

Targeted killing of political activist in Nasirabad, Sindh

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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Introduction

On 16 February 2024, 57-year-old Hidayatullah Lohar, a Sindhi nationalist and primary schoolteacher, was gunned down by two unknown hitmen near Nasirabad police station in Nasirabad city, district Qambar Shahdadkot, Sindh. Known for his progressive stance and nationalist activism, Lohar had been forcibly disappeared twice—first in 2017 and then in 2023.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) deemed it necessary to investigate Lohar's murder. For this purpose, a fact-finding mission comprising Qazi Khizar Habib (vice-chair HRCP Sindh), Imdad Chandio (HRCP member) and Ali Ousat (staff member) was conducted on 20 February 2024. The mission was tasked with (a) meeting Lohar's family to express solidarity, and (b) ascertaining the circumstances of the murder by speaking to various stakeholders, including law enforcement officials, visiting the crime scene, and making recommendations to the authorities concerned.

Circumstances of the murder

The incident occurred on 16 February 2024 at around 8:30 am as Lohar was on his way to the school where he taught. His daughter Sassui told the mission that she had witnessed the incident as she was approximately 150 paces behind Lohar at the time. According to her, two people on a 125cc motorcycle—on a video call at the time—intercepted her father, showed his face to the caller apparently to confirm it was Lohar, and then pumped three bullets into his upper torso and one into his neck. Lohar was killed on the spot.



The spot where Lohar was reportedly killed

Media reports indicate that the suspected attackers escaped after murdering Lohar. The victim's relatives and residents of the neighbourhood immediately took his body to the taluka headquarters hospital, from where the body was handed back to the family after completion of medico-legal formalities. Subsequently, Lohar's daughters Sassui and Sorath, his younger brother Sarang, and others staged a sit-in with the body on the Indus Highway near Government Degree College in Nasirabad, demanding that the killers be arrested immediately. Sorath and Sassui Lohar have been



active leaders of the rights collective, Voice of Missing Persons of Sindh, for the last few years since their father was forcibly disappeared. They remained associated with the cause even after Lohar was released.

Contents of application submitted to the police

Sassui Lohar submitted an application to the Nasirabad police station requesting that the culprits be nominated in a first information report (FIR). The application, a copy of which is available with HRCP, states:

I am Sassui Lohar residing at the above address. My father was a teacher, social reformer, and associated with the nationalist movement of Sindh. So, on 17 April 2017, he was abducted from Government Primary School Nasirabad. The person who kidnapped my father, his purse fell down while abducting my father. A copy of the identity card was found, whose name is Ghulam Muhammad, son of Muhammad Ramazan, a resident of Sargodha, whose identity card number is: 3840183732811.

I filed a petition in the court and protested continuously for two and a half years, after which Baba was presented before the court, and after which the court acquitted him honourably. Again, on 3 April 2023, SHO Nasirabad Hidayat Ullah Bajarani took Baba from his relative's shop in Nasirabad and handed him over to secret agencies.

After which, we began to protest again in front of the police station; later, they released my father. After that, Baba continued to receive constant threats.

Today, 16 February 2024, Friday morning, at around 8:30, my father Hidayat Lohar, 57, son of Muhammad Hashim Lohar, left the school for duty. I went out to go to my duty, I met Baba at the former Tanya Rice Mill near local market. I was behind my father 150 steps, I also saw my brother Sarang who had come to buy vegetables, then the men crossed us on a 125 motorcycle and we saw that they fired after Baba, which hit him in the back on the right side of Baba and he fell down. Later, the assailants easily escaped from the crime scene. We went and took Baba to the government hospital of Nasirabad. Later, we sat on a sit-in at Nasirabad bypass Degree College against this incident [sic]. The incident is not acceptable to us, as the accused are clearly visible. After this, a postmortem was conducted in the government hospital Nasirabad in the presence of our relatives and the police. We have a suspicion that the above-mentioned culprit Ghulam Muhammad and former SHO Nasirabad Hidayat Ullah Bajarani, who repeatedly kidnapped my father and the other officers of the secret agencies who threatened to kill Baba, killed my Baba because he was committed to nationalism.

We demand that justice should be done as soon as possible and register FIR against the culprits.

Visit to the crime scene

The mission visited the crime scene—a narrow street near Nasirabad police station. Despite being a busy area, the police failed to preserve the crime scene adequately. The bullet marks suggested firing at close range. The police's negligence in preserving the crime scene to gather forensic evidence raises suspicion of a deliberate cover-up. The assailants intercepted Lohar at a point where the road split into three small lanes. On the right-hand corner where Lohar was intercepted, was a two-storey house; he was reportedly murdered near a staircase outside.

Law enforcement agencies' response

The SSP Qambar Shahdad Kot's reluctance to register an FIR on the complainant's request would seem to indicate that the police were under pressure. The mission believes that the police would have preferred to file a simple FIR against 'unknown assailants' without mentioning any names as demanded by Lohar's family. This is despite the fact that the police possess CCTV footage of the incident. An FIR was finally registered on 2 March 2024, two weeks after the incident, after Lohar's heirs filed a petition in the sessions court. The report names Ghulam Muhammad, a resident of Sargodha, and the police officer who took Lohar into custody in 2023, as the culprits.

The SSP confirmed that this was the third such attempt on Lohar. Even though the murder took place near the police station, the SSP was reluctant to give any details. However, he shared the CCTV footage, which showed that the face of one of the suspects was exposed while that of the second was covered by a scarf. The SSP said that what had happened to Lohar (referring to his enforced disappearances) was 'in the past', adding that the police would initiate an investigation after they had registered an FIR against unknown assailants. He also claimed that the police had CCTV footage of the murder and could solve the case in a matter of days but clearly after registering an FIR.

Observations and conclusion

The mission is of the view that, up until the FIR was registered on 2 March 2024, the police were deliberately keeping the facts of the case hidden, possibly hoping to arrest one or more low-profile suspects and close the case.



The mission speaking to Lohar's daughters at the sit-in

Sassui Lohar told the mission that her father had been subjected to 'severe torture' by law enforcement agencies because of his unwavering and publicly expressed belief in 'Sindhu Desh' (an independent Sindh) and political self-determination for the province. There was no clear evidence to suggest that the murder was linked to personal enmity or tribal or family disputes, or that it was a case of ordinary street crime. This would suggest the murder was a politically motivated targeted killing.



Although the police claim they do not have a registration number for the motorcycle used by the suspects, the mission thinks they should attempt to refine the CCTV footage to obtain this. Finally, the police's prolonged reluctance to file an FIR—doing so only after Lohar's family obtained a court order—implies a deliberate attempt to hinder the investigation and possibly protect powerful figures involved. The way the crime scene was mishandled also raises concerns as to the integrity of the investigation.

Recommendations

- The Sindh government must ensure that the investigation remains transparent and unbiased, even if this implicates powerful individuals, to ensure justice.
- The government must provide compensation to the victim's family and ensure their safety and wellbeing, especially since they may remain vulnerable as rights activists.
- The police must develop and implement protocols that allow complainants to register an FIR quickly in such cases and in the interest of transparency and accountability.
- Both the government and police must develop strategies to protect political activists and human rights defenders from targeted violence.

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