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Iran strikes put Balochistan's neglected conflict and its victims in the spotlight

'I do not care if I can write or read. I just want my brother.'



Iranian missile and drone attacks have managed what a recent protest march to the Pakistani capital couldn't: brought international attention to the decades-long conflict in Balochistan, where thousands of young men have allegedly been "disappeared" by Pakistan's security services.

Iran said its strikes last week in Pakistan's largest but least populous province targeted an "Iranian terrorist group". Pakistan responded with a strike in Iran's neighbouring Sistan-Baluchestan province, which it said targeted "terrorist hideouts".

Groups on both sides of the border have been struggling for more than 50 years for greater autonomy for ethnic Baloch people, who have long complained of rights abuses, a lack of political representation, and economic marginalisation despite their region's mineral wealth.



The New Humanitarian

Five insurgencies in Pakistan's Balochistan province date back to the country's independence from Britain in 1947. During the latest ongoing iteration, which erupted in the early 2000s, Pakistani security services are accused of torturing and "disappearing" thousands of men accused – often with scant evidence – of rebellion or of supporting the separatists.

Among them is Raheem Ud Din, who was 20 years old when he was taken from his family home in a raid by paramilitary forces. The family was initially told he would be interrogated and released within 48 hours. He hasn't been seen since. That was more than seven years ago.

"It breaks my heart that as I am getting older, even though I have memories of my brother, his face is fading from my mind," his sister, 16-year-old Hakimeen, told The New Humanitarian in early January. "I keep trying to remember how he looked."

After a month-long protest to the capital, dubbed the Baloch Long March, Hakimeen has been taking part in a sit-in demonstration outside Islamabad's National Press Club along with 400 other Baloch, demanding answers about the whereabouts of their missing relatives. Many of their arrests or detentions have never been publicly declared by the intelligence services.

"My classmates are doing their exams right now. I should have been too," Hakimeen said. "Instead, I am on the streets in Islamabad. I do not care if I can write or read. I just want my brother."

Some of the "disappeared" have later been found dead on roadsides, their bodies displaying evidence of torture. [Mass graves](#) have also been discovered.

In an interview with BBC Urdu in October, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar, Pakistan's caretaker prime minister, [said](#) there have only been 50 so-called disappearances, but the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons victims group says more than 7,000 people have been "disappeared" since 2000. Kakar, who is from Balochistan, has [dismissed](#) protesters as "advocates of terrorists".

A protest met with resistance

The 1,600-kilometre Baloch Long March began last month in response to the alleged November murder of Balaach Mola Bakhsh. Police said he was killed during a confrontation with a "proscribed group", but his family accuses the authorities of murdering him after seizing him from their home in October.

Led by human rights activist Mahrang Baloch, whose father Abdul Ghaffar Langove was allegedly tortured and killed by the Pakistani security forces in 2011, the march gathered steam as it headed north – record numbers of women joined from far-flung areas of Balochistan participated and protests were held in towns and cities along the way.

"The state shouldn't think that, if it has abducted the men of our houses, the women would be confined to their homes and won't seek justice on the streets."

Sammi Deen Baloch, leading activist

As the marchers tried to enter Islamabad on 20 December, they were blocked and began a sit-in at Tarnol, three miles from the capital. Hundreds were then arrested in a police [crackdown](#), which saw demonstrators tear-gassed and baton-charged, and water cannons used to disperse them. Of the 283 detained, 52 were women and children – mostly relatives of the missing, including [Mahrang Baloch](#).

After being detained for a day, the women were released on the directives of the Islamabad High Court before a failed attempt to “deport” them back to Balochistan. The sit-in has been allowed to continue since outside the National Press Club in the centre of Islamabad.

The movement has seen growing support around Balochistan as calls for protests and strikes have been welcomed by the Baloch community in several cities as well as in more remote villages and towns. The huge participation of women in the rallies has been particularly noteworthy in a province where women traditionally stay home.



Somaiyah Hafeez/TNH

The sit-in outside the National Press Club in Islamabad.

“We have proved if our men are abducted then the women wouldn’t stay at home; the women would adopt a path of resistance to question the state,” said Sammi Deen Baloch, a leading activist whose father Deen Muhammad Baloch, a doctor, has been missing since 2009. “The state shouldn’t think that, if it has abducted the men of our houses, the women would be confined to their homes and won’t seek justice on the streets.”

The Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC), a rights group that campaigns against the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, has presented a five-point charter of demands to the government. One calls for a UN fact-finding mission to be established and sent to Balochistan to investigate alleged human rights violations by the security forces.

‘We just want our loved ones’

Another woman who made the long journey to the capital is Anisa Baloch. Her nephew, 16-year-old Israr Attaullah, was allegedly taken by paramilitaries from his home in March 2023. “They searched the entire house and found nothing suspicious, yet they took Israr away, saying he will be back home after a couple of hours, but we have [had] no news of him since then,” she told The New Humanitarian.

Despite admitting to feeling “hopeless” about Israr’s situation, Anisa decided to leave her children and “responsibilities at home” behind, and join the march to Islamabad.

Bibi Zargul’s son, Saeed Ahmed*, went missing on 29 August 2013 along with his cousin, who was released in 2018 after five years of extrajudicial detention.

“I have hope,” Zargul said, despite having heard no news of Saeed for more than a decade. “Hopelessness is the work of the devil. If we do not receive justice here on Earth, there is the court of God where we will be granted justice.”

Some families have had to endure several rounds of suffering.

In 2016, Nadia Baloch’s brother, Ghulam Fareed, was taken in a midnight raid on their home in the town of Kharan. He was released after three years of being detained without charge, but she said he is still struggling to cope with psychological problems from the trauma.

In March 2022, another of Nadia’s brothers, Shah Fahad Baloch, was spirited away in a similar fashion. “I don’t even know if my brother is alive or not. Every dead body that is found makes me wonder if it is my brother’s,” she said. “We just want our loved ones and we will return back to our [homes]. We do not want any development or jobs.”

(*The initial version of this story incorrectly stated that Saeed Ahmed was taken when he went to pick up his cousin from detention. They were, in fact, both detained together in 2013. His cousin was released in 2018. This corrected version was published later on 22 January.)

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