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Pakistan & Gilgit-Baltistan: Protesters demand release of Baba Jan, 12 other prisoners

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Family members, political activists march on KKH for justice; threaten to extend protest to other parts of GB if prisoners not freed .



Protesters march on KKH at Aliabad Hunza on July 14, 2019, for release of political prisoners.

HUNZA: Scores of protesters marched on Karakorum Highway (KKH) in Aliabad, the main town of Hunza on Sunday demanding release of political and environmental activists who have been languishing in jails for the last eight years.

The protest was organized by the 'Aseeran Hunza Rahai Committee' (Free Hunza Prisoners Committee). A large number of people including family members of progressive leader Baba Jan, Iftikhar Karbalai and 12 other prisoners, mostly women and children participated in the protest march.

Local leaders and activists of political parties, as well as representatives of Hunza District Bar Association, traders, hoteliers, and transporters' associations, also joined the protest to express solidarity with the families of the prisoners.

The protesters marched from Hunza Chowk up to local press club carrying placards and banners inscribed with slogans in favour of their demands such as free prisoners, justice for Aaliabad firing victims.

At the chowk leaders of political parties including Advocate Ehsan Ali, counsel of the prisoners, Baba Jan's sister Nazneen, Awami Workers Party (AWP) leaders Akhun Bai and Nasir, PPP's Advocate Zahoor Karim, PTI's, Col (retd) Obaid, PML-N's Alam Jan, and MWM chief also addressed the protesters.

"We have met President Arif Alvi twice, former CJP Saqib Nisar, human rights defenders, parliamentarians but all our cries have fallen on deaf ears," they said.

They recalled that international and national human rights organisations and the parliamentary committee on human rights had declared the case bogus, politically motivated with mala fide and recommended the prisoners' release.



Protesters stage a sit-in on KKH at Aliabad Hunza on July 14, 2019 for release of political prisoners.

Even the incumbent CM and former governor of Gilgit-Baltistan during their election campaign had admitted that the case was filed on trumped-up charges and assured that they will do justice with the victims. But nothing has been done by the government, they lamented.

After waiting for eight tortuous years now we have lost faith in judiciary and government and came on roads, they said.

They asked the regional and federal governments to release the prisoners, stop harassment of activists under false pretext and stop misuse of ATA, make public Justice Alam judicial commission report on Aliabad incident and arrest the cops who were involved in the killing of an IDP and his son.

They warned to continue their protest if their demands were not met.

“We will continue our protest and extend it to other parts of GB if the 14 youths languishing in Gahkuch and Gilgit jails were not released within a week,” the protesters warned.

Tragic incident



A woman member of Aseeran Hunza Rihai Committee addressing the protesters at Aliabad Hunza.

On August 11, 2011, IDPs of Atabad disaster of January 5th, 2010 had blocked the KKH on the occasion of then Chief Minister Mehdi Shah’s visit to the area seeking payment of compensation for their losses. A police officer in a bid to clear the highway opened fire on the protesters killing a man and his son. The incident triggered violent protests in Hunza.

Over 400 people were nominated in the FIR registered under the Anti-Terrorism Act for arson and damage to a police station and government offices. Most of them were exonerated of the charges but 14 youths including Baba Jan, Iftikhar Karbalai, Aleem Khan and 10 others were subjected to torture by a joint investigation team (JIT) for weeks and subsequently sent to jail.

However, a judicial inquiry into the incident conducted by then sessions judge Muhammad Alam reportedly absolved all the accused from the charges and held the then regional government and DSP Babar responsible for the tragic incident.

Despite strong demands from human rights watchdogs, international parliamentarians and scholars, neither the report has been made public, nor the cop punished for his crime.



A little boy with his grandfather, holding a placard with a slogan free my papa, at the protest in Hunza.

Travesty of justice

In a travesty of justice, an anti-terrorism court (ATC) convicted Baba Jan and others for 40 years in jail. Later, the GB's Chief Court set aside the conviction and released Baba Jan and others except Aleem.

The Supreme Appellate Court on the state's appeal set aside Chief Court verdict and enhanced sentence of Baba Jan and others to life imprisonment with a fine of Rs2 million each to keep him out of electoral politics.

During the last eight years, the prisoners and their families have been going through immense mental, physical and psychological torture.

The police officer, who shot dead Sher Afzal and his son Sherullah Baig, was never arrested for his crime rather given promotion.

The sister of Shukrullah Baig, one of the jailed activists, committed suicide.

Salman Ali, another prisoner, is currently under treatment at PIMS, Islamabad for psychological issues.

Fazal Karim, another man nominated in the case, also committed suicide as a result of which his father also died of shock.

Baba Jan is suffering from multiple illnesses in Gahkuch jail but he is not being shifted to other cities as per jail protocol for treatment.



Baba Jan's sister Nazneen addressing the protesters at Aliabad Hunza

OHCHR Report

The UN's Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) in its latest report on Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan says the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997 (ATA) and cybercrimes act are misused by GB authorities.

The report has cited the case of Baba Jan and 12 others convicted under ATA for their environmental activism.

The Un body has recommended to the Pakistan Government to fully respect international human rights law obligations; end the misuse of ATA to persecute those engaging in peaceful political activities.

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P.S.

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