

Planned and coordinated - Disappearances spark fears of crackdown on leftwing dissent in Pakistan

Tuesday 10 January 2017, by [BOONE Jon](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2017).

Four prominent online campaigners with anti-military views believed abducted since Friday.

Four social media activists with outspoken, secular and anti-military views have gone missing in Pakistan in recent days, sparking fears of a crackdown on leftwing dissenters.

Pakistan's intelligence agencies have a history of illegal detentions and of not notifying relatives about where they are or why they are being held. However, such "forced disappearances" are usually directed against those suspected of involvement in terrorism or violent separatism [1].

One of the four men, Asim Saeed, was abducted from his home in Lahore on Friday after he had returned from working in Singapore. Ahmad Waqas Goraya, another online activist who is usually based in Holland, was detained on the same day, his friends say.

According to a statement given by Saeed's father to the police, four men arrived at the house in a pickup truck and "forcefully took him away".

"I made all efforts to locate my son but I have been unable to trace him," his statement said.

At the time of Saeed's abduction, the IT worker was carrying his laptop and two mobile phones.

Both Saeed and Goraya help run the Mochi Facebook page [2] critical of Pakistan's powerful military. The page has recently criticised the army's heavy-handed crackdown on political groups in Karachi, alleged corruption amongst senior officers and accused the military of interfering in national politics.

"We respect Armed Forces of Pakistan as much as they respect the constitution of Pakistan," runs the text on the Facebook page's banner.

Salman Haider, a lecturer at Fatima Jinnah Women University [3], failed to come home on Friday. His wife received a mysterious message from his phone saying he was abandoning his car on the Islamabad-Rawalpindi motorway. The car was later recovered by police.

On Saturday the interior minister said he had urged police to find Haider, a playwright, poet and editor of *Tanqeed*. The online magazine has criticised army counter-insurgency operations in the southern state of Balochistan [4].

Relatives of the fourth man, Ahmed Raza Naseer, say he was taken from his family's shop in the Punjab district of Sheikhpura on Saturday.

Human Rights Watch asked authorities to investigate the apparent abductions as a matter of urgency.

“The Pakistani government has an immediate obligation to locate the four missing human rights activists and act to ensure their safety,” said Brad Adams, HRW’s Asia director.

“The nature of these apparent abductions puts the ... government on notice that it can either be part of the solution or it will be held responsible for its role in the problem.”

Shahzad Ahmad, director of Bytes for All, a human rights group focused on online security, said the disappearances had spooked social media activists, and several had deactivating their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

“We are concerned over the recent roundup of social media activists, which we see as a threat to freedom of expression, association and assembly in online spaces,” he said.

The arrests were designed to “silence and smear” those who challenge the establishment and speak against human rights violations in the country, he said.

Security sources have denied any involvement, while a group of MPs have called the disappearances “highly concerning”.

“The pattern of these disappearances suggests that it is a planned and coordinated action, undertaken to silence voices which are critical of prevalent socio-political issues in Pakistan,” they wrote in a parliamentary resolution.

Jon Boone in Islamabad

P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/pakistan-military-critics-disappearances-dissent-crackdown>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/14/pakistan-disappeared-compensation-military-spies>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/TheHawaladar/>

[3] <http://fjwu.edu.pk>

[4] <http://www.tangeed.org/2017/01/tangeed-editor-poet-activist-is-missing/>