

# Civil unrest and violence in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

# Civil unrest and violence in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

## An HRCP fact-finding report (May 2024)

---

### Introduction

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) has been grappling with significant economic difficulties, including high inflation, elevated utility costs, and frequent power outages for some time. A civil society-based group called the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) has spearheaded protests rooted in these economic grievances, demanding greater autonomy over local resources.

Large-scale protests have erupted periodically since March 2023, with Kashmiris taking to the streets to demand subsidized electricity and flour. Led by JAAC, these protests also called for the elimination of unnecessary perks and privileges enjoyed by politicians and bureaucrats. This movement gained significant momentum in May 2024.

On 11 May 2024, thousands of ordinary people responded to JAAC's call and started marching towards the capital city, Muzaffarabad, demanding accountability for the elite and subsidies for electricity and flour. Despite law enforcement agencies' heavy-handed response, the protesters remained resolute. The demonstrations were unprecedented because they were leaderless, not driven by a political agenda nor led by a political party. The entire region came to a standstill as violent clashes and casualties were reported, first on social media and subsequently by the mainstream media.

Shortly following the first verified reports of violence, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) decided to conduct a fact-finding mission to AJK to ascertain ground realities, gather evidence related to the ongoing protests and use of force, evaluate the policies governing wheat and electricity provision in AJK, and scrutinize the response of the AJK government and law enforcement agencies, including the Pakistan Rangers.

The mission comprised Husain Naqi (senior journalist and HRCP treasurer), Sadia Bokhari (HRCP Council member), Jalaluddin Mughal (journalist), Raza Tanoli and Afzal Ayoub (both HRCP members). The mission took place on 16–17 May 2024 in the capital Muzaffarabad, where the team held meetings with journalists, civil society and JAAC representatives, and lawyers; the team also met the family of a young boy who was killed as a result of gunfire during the protests. The mission could not speak to representatives of law enforcement agencies or the district administration because, during the two days that the mission was visiting, the prime minister and president of Pakistan were also on a visit to Muzaffarabad.

### Mission terms of reference

The mission had the following terms of reference:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the events leading up to and during the protests, including the sociopolitical context, underlying grievances, and previous attempts at resolution.
- Interview key stakeholders involved in the protests, including JAAC representatives, local authorities, law enforcement agencies, and affected communities, to gather first-hand perspectives and insights.
- Assess the legal and policy framework governing the issues raised by the protesters, particularly regarding the pricing of wheat flour and electricity.
- Analyse the underlying causes and dynamics of the conflict, including any ethnic, religious or political dimensions, and assess the potential for further escalation or de-escalation of tensions.
- Evaluate the human rights implications of the protests, including allegations of excessive use of force by law enforcement and security forces, including the Pakistan Rangers; violations of the right to peaceful

assembly and freedom of expression; and any other rights violations (including the right to life) reported during the protests and subsequent clashes.

## Background

The recent protests in AJK and consequent unrest have a socioeconomic context. On 8 May 2023, the government suddenly doubled the price of flour, triggering protests in Rawalakot. Later in August, when electricity prices also doubled, another movement started in Muzaffarabad. A few days later, people in Mirpur launched a protest. This resulted in the formation of JAAC in August. Since its formation, JAAC has been at the forefront of these protests, driven by economic grievances and demands for greater autonomy over local resources as well as subsidies on wheat flour and reductions in the price of electricity.

The protests gained significant momentum on 11 May 2024, when thousands of Kashmiris took to the streets with similar grievances. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, the government's assurances rang hollow. A deadline was given for a large-scale protest on 11 May—a shutter-down, wheel-jam strike and long march from various corners of AJK to Muzaffarabad.

A unique aspect of this movement is that it has been leaderless. Current and former prime ministers, presidents, ministers, and members of the legislative assembly are notably absent, having retreated to Islamabad. This sense of abandonment appears to have further inflamed the populace.



*The mission spoke to members of civil society*

JAAC, which comprises representatives from various sectors, including business, the legal profession, civil society, and student organizations, had put forward a charter of demands in August 2023. This included calls for subsidized wheat flour, electricity provision at production cost, reductions in government expenditures on the perks and privileges of the ruling elite, the restoration of student unions, financial and administrative devolution to local bodies, improved internet services, reduced property transfer taxes, amendments to the Accountability Bureau Act 2020 to enhance the functionality of the accountability body, and the functionalization of the wood industry in AJK.

The timeline of events leading to the 11 May protests is crucial to understanding the reasons for escalation. Initial protests in August 2023 against unfair electricity taxes and scarce subsidized wheat flour had led to clashes with the police and first information reports (FIRs) being filed against JAAC leaders. Subsequent sit-ins, strikes and protests throughout 2023 and early 2024 saw a pattern of arrests, clashes and government attempts to quash the agitation by force. Notable incidents included the burning of electricity bills in Rawalakot and Muzaffarabad, leading to police crackdowns and arrests on charges of sedition and treason.

Negotiations between the government and JAAC commenced, following a major protest on 5 October 2023. Despite agreeing to most demands, the government's failure to supply electricity at production cost led to further protests. JAAC then announced a long march to Muzaffarabad for 11 May 2024, after the government failed to implement the actions to which it had earlier agreed, by 30 March 2024.

Ahead of the 11 May protest, the AJK government requested paramilitary troops from Pakistan through an official communique, requesting the interior ministry in a letter dated 22 April, to place six additional platoons of civil armed forces at its disposal for three months—signalling its intent to confront the protesters with force. This deployment, which included the Frontier Constabulary and Punjab Constabulary, started on 3 May—almost a week before the call for protests and long march. However, the involvement of the Pakistan Rangers, a federal paramilitary force, marked a significant escalation. The Rangers' entry into Muzaffarabad from two different entry points, Kohala and Bararkot, and particularly their reportedly unauthorized use of force, contributed to the violence.

Key incidents during the protests included a police raid in Muzaffarabad on the residence of Shaukat Nawaz Mir, an elected traders' leader, on 10 May, resulting in arrests and clashes. On 8 May, an assistant commissioner in Dodyal, Mirpur, reportedly assaulted an elderly citizen. A crackdown on the JAAC leadership in Muzaffarabad, Kotli and Mirpur further incited public anger, leading to retaliatory attacks on government officials and property.

On 10 May, a crippling shutter-down and wheel-jam strike took place, followed by violent confrontations between police and demonstrators. The police arrested numerous activists; clashes in various districts resulted in injuries on both sides. The long march from Mirpur to Muzaffarabad on 11 May saw fierce clashes, in which a police sub-inspector was killed in Islamgarh and numerous police personnel and protesters injured.

The entry of the Rangers, their lack of coordination with local authorities, and the perception that they were deployed in an attempt to suppress protests by force, fuelled the violence. Clashes in Muzaffarabad led to the deaths of three protesters and injuries to many others. The situation escalated as the Rangers engaged in teargas shelling and firing, resulting in widespread public outrage.

On 12 May 2024, following a meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and AJK Prime Minister Chaudhry Anwarul Haq, a PKR23 billion subsidy for flour and electricity was announced. Despite this, the clashes continued; JAAC called off the protest on 13 May after four days of violence and fatalities.

## **Meeting with journalists**

The mission arrived in Muzaffarabad on 16 May 2024 and commenced its work by meeting journalists from the print, electronic and digital media who had been covering the protests since the inception of this movement.

The journalists to whom HRCP spoke provided a rich overview of the situation. A senior analyst from the print media underscored the longstanding perception among the local population that the Pakistani government did not recognize the rights of Kashmiris over their natural resources. 'A clear example of this is that there are 52 matters, including natural resources and media regulations, over which legislative power rests not with the AJK Assembly but with the Kashmir Council. The chairman of this council is the prime minister of Pakistan and the majority of its members are federal ministers and officers who are not elected by the people of Azad Kashmir and are not accountable to them,' he said.

A senior journalist from a private TV channel told the mission that public trust in the AJK government had been eroded by continuous violations of merit, corruption, mismanagement, and a growing sense of deprivation among ordinary people. ‘People are now fed up with this system. This is why there was unprecedented solidarity on an issue like inflation,’ he pointed out.



*Journalists told the mission that public trust in the AJK government had shrunk*

Journalists explained to the mission that the people of AJK believed they had the first right to electricity generated from the region and should receive it at production cost. However, they experienced up to ten hours of loadshedding daily. After the 13th Amendment to the interim constitution in 2018, the local government gained the power to collect taxes, resulting in an additional PKR50 billion in tax revenues. Yet, the promised benefits, such as ownership of Mangla Dam after 35 years, have not been realized, leaving cities such as Mirpur with insufficient water.

The lack of agreements with the Pakistani government on hydropower projects, including the Neelum Jhelum project, had exacerbated feelings of deprivation, they said. There was a pervasive fear among people that Pakistan would eventually revoke the region’s separate constitutional identity—a prospect to which they were strongly opposed.

On the current wave of protests, journalists were of the view that the AJK government had deliberately provoked violence by words and actions, including by ‘making statements, holding police flag marches, deploying paramilitary forces and launching crackdowns before protests,’ according to one journalist.

A journalist from an international media outlet said that the shutdown of the internet during the protests had led to the spread of unverified news and rumours, further provoking the protesters. ‘People were already angry. When they heard that the Rangers had fired on protesters, killing a young man, this sparked widespread stone-pelting at the Rangers’ convoy,’ he pointed out.

### **Meeting with JAAC members**

On the evening of 16 May, the mission met representatives of JAAC—the organizing force behind the recent protests and long march. The representatives of the delegation, including traders, lawyers, youth, and students, expressed their frustration with the government’s approach throughout the negotiation process, which they felt had involved delaying tactics. ‘We did not want to protest and clash, but the prime minister [of AJK] and some of his ministers continuously sought to worsen the situation,’ one representative told the mission.

A representative from the trader community stressed that their demands were non-political and focused solely on public rights but said the government was ‘constantly linking this movement to “foreign conspiracies” and “anti-national forces,” which has angered people and increased their participation in the movement. If the government has evidence of external interference, it should take legal action. We are ready to cooperate.’

The call for a long march was met by repeated government messages indicating the potential use of force to quell the protests, others alleged. One JAAC representative expressed concern regarding the sudden entry of the Rangers even after the government had ceded to their demands. He emphasized the need for an impartial inquiry to determine why the Rangers had been deployed at a time when the situation had already been defused, resulting in the loss of three lives. ‘After the deaths of three youths, thousands of young people participating in the long march felt increasingly restless. Had we not controlled them, there could have been a major clash, with many more lives lost,’ he said. He also told the mission that FIRs were still being lodged against their people, adding, ‘In Mirpur, individuals have been named in an FIR for the murder of a police officer while they had, in fact, been arrested by the police hours before the incident.’

A JAAC lawyer criticized the AJK government’s lack of authority, claiming it was taking orders directly from Islamabad: ‘This became clear during the government’s initial negotiations with us in December because it could not implement the actions it had agreed on with us. This time, we negotiated directly with representatives of the Government of Pakistan, including the chief secretary of AJK and representatives of Pakistan’s security agencies who were in direct contact with the prime minister of Pakistan.’

The committee members blamed the AJK government for the escalation in violence. ‘In districts where Section 144 was not implemented, there was no unrest. Clashes occurred wherever the police tried to stop the march,’ a senior JAAC member told the mission.

Representatives also condemned the police’s night-time raids, alleged harassment of women, and arrests and alleged torture of young persons. They strongly advocated the formation of a judicial commission to investigate these excesses.

### **Meeting with women representatives of civil society**

The mission had the opportunity to meet women representatives of civil society in Muzaffarabad on 16 May, including women from various sectors such as education, journalism and non-government organizations.

Though not directly involved in the protests, many women expressed their solidarity with the movement. One woman said that despite knowing the government would use violence against the protesters, ‘I did not stop my young son from going to the demonstration. It felt necessary to raise our voices for public rights. Remaining silent was not an option.’

A woman from the education sector highlighted systemic corruption in AJK. ‘Educated women and young people do not get jobs unless they have money to pay bribes or have strong recommendations [sifarish],’ she said.

A journalist associated with the international media recounted intimidation tactics: ‘Unknown persons threatened me and came to my house to stop me from covering the march.’

Another woman described the community’s reaction to the reported killing of a young man by Rangers’ firing: ‘When people heard about the young man’s death, women also came out of their houses and pelted stones at the Rangers’ convoys. It is an identity issue. When it comes to our identity, how can women stay at home?’

### **Meeting with lawyers**

On 17 May, the mission met representatives of the High Court Bar Association, including members of the Central Bar Association and the Bar Council.

Most lawyers emphasized that people in AJK were highly sensitive about their identity, especially following India's revocation of the special constitutional status of Indian-occupied Kashmir. This explained their concern over any perceived attempts to undermine AJK's special status.

A senior woman lawyer told the mission that people in AJK were 'more patriotic' than any Pakistani, but when they were repeatedly 'mistrusted and deprived of their rights, it is natural for them to protest. And if you associate asking for your rights with treason, hatred will follow.'



*Mission members with members of the AJK legal community*

Another senior lawyer highlighted the constitutional implications of recent events. 'Calling in paramilitary forces, especially the Rangers, followed by their clash with local people and the killing of civilians is not only a violation of basic human rights but also a violation of the constitutional rights of AJK. The legal system was undermined and insulted. Those responsible for it must be determined,' he stated.

One lawyer told the mission that there were court decisions related to the demands of the protesters that had not been implemented, thus leading to the current situation. 'Whatever the constitution and legal system is, it is crucial to implement them because they are the foundation of the state. But if the government itself violates these, who will be responsible for the consequences?' he asked.

Specific incidents of alleged legal violations were also brought to light. In Mirpur, several lawyers and a woman were arrested in connection with the death of a police officer, despite video evidence indicating that they were already in police custody at the time of his death. The lawyers said they were calling for a transparent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the officer's death to determine whether the bullet that killed him was fired by protesters, police or anyone else.

### **Meeting with the parents of a young man killed in the clashes**

On 17 May, in the densely populated Upper Plate area of Muzaffarabad, the mission met the grieving parents of Saqib Mir, a 16-year-old student who was killed during the clashes. The couple, in their late fifties, expressed their despair and lack of hope for justice. They believe that while the identity of their son's killers is known, no one, including the government, is holding the perpetrators accountable.

Mir's father told the mission, 'I have asked to register an FIR, even if against unknown killers, but so far, they [the police] haven't taken any action. My child wasn't part of any protest; he was standing on the roof. He was shot directly in the chest with a machine gun.' The family said they had video evidence of an injured Saqib Mir being taken down from the rooftop where he was allegedly hit.

Despite the passage of several days, no FIR has been registered against the killing of three young men in Muzaffarabad. The families of the victims claim they are aware of who is responsible, but the state has not acknowledged this. In contrast, an FIR for the killing of a police officer in Islamgarh, Mirpur, was registered swiftly, the mission was told. Several protest leaders have been charged in connection with the murder of the sub-inspector. The FIR against JAAC names more than a dozen leaders, including a woman, some of whom were allegedly in police custody hours before the officer was killed.

The prime minister of AJK has announced that compensation of approximately PKR 5 million each has been given to the families of the three deceased men. However, instead of taking a clear stance on the FIRs, he has blamed JAAC leaders for their deaths.

**Critique of official response to unrest and violence in AJK**

Government officials such as deputy commissioners and assistant commissioners have expressed reluctance to take a clear stance on the situation, citing their duty to follow the directives of higher authorities—even when these directives were in conflict with the law. Many officials were reportedly unaware of the internet breakdown and the deployment of Punjab Constabulary and Frontier Constabulary troops. The Frontier Constabulary and Rangers were said to have been tasked with engaging different sectors of the population at any cost, while the police were instructed to disperse crowds and enforce Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

Some officials were also reportedly assigned to spread government ‘propaganda’ claiming that the protests were ‘orchestrated by foreign forces, particularly India’, and using social media to disseminate these messages. Screenshots of ‘concern’ expressed by Indian officials on social media were shared by government officials to support this narrative, thereby creating doubts about the legitimacy of the public movement.

However, the mission was not able to interact directly with any government officials or law enforcement agency as both quarters said they were occupied with the Pakistani prime minister and president’s expected visit to Muzaffarabad.

Individual members of the mission interacted with some administration and law enforcement officials, however, who spoke on condition of anonymity. They were told that when the protests were at their peak and the situation was being controlled by the civil administration in Muzaffarabad, the commissioner of Muzaffarabad division and the DIG Police Muzaffarabad were suspiciously transferred at midnight and new officers posted to control the protests. The public perceived the deployment of the Punjab Constabulary, Frontier Constabulary and Rangers as an attack on the state of AJK by Pakistan in collusion with the AJK government.

**Conclusion**

The fact-finding mission is of the view that the recent protests in AJK do not just underscore deep-seated socioeconomic and political grievances, but also widespread dissatisfaction with the government’s response to these issues. The AJK government’s approach, marked by heavy-handed tactics and inadequate engagement with protesters’ demands, has exacerbated tensions, leading to human rights violations and further alienating the local populace.

The government’s reliance on the existing political elite in Muzaffarabad has created a significant disconnect between policymakers and ordinary residents of AJK. This has led to loss of public confidence in the political leadership. The ongoing protests, spearheaded by grassroots action committees rather than mainstream political parties, reflect a collective demand for economic rights and better governance.

The mission concludes that the AJK government’s response to the protests involved excessive force, including the deployment of paramilitary forces and suppression of internet services. Such actions have led to human rights violations and fuelled further unrest. The deaths of protesters, including the tragic case of 16-



year-old Saqib Mir, highlights the severity of the situation. The situation underscores the need for effective communication, restraint and genuine engagement with protesters to address their demands and prevent future violence.

## Recommendations

In view of its observations, the mission recommends the following to the AJK government:

- Give ordinary AJK residents and their legitimate demands for economic rights and better governance a fair and serious hearing.
- Show restraint and engage with protesters through peaceful dialogue and negotiations.
- Adopt a conciliatory approach and engage with civil society and grassroots movements to address their legitimate demands and grievances.
- Hold accountable those responsible for the use of excessive force against protesters after conducting an independent investigation and prevent future abuses.
- Adhere to human rights principles, including the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression and the right to life.
- Implement sustainable economic relief measures, including subsidies and price controls, to address the immediate needs of the population.
- Develop policies that ensure that local communities benefit directly from the region's natural resources, particularly hydroelectric power.
- Strengthen local governance institutions to improve service delivery and increase local autonomy over resource management.
- Provide training to security forces on human rights standards and the appropriate use of force in managing protests.

Additionally, the Pakistan federal government should take the following into account:

- Legislative powers for AJK should lie with the elected AJK Assembly.
- The Kashmir Council should be representative of AJK citizens.
- The use of paramilitary forces against AJK citizens is cause for serious concern and should not recur.
- AJK should be given control over its natural resources.
- Pakistan's earnings from its use of AJK's water and electricity need to be shared more equitably.