

PAKISTAN

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN

Head of state: Asif Ali Zardari

Head of government: Raja Pervaiz Ashraf (replaced Yousuf Raza Gilani in June)

The Pakistani Taliban's assassination attempt on a teenage human rights activist in October underscored the serious risks faced by human rights defenders and journalists in the country. Religious minorities suffered persecution and attacks, with targeted killings by armed groups and religious leaders inciting violence against them. The Armed Forces and armed groups continued to perpetrate abuses in the tribal areas and Balochistan province, including enforced disappearances, abductions, torture and unlawful killings. The courts successfully compelled the authorities to bring a handful of victims of enforced disappearance before them, but failed to bring perpetrators to justice in fair trials. In November, the military authorities carried out Pakistan's first execution since 2008. Attacks on health workers had a significant impact on access to medical services in remote and strife-torn regions of the country. Parliament passed laws, in February and March respectively, on the establishment of separate national commissions on the status of women and on human rights.

Background

Pakistan faced several political crises as the military, courts and elected government clashed over a range of issues, including corruption investigations. On 19 June, the Supreme Court forced then Prime Minister Gilani to resign after finding him in contempt of court, underlining the increasing power of the judiciary. In a landmark decision on 23 September, the Supreme Court ruled that members of the transgender community are entitled to the same rights under the Pakistan Constitution as other citizens. Hundreds of prisoners were transferred between India and Pakistan as part of a wider agreement on consular relations signed in May, signalling improved relations between the two countries. An undisclosed number of civilians, including children, were killed or injured as a result of "targeted killings" carried out by unmanned US drones in the tribal areas (see USA entry). By the end of the year, relations had improved between Pakistan and the USA, its chief foreign ally.

Pakistan began its two-year membership of the UN Security Council in January. A number of UN human rights experts visited the country for the first time in 13 years: the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers in May, the High Commissioner for Human Rights in June, and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in September. Pakistan's human rights record was assessed under the UN Universal Periodic Review in October; states raised a range of human rights issues including reform of the blasphemy laws, progress towards abolishing the death penalty, and ending enforced disappearances. Pakistan was elected to the UN Human Rights Council for the third time on 12 November.

Violations by security forces

Security forces continued to act with impunity and were accused of widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, deaths in custody and extrajudicial executions targeting political activists, journalists, and suspected members of armed groups. In the northwest tribal areas, the armed forces exploited new and old security laws to provide cover for these violations beyond the reach of the courts.

- After an alleged plot to murder human rights lawyer Asma Jahangir was exposed in June, the authorities provided extra security but appeared unable or unwilling to investigate claims that military authorities "at the highest levels" had authorized the plot.

Unlawful killings

Hundreds of unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions and deaths in custody, were widely reported. They were most common in the northwest tribal areas, and Balochistan and Sindh provinces.

- On several occasions during the year, the Peshawar High Court ordered investigations into the more than 100 bodies found dumped across Peshawar, capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.
- Muzaffar Bhutto, leader of an ethnic Sindhi political party, was found dead on 22 May in Bukhari village near Hyderabad, Sindh, after he was abducted by men in plain clothes accompanied by police 15 months earlier. His body reportedly bore torture marks and bullet wounds but no one was brought to justice for his abduction or killing.

Enforced disappearances

The Supreme Court was granted unprecedented access to some victims of enforced disappearances, including seven surviving members of the “Adiala 11” in February, and several others from Balochistan throughout the year. The Chief Justice threatened to order the arrest of law enforcement personnel for failing to provide a legal basis for arrests and detentions in Balochistan, and the Peshawar High Court continued to pressure the authorities to provide details of all individuals held in security detention in the northwest tribal areas. However, reports of enforced disappearances continued across the country, especially in Balochistan province and the north-west tribal areas; no serving or retired security personnel were brought to justice for their alleged involvement in these or other violations. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances made its first ever visit to the country in September, but key officials refused to meet them, including the head of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, Chief Justices of the Supreme Court and most High Courts, and senior security and military representatives.

- The body of Baloch Republican Party leader Sangat Sana was found dumped on the outskirts of Turbat, Balochistan, on 13 February. More than two years earlier, he was seen being taken by several men in plain clothes at a police roadblock at the Bolan Pass on the Quetta-Sindh highway.

Abuses by armed groups

The Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the Balochistan Liberation Army and other armed groups targeted security forces and civilians, including members of religious minorities, aid workers, activists and journalists. They carried out indiscriminate attacks using improvised explosive devices and suicide bombs.

- The Pakistani Taliban announced a ban on health workers in the tribal areas until the USA ceased its programme of “targeted killing” there. An ICRC nurse was killed in April. Nine mostly women health workers administering polio vaccinations were killed in co-ordinated attacks in Peshawar, Nowshera and Charsadda in the north-west, and the southern city of Karachi over three days in December.
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for the execution-style killing of at least 14 people during an attack on a bus carrying Shi’a Muslim pilgrims from Quetta to Iran on 28 June. The group was responsible for at least eight attacks across Pakistan, which claimed 49 lives.
- Senior Awami National Party politician Bashir Ahmed Bilour and eight others were killed in a Pakistani Taliban suicide bombing in Peshawar on 22 December as they left a political rally.

Freedom of expression

Journalists remained under serious threat from state security forces, armed opposition and other groups, particularly in Balochistan and Sindh provinces, and the north-west tribal areas. At least eight journalists were killed during the year. Several journalists claimed to have been threatened for reporting on the military, political parties or armed groups.

- Journalist Mukarram Aatif was shot dead during evening prayers in a mosque in Charsadda city on 17 January. He had earlier resettled there from his native Mohmand Tribal Agency

following death threats over his reporting from the Pakistani Taliban, which claimed responsibility for the killing.

- On 19 May, the bullet-riddled body of Express News television correspondent Razaq Gul was found dumped on the outskirts of Turbat, Balochistan. He had been kidnapped the previous day. The authorities failed to bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Senior broadcaster Hamid Mir escaped an assassination attempt in November when a bomb under his car failed to detonate. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attempt.

The government occasionally blocked websites, including YouTube and Facebook, without explanation or for content deemed offensive to religious sentiments. The courts threatened to bring criminal proceedings against journalists under contempt of court laws for reports criticizing the judiciary.

Discrimination – religious minorities

Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians remained at serious risk of violence and intimidation on the basis of their religious beliefs. There were at least 79 attacks on Shi'a Muslims – the most for any religious group in the country. Religious minorities were disproportionately represented in incidents where private individuals sought to invoke Pakistan's vaguely formulated blasphemy laws.

- The northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan experienced unprecedented sectarian violence, with the authorities largely failing to bring the perpetrators of over 70 killings to justice following clashes between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in April.
- On 4 July, a mob lynched a homeless man held at a police station, then burned his body for allegedly burning a Qur'an in Channigoth town, Punjab province.
- On 20 November, the Islamabad High Court acquitted Rimsha Masih, a Christian girl charged with blasphemy by police in August under public pressure for allegedly burning pages of the Qur'an. In September, the cleric who had accused her was in turn charged under the same laws for allegedly fabricating evidence against her. Her release was a rare instance of a speedy court acquittal in which the blasphemy charge against her was publicly criticized by the court.
- The authorities allowed religious groups to prevent Ahmadis from entering places of worship. The graves of over 100 Ahmadis were vandalized in a Lahore cemetery on 3 December.
- The state failed to protect the Shi'a Hazara community in Balochistan from armed group attacks despite a heavy military presence in the province, resulting in at least 84 deaths in the year.

Violence against women and girls

Women and girls and those campaigning for their rights continued to face discrimination and violence in the home and in public. Human rights groups documented thousands of cases of violence against women and girls across the country with a majority from the most populous province of Punjab. Cases included murders, rapes and incidents of domestic violence. This was likely only a fraction of all incidents given limited reporting of these abuses.

- In May, local tribal elders reportedly ordered the killing of four women for singing and clapping, allegedly in the company of two men, at a wedding in Kohistan district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The Supreme Court ordered an investigation into the incident in June and concluded that the women were probably alive. However, the Supreme Court's investigation appeared to be significantly flawed.
- On 4 July, women's human rights activist Fareeda Afridi was killed in a drive-by shooting as she left her home in Peshawar for work in the Khyber Tribal Agency. Local civil society groups said she had been targeted for promoting the human rights of women. The authorities failed to bring the perpetrators to justice.
- The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for attempting to assassinate 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai on 9 October. They vowed to continue to target her for promoting education for women and girls. In response, a new law was signed by the President on 20

December, guaranteeing free and compulsory education to boys and girls between the ages of five and 16.

Death penalty

More than 8,300 people remained on death row, some for 20 to 30 years, and 242 were sentenced to death during the year. In November, military authorities executed Muhammad Hussain for killing a superior officer and two others in Okara district, Punjab province, after appeals for clemency from the Army Chief and President were rejected. It was the first death sentence carried out in Pakistan since 2008. The government distanced itself from the decision to proceed with the execution, as it had been carried out by the military authorities, but activists were concerned it risked opening the door to a resumption of executions.

In July, the government began consultations on a draft parliamentary bill to commute all death sentences to life imprisonment.

Amnesty International visits/reports

- Amnesty International delegates visited Pakistan in February/March, July/August and December. Amnesty International consultants maintained a continuous presence in the country.
- Pakistan: Human rights and justice – the key to lasting security: Amnesty International submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review (ASA 33/003/2012)
- Open Letter: Pakistan must resolve the crisis of enforced disappearances (ASA 33/012/2012)
- “The hands of cruelty”: Abuses by Armed Forces and Taliban in Pakistan’s tribal areas (ASA 33/019/2012)