

# Pakistan's Missing Persons

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**The Pakistani state's kidnapping of its critics is eroding its own foundations, says Irfan Husain.**

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On 29 December 2006, a photograph made the front pages of most Pakistani dailies, shocking a violence-hardened nation. It showed a young man with his baggy shalwar pulled down around his ankles, being beaten on the legs and buttocks by the Islamabad police.

Mahmood Masood's crime was to accompany a small group of protestors as they marched towards army headquarters to give the vice chief of army staff a petition. This demanded the release of their relatives allegedly being held by military intelligence agencies.

For months now, Pakistani newspapers have been reporting on the phenomenon of "missing" citizens from all four provinces. In December, the supreme court took up forty-five cases, and directed the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency to produce them. Although this elite spy outfit had been denying that it had abducted anybody, twenty-one individuals were released. In Sindh alone, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has documented 400 cases.

## **An everyday event**

Here are two typical cases. The first (recounted by a nephew, Khuda Bux) is of Moula Bux, who was returning home from a court appearance in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh province, on 10 July 2006, riding on the pillion seat of a relative's motorcycle, when they were intercepted by a blue Toyota

Corolla. The car had no number-plates, and contained four uniformed policemen.

The cops dragged Moula Bux into the car and drove off. He has not been seen since. His wife, three sons and a daughter are frantic. Relatives have been going from police stations to government offices, trying to find out where he is. Initially, the police refused to register a case, but were forced to do so in November on a supreme-court directive.

The second case is of Abid Raza Zaidi, who is more fortunate. He was kept in safe houses, moved around blindfolded, and tortured for four months until he was released recently. A PhD student at Karachi University, he tells of being transported by train, plane and car. He has no idea where he was taken. He was suspended upside down over an open sewer, and had his head lowered repeatedly into the foul water below. This is a variation of the American technique known as "waterboarding". To this day, he has no idea why he was picked up. His is one of seventy such abductions reported in Karachi alone.

### **Into the void**

On 3 December, Ghulam Mohammad Baloch was forced into a police van in Lyari. Witnesses say there were a number of police officers present, including a DSP and an SHO. On 7 December, the Sindh high court issued notices to the police and several intelligence agencies, directing them to produce Baloch. Nobody has thus far accepted responsibility for this kidnapping.

According to Sajid Baloch, a relative, 6,000 Balochis (Baluchis) have disappeared over the last couple of years. Most people, especially in rural Balochistan (Baluchistan), have never heard of the HRCP, and therefore do not report these disappearances.

Apparently, reports of such incidents have skyrocketed after 9/11. Almost invariably, the police and intelligence agencies deny any hand in these disappearances. And when the victims do return, most of them are too scared by threats to report their experiences to the media, or to go

to court. In any case, most of them are blindfolded during their captivity, and cannot prove who had kidnapped them.

Pakistan's prime minister Shaukat Aziz was asked to comment on the brutal incident involving the public thrashing of Mahmood Masood. Demonstrating a breathtaking degree of insensitivity, he advised the relatives of the missing people not to take to the streets, but to "observe protocol". He forgot that in most cases, families have spent months going to police stations, hospitals and courts in an effort to secure the release of their loved ones, and to find out where they are being kept. What "protocol" are they supposed to follow after exhausting all legal avenues?

It is clear that these cases of kidnapping and torture are part of a covert state policy. There are just too many men disappearing for this to be a random crime-wave.

Saleem Baloch, an office-bearer of the Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP), told reporters at a press conference on 20 December at the HRCP office of being kidnapped in March 2006, having being released a few days earlier. During his eight-month ordeal, Baloch came across many other Balochis in similar illegal confinement.

### **The Balochi factor**

It appears that the uprising in Balochistan is the cause of many of these covert operations. Unable to produce any evidence that would stand up in court, the government is resorting to these methods to obtain information, and to punish people they think might be connected to Balochi nationalist organisations, most notably the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). By resorting to these tactics, Pervez Musharraf's government is taking a page out of the American torture manual: Washington's policy of covert rendition and its hellhole in Guantánamo Bay are clearly the models here.

But apart from suspected Baloch nationalists, other people have fallen victim to this policy. Moula Bux was an activist who sought a semblance

of a fair deal for his people as gas was being pumped out from their land. In a letter addressed to the managing director of ENI, a multinational exploiting the local gasfield, Bux wrote in January 2004:

*"(1) That in Gas Field's plant as yet has not appointed any single said original area inhabitant [sic];*

*(2) That as by Company constructed road and Plant have not yet paid any remuneration amounts as in this respect faced losses by land owners [sic];*

*(3) That small small work and contracts were awarded to outsiders... [sic]"*

I have no idea if Moula Bux's agitation for local rights was responsible for his disappearance. But his family is convinced that this is the only possible explanation as he was not involved in any other kind of activity that could justify what happened to him.

The HRCP also has records of twenty young Shi'a men who have been abducted. Again, their families insist they were not involved in any subversive activities. By behaving like those they seek to defeat (nationalists, extremists), government functionaries are only strengthening resistance to a rule that is being increasingly viewed as illegal.

If the state does not follow the rule of law, how can it expect others to do so? So while the temptation to lash out at its perceived enemies might be great, by placing itself above the law, this Pakistani government is eroding the very foundations of the state.

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## **P.S.**

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\* Irfan Husain is a columnist with Dawn newspaper in Pakistan.