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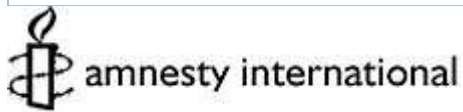
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Amnesty International Report 2016/17 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Pakistan

Armed groups continued to carry out targeted attacks against civilians, including government employees, which resulted in hundreds of casualties. Security forces, particularly paramilitary Rangers in Karachi, committed human rights violations with almost total impunity. Executions continued, often after unfair trials. State and non-state actors discriminated against religious minorities. Despite a new law in Punjab to protect women from violence, so-called “honour” crimes continued to be reported. Human rights defenders and media workers experienced threats, harassment and abuse from security forces and armed groups. Minorities continued to face discrimination across a range of economic and social rights. Access to quality health care, particularly for poor and rural women, remained limited.

Background

Operation Zarb-e-Azb, the Pakistan military's offensive against non-state armed groups that started in June 2014, continued in North Waziristan and Khyber tribal agency. Significant levels of armed conflict and political violence continued, in particular in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Balochistan and Sindh.

The National Commission for Human Rights, set up in May 2015, continued to lack sufficient staff and other resources, despite its budget finally being approved by Parliament. Concerns remained about the Commission's limited mandate with regard to investigation of cases of human rights violations allegedly committed by state agencies.

In late September, cross-border tension between Pakistan and India increased, with both states accusing the other of human rights violations at the UN Human Rights Council. There were repeated violations by both sides of the 2003 ceasefire, with exchange of fire across the Line of Control. India claimed to have carried out “surgical strikes” on militants in Pakistani-administered Azad Kashmir, which Pakistan denied.

Abuses by armed groups

Armed groups continued to carry out attacks, despite a government-mandated National Action Plan to counter terrorism. The Plan was implemented in the wake of a Taliban attack on an army school in Peshawar in December 2014 that killed at least 149 people, mostly children.

On 20 January, armed attackers killed at least 30 people, mostly students and teachers, in Bacha Khan University, Charsadda, northwest Pakistan. Responsibility was claimed by a Pakistani Taliban commander who allegedly planned the 2014 army school attack in Peshawar, but this claim was contested.¹ The army subsequently claimed to have apprehended five “facilitators” of the attack.

On 16 March, a bomb attack on a bus carrying government employees in Peshawar killed at least 15 people and severely injured 25.²

On 8 August, a suicide bomb attack killed at least 63 people, mostly lawyers, and wounded more than 50 others at the Civil Hospital in Quetta, south-west Pakistan. Mourners had gathered to accompany the body of Bilal Anwar Kasi, President of the Balochistan Bar Association, who had been killed by gunmen earlier that day.³

Police and security forces

Security forces including the Rangers, a paramilitary force under the command of the Pakistan Army, perpetrated human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, and extrajudicial executions. Security laws and practices, and the absence of any independent mechanisms to investigate the security forces and hold them accountable, allowed government forces to commit such violations with near-total impunity. Victims included members of political parties, in particular the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and human rights defenders.

On 1 May, plainclothes police arrested Aftab Ahmed, a senior MQM member. On 3 May, after he was moved to Rangers custody, news of his death emerged, alongside photographs apparently showing wounds sustained during torture.⁴ The Director-General of the Rangers for Sindh publicly acknowledged that Aftab Ahmed had been tortured in custody, but denied that his forces were responsible for the death. According to media reports, five Rangers soldiers were suspended after an investigation ordered by the Chief of Army Staff, but no further information was made public.

By the end of the year little progress had been made in the case of Dr Asim Hussain, a senior member of the Pakistan People's Party and a former federal minister who was allegedly ill-treated and denied proper medical attention while in the custody of the Rangers in 2015. Asim Hussain had been arrested on charges including for "being involved in offences relating to misappropriation of funds and for enhancing, supporting terrorism activities, and other criminal links/activities by using authority punishable under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997".

Security forces detained several political activists without trial during the year. Some of them continued to be at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

According to information published in August by the Pakistan Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, 1,401 out of more than 3,000 cases of disappearance had not yet been investigated by the Commission.

Death penalty

Since the December 2014 lifting of a six-year moratorium on executions, more than 400 have been carried out. Some of those executed were juveniles at the time of the offence or had a mental disability.

Both civil and military courts imposed death sentences, in many cases after unfair trials. Contrary to international law, the 28 offences carrying the death penalty included non-lethal crimes.

Military courts

Military courts were given jurisdiction in 2015 to try all those accused of terrorism-related offences, including civilians. By January 2016, the government had constituted 11 military courts to hear such cases.

In August, the Supreme Court ruled for the first time on cases from these courts, upholding the verdicts and death sentences imposed on 16 civilians. The Court ruled that the appellants had not proved that the military violated their constitutional rights or failed to follow procedure. According to lawyers, the accused were denied access to legal counsel of their choice, and to military court records when preparing their appeals. Some of the accused were allegedly subjected to enforced disappearance, torture and other ill-treatment, and at least two were reportedly under 18 when arrested.

Discrimination – religious minorities

State and non-state actors continued to discriminate against religious minorities, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in law and practice. Blasphemy laws remained in force and several new cases were registered, mostly in Punjab. The laws violated the rights to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion. Minorities, particularly Ahmadis, Hazaras and Dalits, continued to face restricted access to employment, health care, education and other basic services.

Mumtaz Qadri, a security guard convicted of killing the Governor of Punjab in 2011 because he had criticized the blasphemy laws, was executed in February. His funeral was attended by thousands of people and was followed by protests in the capital, Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi where protesters damaged public property, attacked media stations and clashed with the police.

Asia Noreen, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, remained imprisoned in Sheikhupura. On 13 October, the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear her case in the ultimate stage of her appeal process but adjourned it indefinitely.

Armed groups attacked a park in Lahore on 27 March, killing at least 70 people, many of them children, and injuring many more. A faction of the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying they had targeted Christians celebrating Easter.

Violence against women and girls

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded almost 3,000 cases of violence against women and girls, including murder, rape and gang rape, sodomy, domestic violence and kidnappings.

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act was passed by the Punjab Provincial Assembly in February, despite opposition from Islamic parties.

An amendment to the law on so-called “honour-based” killings was introduced to end impunity for such crimes, but allowed for the death penalty as a possible punishment and for perpetrators to have their sentences lessened if they secure a pardon from the victim’s family. It remained unclear how the authorities will distinguish between an “honour killing” and other murders, or what standards of evidence would apply, or what penalties would ensue. Human rights NGOs and activists were concerned that the penalty imposed should not depend on whether or not the victim’s family had pardoned the crime. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, around 512 women and girls, and 156 men and boys, were killed in 2016 by relatives on so-called “honour” grounds. As many cases went unreported, or were falsely described as suicides or natural deaths, the actual number was almost certainly much higher. Qandeel Baloch, a social media celebrity, was drugged and killed by her brother in July. He confessed to murdering her for “dishonouring the Baloch name”.

Child marriage remained a concern. In January a bill to raise the legal minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls was withdrawn following pressure from the Council of Islamic Ideology, who considered it “un-Islamic and blasphemous”.

Right to health – women and girls

Access to quality health care, particularly for poor and rural women, remained limited due to information, distance and cost barriers, as well as to perceived norms concerning women’s health and wellbeing.

Freedom of expression – journalists

Media workers continued to be harassed, abducted and sometimes murdered. Those in FATA and Balochistan and those working on national security issues were particularly at risk.

According to the Pakistani Press Foundation, as of October, at least two media workers were killed, 16 were injured and one was abducted in connection with their work. The authorities generally failed to provide adequate protection to media workers from attacks by non-state armed groups, security forces, political activists and religious groups. Of the 49 media workers murdered since 2001, only four cases had resulted in a conviction by the end of 2016. In March, a man convicted of murdering journalist Ayub Khattak in 2013 was sentenced to life imprisonment and a fine.

Zeenat Shahzadi, a journalist abducted by gunmen in August 2015 in Lahore, remained forcibly disappeared. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan believed she had been abducted by security forces. In October Cyril Almeida, assistant editor of *Dawn* newspaper, was placed briefly on the Exit Control List, which prohibits certain people from leaving Pakistan. The Prime Minister’s Office had objected to an article he wrote on tensions between the civilian government and the military. A few weeks later the authorities held the Minister for Information responsible for leaking the information that led to Cyril Almeida’s news report.

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, the federal regulator of the broadcast media, restricted media outputs by issuing fines, threatening to cancel broadcasting licences, and, in some cases, threatening prosecutions. Self-censorship was routine as a result of these measures and because of the fear of reprisals from the intelligence agencies and armed groups.

A new law on cybercrimes – the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act – was passed in August, giving the authorities broad powers to surveil citizens and censor online expression. There were fears that it posed a risk to the right to freedom of expression, as well as the right to privacy and access to information.

Human rights defenders

State and non-state actors continue to harass, threaten, detain and kill human rights defenders, especially in Balochistan, FATA and Karachi.

On 8 May, the Pakistani Taliban shot dead prominent human rights activist and website editor Khurram Zaki in Karachi. A spokesman for a faction of the Pakistani Taliban said it had killed him because of his campaign against Abdul Aziz, a cleric of the Red Mosque in Islamabad.

On 16 January, Rangers personnel arrested human rights defender Saeed Baloch, an advocate for fishing communities, in Karachi. Following national and international pressure, he was presented in court on 26 January and released on bail in August.

According to eyewitnesses, human rights defender Wahid Baloch was abducted on 26 July by masked men in plain clothes, believed to be representatives of security forces in Karachi.⁵ He was released on 5 December.

A policy was implemented from early 2016 requiring international NGOs to obtain government consent to raise funds and operate. In an increasingly hostile climate for human rights work, security forces harassed and intimidated several NGO staff.

In September, the Home Ministry shut down Taangh Wasaib, an NGO working for women's rights and against religious intolerance, stating that it was involved in "dubious activities".

Refugees and asylum-seekers

The legal status of the 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees became increasingly precarious as hostility towards them intensified and abuses, including physical attacks, escalated. The authorities estimated that an additional 1 million unregistered Afghan refugees were also living in the country.

Senior Pakistani officials threatened to expedite the forced return of all Afghan refugees. On 29 June, the authorities extended the right of registered refugees to remain in Pakistan legally, but only until March 2017.

Following the December 2014 attack on the army public school in Peshawar, police targeted Afghan settlements, demolished their homes, and subjected refugees to arbitrary detention and harassment.

Workers' rights

Despite the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992, bonded labour practices continued, particularly in the brick kiln and textile industries and among the scheduled castes (Dalits).

1. Pakistan: Armed attack on Bacha Khan University a potential war crime ([News story](#), 20 January)
2. Pakistan: Government must deliver justice for victims of Peshawar bus bombing ([News story](#), 16 March)
3. Pakistan: Attack on Quetta hospital abhorrent disregard for the sanctity of life ([News story](#), 8 August)
4. Pakistan: Investigation crucial after Karachi political activist tortured and killed in custody ([News story](#), 4 May)
5. Pakistan: Human rights defender at risk of torture ([ASA 33/4580/2016](#))

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