

Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan): Medical care for Baba Jan

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Progressive activists from Gilgit-Baltistan and the rest of the country have been voicing concerns for jailed Awami Workers Party leader Baba Jan's deteriorating health over the last few weeks.

A well-known and popular political figure in the Hunza region, Baba Jan was jailed for allegedly participating in protests seeking compensation for the affectees of the Attabad Lake disaster, in which a climate-change precipitated landslide wiped out hundreds of villages in Gilgit-Baltistan. Since 2011, Baba Jan has been serving a sentence for life imprisonment, was after having been tried and convicted by an Anti-Terrorism Court in the aftermath of violent protests in Hunza against the killing of two unarmed civilians. In 2015, Baba Jan's work captured national attention, as he contested national elections from his jail cell, in a powerful campaign that drew thousands of votes from young and old in the Hunza valley. Loved by many in the valley as the 'Che of Hunza,' Baba Jan is a popular political leader from Pakistan's hinterlands whose popularity has only increased since his conviction.

It is unbelievably disturbing that this popular leader from Gilgit-Baltistan has been reduced to issuing appeals from jail that he be allowed a medical check-up in Islamabad. Protests have already been held in Gilgit-Baltistan to call for Jan's medical examination to take place. No one, be it Baba Jan or former PM Nawaz Sharif, should ever be denied medical care. Baba Jan needs a full medical board to examine his poor health. We must ensure that medical treatment is provided to Baba Jan and other political prisoners in the country - without any ifs or buts.

While Jan's jail term itself is a subject of controversy, the current appeal is merely for him to be given medical treatment. The larger question of how political leaders from smaller regions can be charged under anti-terrorism laws remains an open one. The laws were not supposed to be used to quell legitimate political protest, but to curb growing organised and violent militancy in the country. In a time where regional harmony is more necessary than ever before, it would be a gesture of humanity to at least allow Baba Jan a medical check-up.

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P.S.

• The News International, February 13, 2019:
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/431307-medical-care-for-baba-jan>