



Laura Da Silva

SADF COMMENT

## Human Rights in Balochistan: A role for the European Union?

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, according to a Balochwana News report from the 17<sup>th</sup>, Pakistani security forces raided and carried out a house-to-house search operation in New Kahan (Quetta, Balochistan) after the burial of Surriya Begum, the wife of a prominent Baloch tribal leader. The security forces not only intimidated and harassed the local population, it also arrested several individuals.

Furthermore, this was not an isolated incident, since operations were being reported in several parts of Balochistan; in the following days two people were allegedly killed and a dozen were abducted. These kinds of operations are not a novel phenomenon. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, Pakistani news and media outlets such as “The Nation”, reported that security forces had killed at least 204 people and detained 8326 during 1863 operations carried out under the “National Action Plan”, which started on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2014. . Given the context of the aftermath of the attack on the Peshawar School massacre, some might argue that these kinds of actions are part of a new policy; but the Pakistani military forces have a long history of comparable incidents.

### **SADF - South Asia Democratic Forum**

19 Avenue des Arts  
1210 Brussels  
Belgium

[info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu)  
[www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)

+12 026 834 180  
+32 2 808 42 08

Reg. Num. BE 833606320

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Several advocacy groups (including Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, among others) have drawn attention to the Human Rights situation in Balochistan and to the impunity the Pakistani army has benefitted from in the last few years. Journalists have been threatened and persecuted, but the most worrisome cases involve extra-judicial executions and, particularly, enforced disappearances. As always, numbers vary widely. According to Baloch activists, 18,000 Baloch disappeared between 2002 and 2014 and 1,600 have become victims of the Pakistan's "kill and dump" policy from 2011 to 2014. Indeed, mass graves continue to surface. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies have been accused of extra-judicial killings and disappearances. The Supreme Court has reprimanded the Government for this situation. While there have been cases in which violence was also used by some factions of the Baloch nationalist movement, the Pakistani armed forces' reaction is by no means proportional or tolerable.

Why are we focusing on this particular incident? Because it is very telling that the context of a grieving family and community is no reason for truce. There are no sacred grounds or times, some even compare the current state of affairs to war which only shows how far the situation has evolved.

Unfortunately this it is only part of a larger problem, which must be tackled. The Human Rights situation in Pakistan has a long troublesome past. Although this issue is often mentioned in the international press or even in some official documents from western countries, little has been done. The pressure on Pakistan to improve its Human Rights track record has been sidelined to give place to what is often considered more pressing priorities.

Ensuring basic Human Rights is, needless to say, undeniably essential and these actions are not acceptable. Furthermore, even when considering Human Rights, the argument that Pakistan needs international aid to provide education and basic living conditions to the population has been one of the major hurdles in the way of applying real pressure on other issues. Regarding this point, it is important to note that notwithstanding the importance of these elements, the population's physical safety is essential and both perspectives must be considered as a whole. Nonetheless, when discussing Human Rights and pressure from international actors as the European Union, there is an irrefutable reality: to motivate parties to take action, one has to argue why it is in their best interest to tackle the issue.

Pakistan, by marginalising a part of its population, is playing a dangerous game, which can have go far beyond its borders. As a consequence of Pakistan's security policy under way in Balochistan, there have been a number of insurgencies in the region since its creation in 1948, often with rumours of foreign support, which means they would have the means to support the

Baloch side of the equation in the long term. With the current policy in place it is difficult to expect things will get better.

Although Balochistan has a number of natural resources such as minerals and natural gas that are quite interesting to explore and extract, its geostrategic location is most certainly one of its major assets. Located at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, it connects the Iranian Plateau with South East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and the Arabian Sea. It also shares borders with Afghanistan and Iran. The Chinese investment in Gwadar port only confirms its importance, which is even more obvious if considering the China Pakistan Economic Corridor currently being established that will connect Gwadar Port to China's northwestern region of Xinjiang. One thing is clear: the full potential of the project can only be achieved if the region is peaceful. The current tensions and insecurity strongly reduce the likelihood of meeting these goals.

In order to ensure a safe environment in Balochistan and benefits for the European Union, the latter should press Pakistani authorities to change their course of action in the region in order to keep the vast amount of benefits and aid Pakistan is currently receiving, such as its current GSP + status, with the goal of increasing its influence in Pakistan and in Balochistan in the long term. The fact is that the European Union has the upper hand over Pakistan. As Pakistan's number one trading partner, it is in a very good position to pressure Pakistan into making necessary changes. However this opportunity has not been fully explored. This can be done on two fronts, both by: a) assisting Pakistan in adopting a national Human Rights framework and supporting the rule of law as well as democratic governance and b) providing assistance at the regional level with a programme that would engage with both sides to establish a productive dialogue and help them to address specific issues related to Balochistan.