

Karima Baloch, Pakistani human rights activist, found dead in Canada

Wednesday 23 December 2020, by [BALOCH Shah Meer](#), [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2020).

Husband says foul play cannot be ruled out after body of 37-year-old dissident discovered in Toronto

A dissident Pakistani human rights activist living in exile in Canada has been found dead in Toronto after going missing.

Karima Baloch, 37, was granted asylum in [Canada](#) in 2016 after her work as a human rights activist in the troubled Pakistan state of Balochistan had led to her being followed and threatened by the authorities.

The first chair of the [Baloch Students Organization](#) (BSO-Azad), a political student organisation, she had been advocating for the rights of those in a region home to a long-running insurgency movement, and raising the ongoing issue of [enforced disappearances](#).

She was [listed by the BBC](#) in its 100 most inspirational and influential women of 2016 for her work in human rights

Baloch is the second Pakistani dissident from Balochistan living in exile to be found dead this year. In May, [Sajid Hussain](#), a journalist who wrote about human rights violations in Balochistan, was found dead in a river in Sweden, where he had sought asylum after threats to his life in Pakistan.

Baloch's husband, Hammal Haider, also a Pakistani activist living in exile, said she had left home at midday on Sunday for a walk on Toronto's Centre Island as she often did, but never returned. Toronto police later put out an appeal for information on Twitter and her body was found on Monday on the island.

"I can't believe that it's an act of suicide. She was a strong lady and she left home in a good mood," Haider said. "We can't rule out foul play as she has been under threats. She left Pakistan as her home was raided more than twice. Her uncle was killed. She was threatened to leave activism and political activities but she did not and fled to Canada."

Later on Tuesday, Toronto police said Baloch's death was "currently being investigated as a non-criminal death and there are not believed to be any suspicious circumstances." They did not provide further details.

But Haider said a month ago he had received multiple threatening messages over social media after raising the issue of human rights abuses and military operations in Balochistan.

He said: "I was told that my brothers and wife can be targeted. I didn't take them seriously. We often get such trolls and threats while talking about human rights abuses."

Lateef Johar, a Baloch activist and close friend in exile in Canada, told the Guardian the police had said Baloch's body had been found near a body of water. "The police have not provided any further details. They have not told us the cause of death nor have they returned the body of Karima."

Johar said he had met Baloch on Thursday at the University of Toronto, where they were both students. They talked on the phone on Friday. "I don't think this is an accident or an act of suicide," Johar said. "We all feel threatened here. Even after the killing of Sajid Hussain I fear when I find myself in a dark street."

Amnesty International said: "The death of activist Karima Baloch in Toronto, Canada is deeply shocking and must be immediately and effectively investigated. The perpetrators must be brought to justice without recourse to the death penalty."

Since moving to Canada, Baloch had continued to be vocal about human rights abuses in her home province and across Pakistan. She regularly spoke at conferences, addressed the media and attended protest rallies in Canada.

"She had received threats from unknown Pakistani numbers on WhatsApp after a few Baloch students were abducted in late 2017," said Johar. "Those threats also mentioned me. She was asked to come back to Pakistan and told that if she comes back, the cases against her would be quashed and those abducted students would be freed."

The Swedish authorities ruled out foul play in the death of Hussain but an autopsy did not confirm an exact cause of death. A friend of the family who has seen the autopsy report and police investigation told the Guardian: "The family was not convinced by the investigation and they have requested for more evidence from the Swedish authorities. Their request has yet to be entertained."

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