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Pakistan urged to act over escalating violence

Pakistani authorities must put an end to the rise in targeted killings across the country by providing justice for the victims and accountability for the perpetrators, Amnesty International said today amid reports of more than 30 fresh deaths in Karachi in the past two days alone.

On Tuesday the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said it had documented the violent deaths of more than 1,100 people in Karachi in the first half of 2011. Some 490 of these were targeted killings on political, ethnic or sectarian grounds.

The figures do not include an estimated 42 people killed in the first week of July, one of the most violent periods in Karachi this year.

“The alarming rise in targeted killings and general insecurity in Pakistan over the past two years reflects a grave law and order crisis in the country,” said Sam Zarifi, Asia-Pacific Director at Amnesty International.

“Even when investigations have been opened in a few high-profile cases, they have either been inadequate or have failed to address the systemic problems leading to impunity.”

Security forces, political groups and non-state armed groups have been blamed for targeted killings, which have been on the rise in the last few years.

Amnesty International has previously called on Pakistani authorities to carry out thorough and impartial investigations into a number of targeted killings by state security forces and non-state armed groups.

Members of the paramilitary Rangers were filmed shooting 25-year-old Sarfaraz Shah dead in a Karachi park last month. Despite reports he was suspected of an armed robbery, there is no evidence he was armed at the time of his death.

The Chief Minister of Sindh province has ordered an inquiry and suspended a senior police official over Shah’s killing, but numerous other cases involving killings by Pakistani police officers have not been properly investigated or prosecuted. The two media workers who filmed the shooting have gone into hiding after receiving death threats.

Targeted killings

Authorities have promised thorough investigations into a number of high-profile targeted killings in Pakistan this year. These include the assassination of two prominent politicians – Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti and Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer – killed over their opposition to the country’s controversial blasphemy laws.

Although Taseer’s alleged killer has been brought to trial, proceedings appear to have stalled. There have

been media reports that the Interior Ministry had identified the possible assailants in the Bhatti assassination, but police officials have effectively closed their case, claiming a lack of evidence.

A public inquiry has also been established to investigate the abduction and murder of journalist Saleem Shahzad. But there are grave concerns that it will not adequately investigate the alleged involvement of Pakistan's intelligence agencies. Saleem Shahzad himself claimed members of the Army's Inter Services Intelligence had threatened him last year due to his investigations into alleged al-Qa'ida penetration of Pakistan's military.

Amnesty International called on Pakistani authorities to act upon and make public the findings of completed investigations. A detailed investigation into the shooting deaths of five foreigners by security forces in Quetta province in May has yet to be released.

“Pakistan's political parties and authorities must show leadership and ensure the human rights of all in Pakistan by protecting them from harassment, intimidation and targeted killings and bringing the perpetrators of these abuses to justice. They must send the message that, regardless of who the perpetrators are of these killings, nobody is above the law,” said Sam Zarifi.