration to the demands. These included halting work on Gwadar port until a detailed feasibility reports on the socio-economic and administrative implications was done, an end to the construction of new garrisons, cancellation of all illegal land allotments in Gwadar district, amalgamating locally recruited levies into the police force, and disbanding all military and paramilitary check points which contravene the constitution. The demands also included equal well-head prices and a 30% royalty for Balochistan, the agreement of the rights of the provinces on natural resources, and equal representation in Federal services.

Baloch nationalists also insisted that development projects must be linked with local ownership and benefit. Gwadar Port must be placed under the control of the provincial government, ending the practice of allocating coastal lands on Islamabad's own choice. There was an undisputed demand from political representatives in the Parliamentary Committee on Balochistan that maximum constitutional reforms need to be adopted to ensure provincial autonomy. The demand includes that the Constitution Concurrent Legislative List comprised of 47 articles should be devolved to the provinces and a new provincial legislative list needed to be introduced in the Constitution. Baloch, Pushtoon and Sindhi nationalists had a similar demand that major articles in federal Legislative List deal with natural resources (oil, gas, and metallic minerals), port and shipping and tax collection should be part of provincial list³.

The formation of the much-talked about Parliamentary Committee on Balochistan and the positive response from Baloch nationalists to resolve Balochistan's long-standing issues through dialogue and discussions caused chaos to the hard-liners, those who take the view that Baloch demands for greater political autonomy need to be answered by force. Initially the Committee considered Baloch fears about development projects and military intervention in the province, but before inking a draft agreement another war was imposed on Baloch people.

The Committee proved as an eye wash and trap for the veteran Baloch leaders and particularly for Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti who had great trust and hope for the Committee. The Committee provided the cover to the military and paramilitary forces to mobilize and eliminate the political representatives of Balochistan. The subsequent military operation resulted in killings, displacement, disappearances, harassment and serious human rights violations

Human Rights Abuses

Despite the lack of any official 'State of Emergency' in Balochistan, Pakistani forces are presently using force that is often excessive, indiscriminate and in violation of Pakistan's constitution and international pledges. Islamabad's militarized approach has led to nearly three years of violence, widespread human rights abuses, mass internal displacement and the deaths of hundreds of civilians and armed personnel.

According to Human Rights Watch 2007 report hundreds of Baloch political activists have been arbitrarily detained, scores have disappeared, and torture by the security forces of political opponents has become routine. Military operations in the province have frequently been accompanied by allegations of excessive use of force, particularly in periodic attacks on Dera Bugti, the stronghold of the tribal chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti. The August 26, 2006, killing of Bugti in a controversial military operation plunged Balochistan into further unrest and was followed by a new round of arbitrary arrests and disappearances.

³ In the Constitution schedule four under article 70(4) there are two legislative lists, which empower and give absolute authority to central government to legislate on all social, administrative and development matters without taking provinces in to confidence. Provinces have no power in constitution and there is no legislative list for the provinces. (for further details please see the link to the lists below <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/schedules/schedule4.html>)

Contrary to national and international laws, enforced disappearances are frequent in Balochistan. Around 1,200 cases have been reported so far in the last three years. The figure may be higher, as “families are often hesitant to come forward because of threats by intelligence agencies warning them to remain silent”. Disappearances constitute a crime against humanity. Under customary international law States are also obliged to ensure that they do not aid disappearances by inadequate investigation. The Human Rights Watch report says that “though the dispute in Balochistan is essentially political, centered on issues of provincial autonomy and exploitation of mineral resources, the Pakistani military has sought a military solution to the dispute”. The military regime has no respect for the rule of law and refuses to release hundreds of Baloch political prisoners, many of whom have been in prison for several years without a fair trial or court hearings.

Thousands of unarmed Baloch civilians, including women and children are being forcibly displaced from their hometowns and no efforts are being made by the Pakistan government to support the displaced. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC] in its report published in October 2006 has reported that around 200,000 people have been displaced from the Kolu and Dera Bugti districts alone in 2006. There is a urgent need to seek a political solution to the conflict to bring an immediate end to the violence and human rights abuses.

Towards a Peaceful Settlement.

Islamabad’s ill-conceived policies and uninterrupted use of force are widening the gap between Balochistan and the Pakistan government. Islamabad has to take actions to restore the confidence of the traumatized people of Balochistan. These actions should include the formation of a high-level judicial commission to enquire in to the 17 December 2005 Kolu incident, the start of military operations, the killing of Baloch nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the disappearances, and the disproportionate use of force against the civilians. The Government has to be accepting that it faces a conflict with a broad-based movement for political, economic and social empowerment and as a result, it has to initiate a sincere and serious dialogue with Baloch nationalist parties. Islamabad should end its reliance on military, withdraw all armed forces from province, and respect the provincial assembly resolution regarding construction of cantonments. It should abandon the colonial role of the Frontier Corps and dismantle all military and paramilitary check points.

The Pakistan government must respect constitutional and democratic freedoms, allowing all political parties to function freely. It should respect the human rights of free speech and expression, of free assembly, free association and movement, and should produce all detainees before the courts and/or release political prisoners. The role of the intelligence agencies needs serious review with regard to the treatment of Baloch people and Balochistan. The military should stop relying on and supporting religious parties in the province and bring to an end to the inhuman acts of intimidation, torture, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and extra-judicial killings of moderate political forces. The government must revise and announce financial resource distribution criteria to address the scale of the province’s backwardness and underdevelopment. The international community must ensure that the Pakistan government abides by national and international law in relation to how it treats Balochistan and the Baloch people.

