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Pakistan: Mass graves a stark reminder of violations implicating the state in Balochistan

Amnesty International calls on the Pakistani authorities to ensure an independent and impartial investigation into the unmarked graves found in Totak, near Khuzdar in Balochistan province on 25 January and the alleged abduction and extra judicial execution of a child by state security forces two weeks earlier. Urgent action must also be taken to protect “Long March” activists who have received death threats for highlighting the human rights situation in Balochistan and investigate the source of these threats.

The Deputy Commissioner of Khuzdar district says 13 bodies were found in unmarked graves in Totak. Amnesty International is concerned that there may be more graves in the area that the authorities are not disclosing. Balochistan is one of the most violent parts of Pakistan with scores of activists, journalists and suspected armed group members falling victim to abductions, enforced disappearances and extra judicial executions across the province, including in Khuzdar. Some victims have later been found dumped at the roadside on the outskirts of the city of Karachi.

The Balochistan government has established a Tribunal Inquiry with the powers of a civil court headed by a judge of the Balochistan High Court and a special Medical Board to investigate the graves. Investigations to identify the bodies should be carried out by forensic experts in line with the UN Model Protocol on the disinterment and analysis of skeletal remains. In addition to the medical investigation, a credible criminal investigation must be carried out and any persons suspected of committing human rights abuses must be brought to justice in a fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty, regardless of their links to state or non-state groups.

The Tribunal, Medical Board and any other investigators must be allowed to independently and impartially investigate all graves, including the reported 13, without interference from state security forces. The authorities must ensure that persons who suspect that the bodies may include their relatives are allowed to inspect the bodies to enable identification.

Following initial investigations by a local law enforcement force known as Levies, two bodies were found in Totak on the first day, followed by 11 bodies after that. Two of the dead have now been identified by relatives as Qadir Bakhsh and Naseer - both from Pirandar in Awaran district. Relatives claim both men were forcibly disappeared by the Frontier Corps, a state security force, on 30 August and 4th October 2013 respectively.

The Frontier Corps and other state security forces have been widely implicated in enforced disappearances, extra-judicial executions and other human rights violations in the province for several years. In December 2013 Balochistan Chief Minister Dr Abdul Malik Baloch acknowledged that state “agencies” were responsible for “illegal confinement” of Baloch activists, including, he believed, the Secretary-General of his own Balochistan National Party, which is currently part of Balochistan’s coalition government. Judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the highest judiciary in the country,

including recently retired Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, have also accused the Frontier Corps of being responsible for many enforced disappearances in the province.

The Frontier Corps reportedly cordoned off the area surrounding the graves soon after their discovery, preventing civil society and the local community from monitoring activity at the grave sites. The Frontier Corps has also reportedly prevented some relatives of enforced disappearance victims from visiting a local hospital to inspect the recovered bodies to see if they could identify their missing relatives.

As far as Amnesty International is aware, no Frontier Corps or other security and intelligence service personnel have been brought to justice for their involvement in enforced disappearances or other human rights violations in Balochistan. The authorities also have a very poor record in bringing non-state suspects to justice, with criminal gangs and armed groups, some hostile to the state or engaged in hostilities in neighbouring Afghanistan, others targeting those considered anti-state or the minority Shi'a Muslim population, operating with virtual impunity.

The Tribunal Inquiry established by the Balochistan government must thoroughly investigate all individuals and groups against whom there is credible evidence of responsibility for the Khuzdar graves. The authorities must ensure that any individuals suspected of committing human rights abuses are brought to justice in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty regardless of their affiliations, rank or status. They must also immediately secure the grave sites to prevent loss or interference with the evidence.

Alleged extra-judicial execution of 10 year old Chakar Baloch

Amnesty International is alarmed by credible allegations of the extra-judicial execution of 10 year old Chakar Baloch in Turbat, Balochistan. Around 5pm on 7 January, Chakar Baloch was walking to Turbat market when, according to eyewitnesses, four plain-clothed men accompanied by four uniformed personnel from the Frontier Corps picked him up. Chakar Baloch's family registered a complaint about the abduction with local police in Turbat. However apart from registering the complaint, the police did not appear to take any further steps and, in practice, they have virtually no power to investigate allegations against the Frontier Corps. Three days later, on 10 January, Chakar Baloch's body was recovered from Kech Kaor River, a kilometre from where he was last seen alive. According to a medical examination carried out at District Headquarters Hospital in Turbat, Chakar Baloch's body bore what appeared to be torture marks and four bullet wounds to the head, chest and left arm due to gunshots at close range.

Since the recovery of Chakar Baloch's body, his family has continued to receive death threats over the phone and has had to leave Turbat for an undisclosed location. A number of Chakar's relatives are active members of the Balochistan National Movement, a political group that advocates separation of the province from Pakistan. Chakar Baloch's family fled their home in Parom Panjgoor to Turbat in December 2013 after receiving threats from unknown men who relatives claim are members of state intelligence services. According to information received by Amnesty International, other relatives of Chakar Baloch have also previously been subjected to violations. Chakar Baloch's great-grand uncle Rahim Baksh, around 80-years-old, and cousin Jaffar Majeed, 16-years-old, were picked up by the Frontier Corps during a raid on their Parom Panjgoor home on 10 October 2013. Both were released around 15 October. Another of Chakar's cousins, Sannaullah Majeed, 14 years old, was picked up by the Frontier Corps during another raid on the house on 16 October and remains missing to this day. Relatives claim that men in plain clothes belonging to state intelligence services accompanied the Frontier Corps on both occasions.

Amnesty International calls on the Pakistani authorities to ensure an immediate, independent and impartial investigation into the apparent extra-judicial execution of Chakar Baloch, and the abduction and arbitrary detention of Rahim Baksh, Jaffar Majeed and Sannaullah Majeed. Where there is sufficient admissible evidence, suspects should be brought to justice in fair trials, without recourse to the death

penalty. The authorities must ensure their investigations include the Frontier Corps and intelligence services operating in the area.

Threats to relatives taking part in Long March to Islamabad

Relatives of people subjected to enforced disappearance are currently undertaking a “Long March” from Quetta to Islamabad via Karachi, protesting these violations and calling on the authorities to reveal the fate or whereabouts of their loved ones. Amnesty International calls on the Pakistani authorities to take measures to ensure the protection of the protestors, particularly following credible claims by participants of threats received from unknown persons over the phone. The authorities must also carry out credible investigations to determine who is behind the threats, ensuring that suspects are brought to justice in fair trials. Furthermore, Amnesty International urges that anyone who has been subjected to enforced disappearance or otherwise held in secret or arbitrary detention must be released unless they are charged with a recognisable criminal offence and brought promptly to a fair trial in accordance with international standards.