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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2013 - Pakistan

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Pakistan has become one of the deadliest countries in the world for ethnic and religious minorities. In 2012, targeted attacks against the country's minority communities rose significantly, with little or no action taken by the government to protect them. In September 2012, HRW reported that 320 members of the Shi'a community had been killed during the year, noting that this was an escalation of the violence against the minority. Most of the attacks in the largely Sunni country were targeted ones by militant groups such as the banned Lashkar-e Jhangvi. In one of the attacks in August, gunmen ambushed a bus, searched ID cards, singled out Shi'as and shot them dead, HRW said. Violent attacks against Shi'as increased again towards the latter part of the year, as the community marked its major religious festival, Ashura. In the run-up to the event at least 30 people were killed and over a hundred injured in a series of bomb attacks in Rawalpindi and Dera Ismail Khan. Seven children were killed in one attack on 24 November.

Many of the attacks on Shi'as were targeted against ethnic Hazara living in the conflict-affected Baluchistan province. According to media reports over 100 Hazara were killed in Baluchistan in 2012. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported that there were 213 incidents of sectarian-related attacks in 2012, which killed 583 people and injured 853.

Intolerance towards other religious minorities in Pakistan continued to be reported throughout 2012. In August 2012 the AHRC reported on a rise in emigration of Hindus from Pakistan's Sindh Province to India. The AHRC noted that large numbers were fleeing the country due to the increase in incidents of religious intolerance. The exodus was believed to have been prompted by the abduction and forced conversion of a 14-year-old Hindu girl to Islam in Jacobabad, in Sindh. Earlier in the year, in Mirpur Mathelo, a 17-year-old Hindu girl was allegedly abducted, forcibly married and forcibly converted. The AHRC reported that the case was brought before a civil court, where the girl, Rinkle Kumari, was slapped and abused, and, despite her pleas that she wanted to return to her parents, the girl was converted to Islam. Her family was threatened and forced to accept the conversion. Kumari's case was later heard by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the girl should choose. The question raised by human rights defenders and community spokespersons was whether her decision ultimately to remain with her husband could truly be voluntary. While the facts of the case remained disputed, it drew considerable media and political attention to the situation facing religious minorities in the country.

In September, a young Christian girl, Rimsha Masih, who suffers from a learning disability, was held on remand in an adult prison for blasphemy and accused of damaging parts of the Qur'an. Several weeks later, Rimsha was freed on bail after witnesses had stated that she had been framed. Under Pakistan's oppressive blasphemy laws, bail is normally not permitted; Rimsha's lawyers had pleaded for her release, however, on the basis that the girl was a juvenile. An imam in the area was subsequently arrested for planting burnt pages of the Qur'an in the girl's bag. The case was finally thrown out of court. Rimsha's plight highlighted how the blasphemy laws can be abused by individuals.

Despite increasing national and international condemnation, Pakistan has done nothing to remove these laws. In November, when Pakistan was reviewed by the UN Human Rights Council under its four-year UPR, more than 15 countries raised concerns over the laws and asked for them to be repealed. Several international organizations, including MRG, drew attention to the difficult and threatening conditions under which religious minorities live, having to face killings, abductions, attacks, rape, forced conversion and extortion, many of which are conducted by members of violent religious extremist groups but commonly supported by state agents and enabled by the legal system.

Pakistan's Muslim minority Ahmadiyya community continued to face intolerance throughout the year. In August, the local Ahmadiyya community was prevented from attending religious prayers to mark the Eid-al-Fitr festival in Rawalpindi. In December, masked men desecrated an Ahmadiyya grave site, in Lahore, breaking down and destroying over 100 gravestones. A similar incident had occurred in Faizalabad earlier in the year. No action was taken by the police following these incidents. The Islamist Tehrik-e-Khatme Nabuwat organization had previously pressured the police to remove Islamic inscriptions from the gravestones. Earlier in the year, this group had held a conference in Lahore that had called for the banning of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. According to the HRCP at least 20 Ahmadiis were killed in 2012 because of their religious identity.

Baluchistan, where ethnic Baluchis are fighting for a separate state, has long seen large-scale human rights violations. In August 2012, following a fact-finding mission, the HRCP said the situation had shown little improvement in the past year and serious violations, including enforced disappearances, continued to be reported amid widespread impunity in the province. The HRCP stated in its annual report that 125 mutilated bodies had appeared in the first 10 months of the year; in addition, the HRCP recorded 34 disappearances; while 26 people were traced and released, the remainder are still missing. The HRCP argued that the human rights situation in Baluchistan should be seen more broadly beyond the conflict with the Baluch independence movement, given the increased targeted attacks against Hazara, other Shi'as and other religious minorities in the province.

Violations also continued to be reported from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which are also affected by conflict. HRW reported that thousands of people arrested in 2009 in the Swat valley and FATA on suspicion of being involved with the Taliban remain in custody under anti-terrorism laws. This area is particularly affected by internal displacement due to the conflict. In September 2012, aid agencies warned that due to the protracted conflict around 400,000 children displaced because of the conflict were at risk from malnutrition and disease.

Health

Pakistan is not expected to meet the child mortality target set for 2015. At present, the number of deaths of children under one year of age per 1,000 live births is 75, against the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target of 40. Attaining high immunization coverage for childhood diseases is an important intervention with regard to reducing child mortality. However, less than half of Pakistan's children are fully immunized. Immunization coverage has actually fallen in all the provinces except Punjab, with the sharpest decline seen in Baluchistan (19 per cent).

In December 2012, nine health workers vaccinating children against polio were shot and killed in Karachi and Peshawar. Pakistan is one of four countries in the world where new polio cases were still emerging, despite a massive nationwide immunization programme. There were 58 reported cases in 2012, down from 198 cases in 2011. Misinformation about the immunization programme led some Islamists and Muslim preachers in Pakistan to say the polio vaccine is a western plot against Muslims. The killing of the health care volunteers in December was a major setback to the effort to reach full immunization coverage for polio and resulted in the UN calling off the campaign.

Malnutrition contributes to 35 per cent of under-five deaths and more than 40 per cent of children are either moderately or severely stunted; malnutrition rates in two provinces are above emergency levels. The national nutrition survey of 2011 reveals that Sindh is the poorest and most food-deprived province, with 72 per cent of families being food insecure. It is followed by Baluchistan, where 63.5 per cent of families are food insecure.

Pakistan's maternal mortality ratio has declined, from 400 per 100,000 in 2004-5 to 276 per 100,000 in 2006-7, but meeting the MDG target of 140 per 100,000 will require further immense resources and efforts. The maternal mortality ratio in Baluchistan is shockingly high, at 758 per 100,000 live births. Cultural practices of ethnic minorities living in Baluchistan do not allow women to seek services/ information from male health staff. The majority of Basic Health Units in the province are reported to have no female health workers. Almost a quarter of the Basic Health Units do not have personnel to offer family planning counselling or other services; almost 40 per cent do not have a maternity kit; and almost half do not have a labour room. Geographical disparities can be seen across the country, especially between Punjab (with the most personnel and facilities to serve women) and Baluchistan (with the least).

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