

# Balochistan's Struggle for Hope

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights  
Commission  
of Pakistan

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has closely monitored the political and human rights situation in Balochistan for over two decades, leading high-profile fact-finding missions to the region every few years and calling the attention of successive governments to the legitimate demands of the Baloch people—including an end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, greater press freedom for a province that is referred to constantly as an ‘information black hole’, a fairer share in the dividends that Balochistan’s rich natural resources have to offer, and more effective, more independent governance that focuses on delivering education, healthcare, housing, livelihoods, and law and order to citizens.

In August 2019, a high-profile mission led by former HRCP secretary-general and long-time Balochistan observer I. A. Rehman observed that ‘the popular Balochistan narrative remains a dirge on the wrongs done to the people of the province since 1947.’ HRCP notes with considerable alarm that the human rights situation in the province has improved little since then—indeed, members of the 2022 mission noted that there was a palpable sense of anger among ordinary citizens, many of whom went so far as to refer to Balochistan as a ‘colony’ of the state. This sentiment should not be treated lightly. Allegations of political manipulation by the military establishment—an impression strengthened by the level of the Frontier Corps’ (FC) presence in the province and its degree of control over almost all matters—appeared to be compounded by public frustration at the sluggishness of the current provincial government.

This mission, which took place during 10–16 October 2022, comprised Husain Naqi (treasurer of HRCP’s governing council and a senior journalist), Habib Tahir (vice-chair of HRCP Balochistan), staff members Maheen Pracha, Fareed Shahwani and Ghani Parwaz, and Akbar Notezai (journalist with Dawn).

As part of this exercise, the fact-finding team visited the districts of Gwadar, Kech and Panjgur in the southern division of Makran, where it held meetings, focus group discussions and consultations with the fisherfolk community, local activists, traders, lawyers, students, academics and journalists. In Quetta, the provincial capital, the team held a series of consultations with the main political parties, including the Balochistan National Party (Mengal) (BNP-M), the National Party, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), Hazara Democratic Party (HDP) and Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP).

The team also held key informant interviews with the inspector general of prisons and additional inspector general (AIG) of police for gender in Quetta and a team of senior police officials in Gwadar. Despite efforts to contact the provincial chief minister and the inspector general of the Frontier Corps, HRCP received no response to its request for interviews.

Broadly, the mission's mandate was to:

- Assess the situation regarding democratic governance, especially the functioning of the provincial assembly and legislation.
- Determine the extent and impact of curbs on freedom of movement, expression, association and assembly in the region.
- Understand the role of Baloch women in local rights movements.
- Assess the factors responsible for the reported rise in cases of enforced disappearances and to assess its implications for the region.
- Assess the preparedness of the relevant authorities in dealing with the impact of natural calamities.

The mission is grateful to the large number of people—officials as well as members of political parties and citizens—who gave HRCP their time and answered the team's questions.

# In the vanguard: Balochistan's women activists



*Being browbeaten by the state has cultivated our political consciousness, leading to informed resistance.*

— Dr Mahrang Baloch

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In December 2021, an estimated 2,000 women gathered in Gwadar—some as young as 15—to demand access to uninterrupted supplies of electricity, gas and water, a ban on commercial fishing trawlers in the sea and removal of restrictions on local movement through security check-posts. [1] Although Baloch women have been actively involved in local rights movements for many years, observers commented that this was the first time they had gathered in such numbers and over a sustained period. Baloch women continue to organise the Quetta edition of Aurat March, demanding, among other things, women's economic rights, while women play an active role in student-run organisations at universities, lobbying for lower tuition fees and better facilities.

Most prominent are the Baloch women activists who campaign against enforced disappearances. Dr Mahrang Baloch has borne the brunt of state excesses against the Baloch for over a decade. Her father was abducted in 2009; his mutilated body surfaced two years later. Subsequently, her brother was abducted in 2017. At a meeting with the HRCP mission, she and women's rights activist Seema Batool explained why Baloch women have been so active in local rights movements, campaigning against not just enforced disappearances, but also gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and forced marriage. 'The patriarchal system has become so deeply entrenched in the province that building a women-led movement or having a voice in leadership is exceedingly difficult,' said Mahrang, adding that 'women who do choose to get involved in the struggle for rights—often against the wishes of their family—are surveilled, profiled and labelled "traitors" for peddling a "Western-funded agenda".'

For Seema, traditional religious notions of purdah, jahez [dowry] and restriction of women to domestic spaces are not part of Baloch culture, with women often owning property and



cattle and occupying positions of considerable significance in the social structure. She contended that such trends had crept in post-urbanisation, following greater influence from the clergy in the province. 'It is crucial to stand shoulder to shoulder with men and lay claim to spaces where men are also present rather than isolating ourselves to women-only spaces,' she said. Pointing to recent protests held by doctors in Quetta and labourers in Gwadar, she underscored the active and visible presence of women in both cases.

However, both women agreed that the crackdown on educational institutions—and on student organisations in particular—had deprived Baloch youth of the opportunity to build a sound political consciousness. Pointing to incidents at Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, they pointed out that any sort of political discussion or events were banned, with students compelled to sign affidavits that they would not partake in either. Both women said that, despite this obstacle, their own experience of higher education had helped develop their resolve to be human rights defenders. They also felt that the ongoing insurgency in Balochistan had diverted attention away from rights-based issues in the province.

**Both women agreed that the crackdown on educational institutions – and on student organisations in particular – had deprived Baloch youth of the opportunity to build a solid political consciousness.**

Both Mahrang and Seema identified a number of barriers to their work as women human rights defenders, alleging that families of missing persons were commonly harassed and coerced into withdrawing their FIRs or court cases and ceasing public protests. In addition, the lack of mainstream media attention, generally shrinking spaces for civil society and the unchecked influence of extremist religious elements had worsened prospects for Baloch women.



*Women and girls were a prominent part of the Gwadar-based Haq Do Tehreek (image credit: Lok Sujag)*

# Enforced disappearances

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Of all the human rights concerns raised at various meetings and consultations during the mission, the problem of enforced disappearances—allegedly carried out by local security agencies or at their behest—remained a constant refrain, whether in conversations with members of the Gwadar-based Haq Do Tehreek, with civil society members in Panjgur and Turbat, or with journalists and political workers in Quetta.

While many victims have been missing for over a decade, such as Baloch activist Dr Deen Mohammad who was forcibly disappeared in June 2009, HRCP has also observed a change in tactics over the years, with political dissidents, journalists, students and rights activists being disappeared for short periods and subsequently released—followed by a string of fresh disappearances soon after. A local journalist in Gwadar appeared to confirm this, saying, ‘If the state releases one missing person on a given day, it will disappear another four the next day.’ When asked why they thought this pattern occurred, several civil society activists in Turbat said it was a way to ‘keep Baloch dissent in check,’ adding, ‘If our people have committed any crimes, the state should produce them in court. But unfortunately, the state does not trust its own institutions. If [the state] were to produce our missing persons in court, there would be no reason for our families to take to the streets and chant slogans against the state.’ Nor is age any guarantee of safety.



*At the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons camp in Quetta, rights activists Mama Qadeer and Nasrullah Baloch said that families continue to find it difficult to file an FIR if a relative is forcibly disappeared*

One civil society activist in Turbat alleged that ‘even boys who have not yet reached their teens have been picked up by the state.’ Although HRCP could not independently verify the case in question, it is worth noting that reports of minors having been forcibly disappeared do surface from time.

**A political worker with the National Party in Turbat said that the solution to enforced disappearances was a political one and lay in negotiations, but that neither side was ready to initiate this step.**

The threat of enforced disappearances hangs heavy over university students in particular. As one student in Turbat explained, ‘My cousin [a student at the University of Turbat] was picked up [allegedly by security agencies] and released after more than three years. The risk that any one of us could be next has made us fearful of attending university at all.’ This sentiment should be cause for immense concern in a province where the state has invested little enough in education. Another local campaigner against enforced disappearances said

that this tactic was used to discourage students from taking part in politics. ‘When the vice-chair of the Baloch Students’ Organisation is barred from entering the premises of the University of Turbat, why have a political science department at the university at all?’ he scoffed.

Additionally, the problem is not restricted to students in Balochistan. Young civil society activists in Turbat and Quetta expressed concern over the number of Baloch students subjected to ‘racial profiling’ and illegal detention as students at well-known universities in Lahore, Bahawalpur, Karachi and Islamabad. [2] ‘Like Balochistan, even Punjab is becoming unsafe for our children to study,’ said a rights activist in Turbat.

Some members of the district administration in Gwadar and Turbat conceded privately to the HRCP team that there had been a rise in enforced disappearances in the province. ‘Many are insurgents who were arrested on charges of terrorism, but subsequently released by the courts for lack of evidence,’ said one official, adding that the same persons would then be abducted by the security agencies, since an enforced disappearance had no need of ‘evidence’ or ‘proof of guilt’. ‘There are flaws in the trial system,’ said another official. At the same time, officials claimed that, as a result of the state crackdown, there were no longer any ‘no-go’ areas in Makran division, where insurgents once held sway.

A political worker with the National Party in Turbat presented a different take. While conceding that the problem of enforced disappearances was linked, at least partly, to the ongoing insurgency, he said that the solution was a political one and lay in negotiations,

that neither side was ready to initiate this step. 'As long as you keep looking at things through a security lens, you cannot expect a political solution,' he warned.

### The long wait for missing relatives

On 15 October 2022, the HRCP mission visited the missing persons protest camp run by Voice for Baloch Missing Persons in Quetta and spoke to two of its representatives, Mama Qadeer and Nasrullah Baloch, both of whom have campaigned against enforced disappearances for over a decade. They alleged that a number of forcibly disappeared persons had been killed in 'fake encounters' staged by the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) in Balochistan. Of particular concern to the mission was the allegation that five missing persons were killed allegedly during a security operation launched after a lieutenant colonel, Laiq Baig Mirza and his cousin, were abducted and murdered in Ziarat in July 2022—an incident for which the proscribed Baloch Liberation Army claimed responsibility. [3]

Mama Qadeer claimed that 500 Baloch persons were forcibly disappeared in 2022 alone, while 40–50 dead bodies (victims of extrajudicial killings) were found in the province. While HRCP could not verify these numbers independently—given that only a small number of such cases are registered with the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and many families are reluctant to report such cases for fear of reprisal—it was clear to the mission that the use of enforced disappearances as a security tactic continued unabated. Both Mama Qadeer and Nasrullah Baloch reiterated that families continue to find it extremely difficult to file an FIR if a relative is disappeared in this manner.

The mission was shown a photocopy of what Mama Qadeer referred to as the 'CTD red book', which he alleged listed hundreds of missing who had been declared 'absconders'. 'Nauroz Baloch, who was disappeared in 2016,' said Mama Qadeer, 'has a bounty of PKR 100,000 on his head [according to this document].' He also claimed that the CTD had produced about 80 people in court who had been implicated in false cases and the majority released for lack of evidence. While the mission could not speak to any CTD officials on the matter, the fact that rights activists in Balochistan have consistently alleged that forcibly disappeared persons are denied their right to a fair trial and due process warrants a transparent investigation into such lists maintained by security forces.

# Securitisation in Makran

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The heavily crowded, run-down main market in Gwadar—in stark contrast to the wide, clean, empty stretch of Marine Drive along the coast—is punctuated by armed Frontier Corps personnel who stand rigidly among local vendors selling vegetables.

Leaving Gwadar for Turbat, the HRCP team counted no fewer than 13 check-posts during the first hour of the journey. Civil society activists in both Gwadar and Turbat spoke bitterly of being stopped regularly at such check-posts, frisked and often intimidated.



*Women in Turbat spoke to the HRCP mission about family members being harassed at security check-posts*

One resident in Turbat claimed he has had to pay bribes to be allowed to pass through on several occasions. The consensus among citizens, however, is that the purpose of the check-posts is to create a climate of fear and control among the local population. Although some check-posts were removed after the protests led by Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman and the Haq Do Tehreek at the end of 2021, the military presence in Gwadar at least remains highly visible.

# Political representation and governance

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## Hazara Democratic Party

Members of the HDP conceded that Quetta had been relatively peaceful in the last two years for their community, but pointed out that a general unease still existed. Most members of the Shia Hazara community continue to live in the Hazara Town and Mariabad neighbourhoods. The fear of ethnic violence means that Shia Hazara citizens still require an armed escort to visit Quetta's main markets to purchase food and other items. A daily convoy of 30–40 vehicles leaves these areas every day and citizens are told they have two or three hours at most to purchase what they need.

A particular concern of HDP representatives was the level of unemployment among the young Shia Hazara population. One representative claimed that even well-qualified Shia Hazara candidates found it difficult to obtain government posts, citing corruption and nepotism. 'Eighty percent of the community is still too scared to return to regular trade in the city's main markets,' he added.

## Balochistan National Party (Mengal)

Speaking to the HRCP mission at their central party office in Quetta, representatives of the BNP-M—the largest Baloch nationalist party in the province, allied with the government in the centre and in opposition in the Balochistan Assembly—reiterated their commitment to federalism and the democratic struggle, but identified the problem of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings as a sticking point. The party's district president Ghulam Nabi Marri expressed considerable unhappiness over the seeming inability of the previous and current federal governments to ensure that these practices should cease.

The BNP-M was especially critical of what they perceived as brazen 'political engineering' that had brought to power the Balochistan Awami Party—allegedly supported by the military establishment, given the party's startlingly rapid rise to power in 2018 in the absence of any grassroots support. As legislator Ahmad Nawaz Bangulzai said to the

mission, 'The Baloch question can only be resolved by political means because the question itself is a political one. Unfortunately, the state wants to resolve it through the barrel of a gun.'



*HRCP mission meeting with BNP-M leaders in Quetta*

Party representatives felt it was critical for the province to feel it had a stake in the federation rather than be treated as merely a staging area for potentially lucrative development projects such as those being carried out under CPEC, the Saindak Copper-Gold Project and the Reko Diq mines project. Several party leaders said they had objected strongly to the in camera briefing held on the Reko Diq project in December 2021, arguing that the terms of the project should have been debated transparently in Parliament. The BNP-M had demanded a 52 percent share of project royalties for the province, but expected to receive no more than 25–35 percent. [4]

### **National Party**

The HRCP team spoke to Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, former chief minister of Balochistan and president of the National Party (NP), at the latter's central office in Quetta. Dr Malik underscored the need for the federal government to change what he referred to as the 'Islamabad mindset' towards Balochistan by acknowledging that the Baloch people had the right to profit from their own natural resources and to elect legitimate representatives

without interference—tacit or otherwise—from the establishment. This, he said, would require sustained political dialogue—an element currently missing from the state’s relationship with the province. For NP leaders, the solution to the ongoing low-level insurgency in Balochistan is also political negotiations. However, they claimed their efforts to hold such negotiations in the past had been disowned by the state.

‘The binding force must be the constitution’, said Yasmin Lehri, the party’s women’s wing secretary. ‘If you cannot secure the rights guaranteed [to the Baloch people] under the constitution, what can you hope to achieve?’ She told the mission that young Baloch people had become bolder out of sheer frustration, adding that the state was ‘breeding revolutionaries’.



*HRCP mission meeting with National Party leadership and labour unions in Quetta*

### **Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party**

The PKMAP delegation in Quetta expressed its deep dissatisfaction with what it saw as the ‘receding role of civilian authority’ in Balochistan and the control allegedly exerted by the FC over matters ranging from curbs on cross-border trade in Chaman to the bribes it reportedly demanded for providing security to coal miners, most of whom hail from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.



Party representatives, including senior political leader Dr Hamid Khan Achakzai, also felt that the Pashtun population of Balochistan was not represented equally in the provincial assembly relative to the Baloch population, despite the two being more or less equal in demographic terms. 'Our [Pashtun-dominated] constituencies are being delimited in a way that decreases the Pashtun population's electoral power,' said one PKMAP leader.

A particularly serious allegation made by the party was that the state continued to stoke tribal disputes as a tactic to preserve provincial disunity. One solution proposed to the mission was to hold a roundtable that would bring together all stakeholders of the province—including all political parties, the bureaucracy, the media, the legal community and the security establishment—to find a way forward.



*Members of the mission speak to the PKMAP leadership in Quetta*

### **Pakistan People's Party**

PPP representatives in Quetta expressed great concern over the lack of livelihood opportunities for Balochistan's residents as well as access to education, healthcare, drinking water and social security. 'All classes of people should have access to the same quality of education,' a party members told the mission, adding that '85 percent of people from Quetta are compelled to go to Karachi for medical treatment because the facilities here are poor.' Of particular concern to several party representatives was the ongoing ban on student unions. 'In the absence of student unions and study circles, young Baloch people are being deprived not only of their right to freedom of association, but also awareness of their other rights as citizens,' said one PPP member.

## Students' freedom of association

A delegation of Baloch students was also present at the mission's meeting with National Party leaders in Quetta and explained their concerns regarding the right to freedom of association in the province amid the ban on student unions. The mission noted that attempts by university administrations to stamp out political activism on campus remain very much in force.

As at other universities in Pakistan, students in Balochistan are required to sign a bond at the time of admission stating they will not take part in any political activity. In Balochistan, such controls go a step further. As one delegation member said, 'If 100 boys get together on campus for an apolitical university activity, FC personnel—which remain stationed at the University of Balochistan ostensibly for security purposes—invariably arrive to ask what is being discussed.'

A young woman who was part of the delegation also complained of harassment by senior college officials at her institution, an agricultural college, when she had tried to campaign for lower tuition fees, arguing that the rise in fees from PKR 8,000 to PKR 19,000 was too steep.

# Shrinking space for press freedom

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Historically, press freedom in Balochistan has been severely constrained, with journalists compelled to resort to self-censorship, and editors and media house owners issued regular 'press advice' by the security establishment on which incidents they can and cannot report, and from what perspective. According to HRCP's own records, at least four journalists were killed in Balochistan between 2020 and 2022, including one woman. [5] Periodically, newspaper distribution is also suspended and press clubs closed down due to threats from sectarian and militant organisations as well as insurgents.

The situation appears to have worsened over the last several years, with journalists at the Quetta Press Club informing the mission that the frequency of targeted attacks against their colleagues in Khuzdar in particular had not only forced the press club to close down,

**One journalist in Quetta to whom the mission spoke said they were caught in a Catch-22 situation and yet criticised by the public for 'not doing' their jobs.**

but also compelled many local reporters to move away, fearing for the safety of their families. Such threats, they alleged, emanated not only from nonstate actors such as sectarian and militant organisations but also from actors claiming to be associated with the state.

According to an office bearer of the Balochistan Union of Journalists, journalists cannot report independently on attacks perpetrated by militant organisations in Balochistan. Instead, they are

'expected' to follow the official press statements issued by the ISPR on such incidents. At the same time, militant and sectarian organisations as well as insurgent groups are liable to threaten journalists who do not report their claims or demands. One journalist in Quetta to whom the mission spoke said they were caught in a Catch-22 situation and yet criticised by the public for 'not doing' their jobs.

Other journalists, particularly in the electronic media in Quetta, also confirmed that they had been instructed by their media houses not to report on enforced disappearances. 'We don't have permission to cover the missing persons camp, for instance. If we try to do so, state agency officials on the scene ask us what we are doing here,' said one journalist.

# The impact of the 2022 floods

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Although none of the areas visited by the mission had been affected badly by the July–August floods, several journalists in Quetta spoke to HRCP about the destruction they had witnessed in the Nasirabad and Jaffarabad districts in western Balochistan. The lacklustre performance of the provincial government and, in particular, the marked absence of the chief minister in a time of crisis drew bitter criticism.

One journalist said that the floods had inundated Nasirabad—one of the few agricultural areas in the province—to the extent that no rice production would be possible this year; he warned that a food security crisis was imminent. Almost all the journalists who had reported from Balochistan’s flood-affected areas said that cases of malaria, gastrointestinal disease and snake bites were rife. ‘Patients were being treated on benches in schools being used as temporary shelters,’ reported one journalist.

**The lacklustre performance of the provincial government and, in particular, the marked absence of the chief minister in a time of crisis drew bitter criticism.**

A particularly disturbing allegation raised by several journalists was that members of the provincial assembly were channelling relief goods to areas where they hoped to build a vote bank rather than to the constituencies that needed them most.

A PPP political worker in Quetta, who had returned recently from the district of Sohbatpur, said that people affected by the floods were forced to camp by the side of the road and were living ‘hand to mouth’, worried that the oncoming winter would bring greater misery still if they were not resettled in time. ‘At one point,’ he said, ‘there was no dry land to even bury the dead.’ Representatives of the National Party and PKMAP also voiced their concern at the provincial government’s lack of action during the floods and reportedly poor coordination at the level of the bureaucracy.

# Livelihood opportunities for fisherfolk in Gwadar

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On 11 October 2022, the mission held a consultation with members of civil society in Gwadar, including the fisherfolk community, local journalists and human rights defenders. Several fisherfolk activists explained that the area that now comprises the main port was originally a poor fishing settlement, which relied on the adjacent bay as a year-round source of livelihood.

They said that the recently inaugurated Eastbay Expressway (a USD 168 million CPEC project), which connects the main port to the Makran Coastal Highway, had cut off their access to the Arabian Sea, thereby affecting the livelihoods of thousands of local fisherfolk. In a city where an estimated two thirds of the population relies on fishing for a livelihood, this is cause for concern.



*Fisherfolk rights activists in Gwadar said that illegal trawlers had depleted the area's seafood reserves, affecting local livelihoods*

A recurring complaint was the continued presence of 'illegal' trawlers off the coast of Gwadar. [6] Members of the fisherfolk community claimed these had greatly depleted the area's seafood reserves because—unlike the smaller boats used by local fisherfolk—the Karachi-based trawlers use large dragnets that end up trapping schools of breeding fish and damaging fish roe and coral, with adverse ecological impacts. As one fisherman said, 'When I go to sea now, I return with hardly anything in hand.'

## A collective demand for rights

Gwadar has long been a site of contention between the state and local residents who claim they have been systematically excluded from the economic and development benefits of the deep-sea port being developed there as part of the multibillion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects being carried out in the country.

Matters came to a head when, in August 2021, hundreds of residents took to the streets to protest against the severe shortage of water and electricity in the area as well as threats to their traditional source of livelihood—fishing—in the form of deep-sea trawlers run by Chinese firms and by larger companies in Karachi. In September that year, under the leadership of Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the number of protestors swelled to several thousand, with women in the vanguard. The mission was happy to note that women's participation in this movement was a source of pride for the civil society activists to whom it spoke. As one rights activist said, 'Gwadar's women are our decision makers.'

The growing movement became known as the 'Haq Do Tehreek', with thousands expressing deep frustration over the state's failure to secure their social and economic rights. Unlike most other rights movements in Balochistan, the Gwadar movement gained comparatively more traction in the media when it began in 2021, partly because of sustained social media visibility. Similar protests have occurred periodically since then over the course of 2022, but despite negotiations with the government, there has been no meaningful response in the form of any deep-seated or sustained policy changes to address the root of the problem.

When asked whom they held responsible for illegal trawling, fisherfolk activists alleged that the vessels were owned by Karachi-based businesses that had enough political influence to ensure their operations continued despite occasional attempts by the Sindh government to reign them in. International trawlers operated by Chinese companies were also blamed for the practice. Although the respondents could not put a figure to the number of trawlers, one rights activist estimated it ran into 'thousands'.

In general, the fisherfolk community felt it had become mired in poverty as a result of lower income, lack of local facilities that might help improve their catch, and inadequate access to education and healthcare. One rights activist said it was 'a vicious cycle' that kept fisherfolk trapped in a low-wage sector and unable to invest in their children's schooling, thereby ensuring that they too had no other prospects but to continue in their parents' line of work.

# Livelihood opportunities through border trade

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A large proportion of Balochistan's population relies on border trade, particularly with Iran, to sustain itself economically. Many of the citizens to whom the mission spoke in Panjgur and Turbat (in the Makran division) said they depended heavily on petrol trade with Iran. Given the scant presence of Pakistan State Oil in the province, much of Balochistan's fuel needs are met by petrol smuggled from across the border from Iran.

Although the Mand-Pishin border crossing in Kech district has been operational for some time, recent border fencing has allowed authorities such as the FC to monopolise trade by issuing a 'token' system that grants preferential access to buyers, as corroborated by members of civil society in Panjgur.



*Residents of Panjgur expressed frustration at the dearth of viable economic opportunities in the area*

Local residents expressed considerable frustration not only at the dearth of viable economic opportunities, which they say compels them to resort to illicit trade and smuggling, but also at the token system, which they alleged was arbitrary. 'I have to



'indicate on the token what I plan to purchase,' explained one trader in Panjgur, 'but if I purchase, say, tomatoes instead of coriander, my purchases will be confiscated by the FC. If the FC wants to restrict the movement of drugs and weapons, that is fine, but why restrict our livelihoods like this?'

At a meeting with members of civil society in Quetta, one respondent informed the mission that tens of thousands of Balochistan residents were involved in the illegal oil trade with Iran, claiming that the state did not want to legalise this because the FC and provincial bureaucracy were able to generate 'millions of rupees' for themselves through the current arrangement.

**Local residents expressed considerable frustration not only at the dearth of viable economic opportunities, which they say compels them to resort to illicit trade and smuggling, but also at the token system, which they alleged was arbitrary.**

The mission observed that the absence of a healthy legal trading ecosystem between Balochistan and neighbouring countries had exacerbated poverty levels in the region. Local residents in Quetta also said that trade at the Chaman border had ground to a halt, forcibly severing economic, social and cultural ties between families on either side of the border.

These dynamics have created a rent-seeking oligarchy of state institutions that has concentrated economic and political power, making the provincial economy highly exclusionary.



*In Makran, pickups wait to cross the border to bring back smuggled petrol from Iran—a source of livelihood for many*

# Quetta's jails

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Balochistan, given its small population, is the only province in which prisons are not sorely overcrowded, although specific jails—such as in Turbat and Dera Murad Jamali—house more inmates than their capacity allows.

At a meeting with the inspector general of prisons in Quetta, the mission was told that inadequate budgetary allocations meant the provincial prisons department would not be able to expand jail capacity to meet any future increase in the inmate population. Inflation has also increased the cost of meals per inmate from PKR 250 to PKR 270, he explained.



*The inspector general of prisons in Quetta said that prisons rely on donations to meet their need for medical supplies*

Access to healthcare remains a problem, however, with prisons relying primarily on donations to meet their need for medical supplies. 'Doctors are reluctant to work in jails,' said the inspector general, 'and apply for transfers as soon as they are posted here, even though their salaries are about PKR 150,000 a month. There is, however, little scope for promotion.' A key concern among prison staff was the lack of drug detox centres onsite, given the reportedly high incidence of drug use among inmates.

A spot-check of the women's prison in Quetta revealed that the premises house 26 female inmates and 12 children under six. The rooms they sleep in are equipped with small electric heaters and the inmates have access to a surprisingly well-equipped art and crafts room for their children. However, while women prisoners sleep on mattresses, juvenile prisoners make do with raised concrete slabs and blankets.

# Quetta's Christian community

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The HRCP mission met members of the Christian community in Quetta on 16 October 2023. Recent census data from Balochistan records the number of Christians in the province at around 30,000, but members of the community told the mission that this figure was abysmally low. They said that church data was unreliable and that even NADRA had not recorded their numbers accurately. Representative of the community alleged that this undercounting was done deliberately to deprive this historically oppressed minority of reserved seats as well as education and employment quotas.

One of their main concerns was that Christians of Punjabi origin, but now having lived in Balochistan for decades, were unable to relocate their domicile to Balochistan. Additionally, they alleged that the Christian community were invariably seen as 'outsiders' unlike the ethnic Baloch, Pashtun and Hazara population. As a result, the 5 percent quota for religious minorities in government employment and the 2 percent quota for education was not filled. 'Without access to scholarships and a good higher education, we cannot get government jobs,' said a member of the Christian community, adding that public funds for the minorities' affairs department were often squandered with little to show for it.

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A second concern was that the provincial laws governing marriage and divorce in the Christian community in Balochistan, the Christian Marriage Act 1872 and the Divorce Act 1869, are out of date. Members of the community also alleged that there were cases of minors having been forcibly converted and married to Muslim men, with no oversight by government authorities. Although the mission was not provided details, this is a serious allegation that needs further investigation, given that it has received little to no coverage in the mainstream media.

Community members also highlighted the shortcomings of reserved seats for minorities. Since these appointments are made purely at the discretion

of the party leadership, with no input from the minority community itself, they are answerable solely to senior party members, making it impossible for their community to hold them accountable since they do not rely on them for political support or votes. One of the members highlighted that all mainstream political parties did not even bother to pay lip service to minority issues in their manifestos published prior to the 2018 election. They also spoke of the wanton land grabbing of real estate owned by the Christian community, with a missionary hospital in Quetta recently having been taken over by a local political leader and well-off minority members from other provinces being brought in to run it. One individual also spoke of jailed Christians being promised clemency if they converted to Islam, highlighting a larger endemic issue around coerced conversions in the province.



*Members of the Christian community in Quetta said they were seen as 'outsiders' in the province*

# Recommendations

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Based on its findings, the HRCP fact-finding mission has made the following recommendations:

- The unwarranted interference of law enforcement and security agencies in Balochistan's political affairs and civilian administrative matters needs to end immediately. Its citizens must be able to take part in free, fair, credible and transparent elections in 2023 so that an effective provincial government and civilian administration can run the affairs of the province to ensure Balochistan's provincial autonomy.
- HRCP remains extremely concerned at continued reports of enforced disappearances; there appears to have been no improvement in this situation since its last mission in 2019. Any citizens or residents of the province who are deprived of their liberty for lawful reasons must be kept in a fully authorised place of detention, produced in court and the law allowed to take its course. Additionally, victims of enforced disappearances, their families and witnesses must be provided protection in case of reprisals.
- The provincial government of Balochistan and the federal government must ensure that all missing persons are accounted for and recovered safely. While the recently passed Criminal Laws (Amendment) Bill 2022 acknowledges the crime of enforced disappearance, legislation is needed to (a) address the need for a new legal architecture extending civilian oversight to state agencies, which are commonly alleged as perpetrators of enforced disappearances, (b) provide reparations to victims and their families, and (c) address the accountability of perpetrators.
- The legitimate grievances of the Pashtun population of Balochistan—including that pertaining to its unequal representation in the provincial assembly relative to the Baloch population—must be given a fair hearing by all political stakeholders. In this context, the mission recommends holding a roundtable that would bring together all stakeholders of the province—including all political parties, the bureaucracy, the media, the legal community and the security establishment—to find a way forward.

- A journalists' safety law must be enacted in Balochistan as soon as possible to promote and protect the independence, impartiality, safety and freedom of expression of journalists and media professionals.
- The provincial government must uphold all its citizens' right to freedom of peaceful assembly by avoiding the use of excessive or disproportionate force, pre-emptive arrests and unwarranted charges of terrorism or sedition.
- The provincial government must enact legislation to restore student unions in Balochistan to allow all students to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of association. Universities in turn must be willing to listen to and address the legitimate demands of their student bodies, paying special attention to the needs of women students in terms of transport, hostel accommodation, campus safety and security against sexual or physical harassment.
- The long-standing, reasonable demands of the Haq Do Tehreek must be met, including the demand for access to healthcare, electricity and clean drinking water and an end to enforced disappearances. The fisherfolk community in Gwadar should be allowed to continue to earn their livelihood through fishing, despite any ongoing or planned projects under CPEC. If the scope of any such projects is likely to affect their access to the sea, such projects should be reshaped in accordance with the concerns of the community. Illegal trawling by other provincial or international vessels must cease permanently. In addition, the government should invest in better education and scholarships for fisherfolk children to give them options of alternative livelihoods.
- People's freedom of movement in the Makran region must be secured by reducing the number of security check-posts and ensuring that citizens are not needlessly harassed by security or law enforcement personnel while going about their daily lives.
- The provincial government must pay special attention to Panjgur in terms of providing better infrastructure (including farm-to-market roads), access to healthcare and schools, agricultural inputs for date production, electricity and internet connectivity. Cross-border trade must also be facilitated rather than hindered, given the limited livelihood opportunities in the area and spiralling inflation.
- Given the devastation caused by the 2022 floods, the provincial disaster management authority and Balochistan government must map vulnerability zones across the province, invest in early warning systems, evacuation plans and community

sanctuaries with stockpiles of emergency supplies, and set up a system of joint management through local bodies.

- While the HRCP mission was pleased to see efforts being made by the Balochistan Police to recruit women to the force, such initiatives must be prioritised through affirmative action and by providing women police officers facilities such as additional day-care centres for their children.
- All police stations in Balochistan must be equipped with complaints desks and secure waiting areas for women and trans persons, headed by women or transwomen officers. The government must also invest in better human rights training for all provincial police officers, especially among lower cadres who come into contact with citizens daily.
- The provincial government must increase the budgets available to the prisons department to allow access to medical supplies and establish drug detox centres for prisons that face an acute drug use problem among inmates.
- The provincial government should pass fresh legislation governing the establishment of new domiciles within Balochistan for all religious minorities, especially the Christian community, to be represented accurately. The government should also consider seriously the proposal for a dual voting system that would allow religious minorities to vote for reserved seat members alongside casting votes for their preferred parties during general elections.
- The Shia Hazara community needs greater protection without needing to be relegated to ghetto-like neighbourhoods. The provincial government should engage with the community and devise ways that allow the community to live in the province securely.
- The harassment of civil society organisations and human rights defenders must end: they must be allowed to continue their much-needed relief, development and human rights work in the province.



# Endnotes

[1] <https://loksujag.com/story/Gwadar-haq-do-protest-women-participation-eng>

[2] On at least two occasions in 2022, local groups of Baloch students approached HRCP to say that their peers had been forcibly disappeared from Lahore. Although they were eventually traced to various police stations, it was clear they had not been legally detained; no charges had been filed against them.

[3] A statement released by the ISPR claimed that nine ‘terrorists’ were killed. Subsequently, the families of missing persons staged a protest in Quetta, claiming that five of these persons were not terrorists at all, but rather forcibly disappeared relatives. According to press reports, the adviser to the chief minister of Balochistan on home affairs, Mir Ziaullah Longau, denied these allegations.

[4] Ultimately, the province’s share was established at 25 percent in December 2022. The BNP-M termed this an attempt to usurp the province’s resources (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1727126>).

[5] These include: Anwar Khetran, a citizen journalist, who was killed in Barkhan district in July 2020, having allegedly irked the region’s influential tribal lords by continuously highlighting the problems of the district; Shaheena Shaheen, who was shot dead in her home in Turbat in September 2020; Abdul Wahid Raisani, a sub-editor working for Daily Azadi, who was gunned down outside his home in Quetta in April 2021; Shahid Zehri, a journalist working for Metro News 1 in Hub, who was killed in a bomb blast in October 2021.

[6] Pakistan divides its sea into three zones: zone 1, up to 12 nautical miles from the coast, falls within the domain of the province (in the case of Gwadar’s coast, Balochistan); zone 2, between 12 and 20 nautical miles, is a declared buffer zone; and zone 3, between 20 and 200 nautical miles, falls within the domain of the federal government. Reports that illegal trawling by Karachi-based vessels had led to a decrease in catch for Gwadar’s fisherfolk began to emerge in the 1990s, according to one activist to whom HRCP spoke. Despite periodic negotiations with the Sindh government, which helps improve the local catch temporarily when action is taken against the trawlers, illegal deep-sea fishing has re-emerged, much to the consternation of local fisherfolk in Gwadar.