

PAKISTAN

DISAPPEARED: Proofreader Abdul Razzaq Baloch, who went missing in Karachi in March, pictured on a mobile phone. REUTERS/STRINGER



Hundreds of people have vanished, suffered torture or died in a little-known separatist conflict

The struggle Pakistan does not want reported

BY MATTHEW GREEN
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PAKISTAN BALUCHISTAN'S DISAPPEARED

Abdul Razzaq Baloch worked nights. After dinner, he would start his shift as a proofreader at the Daily Tawar, a newspaper published on a shoestring from a cramped office in Karachi, Pakistan's commercial capital. At 2 a.m., the 42-year-old would make the short journey home on his new Super Star motorbike.

One night in March, Baloch did not return. His phone was switched off and his bike was missing. His family made enquiries with the police, then hospitals, and finally in the lanes of Lyari, the gritty neighbourhood where they live.

The word on the street was that Baloch had been kidnapped, his relatives said. He had last been seen as he was bundled into a white SUV with a blanket over his head.

Speaking to Reuters two months later, Saeeda Sarbazi, Baloch's outspoken sister, was in no doubt as to the identities of the culprits: Pakistan's intelligence services.

"This case is like a bombshell – nobody we go to wants to touch it," Sarbazi said at the family home in Lyari, where his wife and four children awaited his return. "People are scared that the agencies will harm them."

On Aug. 21, Baloch's body was found dumped amid the brambles overrunning wasteground in Suranji Town, a scrappy neighbourhood on Karachi's northwestern fringe. A piece of paper bearing his name had been stuffed into his pocket. His hands were tied; he had been strangled. Pakistan's military, which has repeatedly denied involvement in extra-judicial killings, did not respond to a request for comment on Baloch's death.

Baloch's associates believe his disappearance and murder was linked to the Daily Tawar's coverage of a separatist guerrilla campaign in Baluchistan, a huge Pakistani province bordering Afghanistan and Iran, where his family has its roots. The Daily Tawar supports independence for the province, and according to several of his friends, Baloch himself belonged to a pro-independence party.



LEFT BEHIND: Baloch's wife Gul Afroz and their daughters, Zainab, left, and Sara. Baloch's body was found last month. **REUTERS/STRINGER**

“This case is like a bombshell – nobody we go to wants to touch it.”

Saeeda Sarbazi

Abdul Razzaq Baloch's sister

The Baluch rebels, who believe the rest of Pakistan has always treated Baluchistan like a colony, have agitated and fought for their own independent, secular homeland for decades. In response, the security forces have waged a lengthy but little-known counter-insurgency to try to quash them.

In the past three years, the bodies of hundreds of members of pro-independence political parties, student groups and even poets have been discovered on desolate verges or patches of scrub. Baluch activists say the bodies are evidence that the military is pursuing a systematic “kill-and-dump” campaign to crush dissent – a charge the army denies.

Under growing pressure from Pakistan's increasingly assertive judiciary to explain

the disappearances, military officers have speculated that a range of armed groups or criminal gangs active in the province may be to blame.

But Baloch's death has hardened a belief among Baluch that the security forces – far from softening their stance – have sharply expanded their crackdown this year in a drive to extinguish the uprising once and for all.

In a new trend, the bodies of the disappeared have begun to turn up beyond Baluchistan's borders in Karachi, a city of 18 million people and the motor of Pakistan's economy.

The discovery of Baloch's remains, alongside those of another man, brought the total number of bodies of missing Baluch that have been found in the city to 18 since the start of this year, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Although Baloch vanished in Karachi, many of the others had been reported missing hundreds of km away in Baluchistan itself.

Asked to comment on Baloch's

PAKISTAN BALUCHISTAN'S DISAPPEARED



DEATH IN KARACHI: More than a dozen bodies of dead Baluch have turned up in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city. **REUTERS/STRINGER**

disappearance, a security official said he had no specific knowledge of the case but added that the military would have no reason to detain an obscure proofreader.

"Unknown journalist. Unknown newspaper with a very limited or no following at all. Why should we go and pinch him and make him part of the news?" the official said. "It doesn't serve us."

Virtually sealed off to foreigners, Baluchistan is potentially one of Pakistan's most prosperous regions, endowed with copper and gold. Iran's government hopes a planned \$1.5bn pipeline project will one

day snake across its rocky wastes to export natural gas to Pakistan and India to help Tehran circumvent U.S. sanctions. China wants to import oil via Baluchistan's deep-water port of Gwadar.

But none of that is likely to happen as long as the unrest in Baluchistan continues.

The rebels, as well as the army, stand accused of waging a dirty war. In recent years, the HRCP believes Baluch separatist gunmen have murdered hundreds of civilian "settlers" from Pakistan's eastern Punjab province to try to drive out the community. In turn, Baluch say the Frontier Corps, the

main official force in Baluchistan, launches punitive raids to torch homes and round up opponents.

Unfolding in closed-off badlands, the conflict is subject to far less international scrutiny than the army's separate battle against the Pakistani Taliban on the frontier with Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, repeated reports by human rights groups of abuses in Baluchistan have raised awkward questions over the conduct of Pakistan's military, which has received almost \$11 billion from Washington since 2001 to finance its anti-Taliban campaigns, according

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to data compiled by Alan Kronstadt of the Congressional Research Service.

Speaking to Baluch living inside and outside the province over the course of several months, Reuters has been able to gather testimony from witnesses and relatives over what they describe as three apparent cases of “kill-and-dump.”

Reuters submitted a dossier of testimony related to the disappearance of Abdul Razzaq Baloch, the journalist, and two other alleged “kill-and-dump” cases within Baluchistan to the army on June 10. The military said it had pursued the query but had not yet been able to obtain any information.

Reuters also wrote to Pakistan's government seeking permission to visit Baluchistan to meet military officers but received no reply. The Interior Ministry did not offer an explanation, but officials have previously said that journalists travelling to Baluchistan may face risks from armed groups.

The lack of access makes collating data on disappearances difficult and there is a risk that some of those reported missing may have gone into hiding.

Taking these caveats into account, one online database of abductions run by a group of activists in the United States who track media reports, suggests the pace of disappearances has increased sharply. The group says 247 Baluch were reported abducted in the first six months of this year, compared with 214 in the whole of 2012, and 206 in 2011.

“Anyone remotely linked to Baluch (separatist) politics is targeted,” said Jeeand Baloch, a leader of Baloch Students Organisation (Azad), a pro-independence group. “If they go into hiding, their families are punished.”

The allegations come at a sensitive time for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whose new government has pledged to rein in abuses as a prelude to seeking negotiations with insurgents to usher the alienated province into the national fold.

Whether he can succeed will be an early



MORGUE: Family members identify Baloch's body in Karachi last month. REUTERS/STRINGER

247

Number of Baluch reportedly abducted in first six months of 2013, up from 214 in whole of 2012

Source: www.balochmissing.com

test of his authority over Pakistan's powerful military, whose commanders exert far greater influence in Baluchistan than the feeble provincial administration.

“LINES YOU CAN'T CROSS”

Baloch, the missing journalist, lived with his extended family in an apartment in Lyari, a warren in old Karachi where police tread warily and gangsters make the rules.

His family and friends described him as a bookish man who socialised little and prided himself on his role as bread-winner.

The proofreader was a member of the Baloch National Movement (BNM),

Baluchistan



Source: Reuters

a separatist party, according to several people who knew him and party officials. Although it espouses peaceful protest, the BNM's stance marks its members as traitors in the eyes of the security forces, still haunted by the loss of East Pakistan, which broke away to form Bangladesh in 1971.

The separatist message was one shared

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by Baloch's newspaper. Founded a decade ago, The Daily Tawar had a circulation of a few thousand copies within Baluchistan, but its pro-independence stance earned it a loyal online following among the Baluch diaspora in Europe and the Middle East.

The paper – whose title means “Call” in Balochi – has regularly reported on allegations of enforced disappearances by the military and its editors have said they received repeated threats. Several of its reporters had been murdered.

In early March this year, a little over two weeks before Baloch disappeared, the Daily Tawar reported the discovery of the body of Abdul Rehman Baloch, a senior member of the BNM who had disappeared in Baluchistan in February. His remains were discarded in bushes in the eastern Steel Town area of Karachi in March.

Pakistan's military has always denied involvement in disappearances.

According to a source in BSO-Azad, the Baluch students' movement, Baloch was among those who went to a hospital to retrieve Abdul Rehman's bullet-ridden body.

In an angry editorial published the next day, The Daily Tawar accused security agencies of using Karachi as a dumpsite for bodies in the hope the discoveries would go unremarked because of the city's high murder rate.

Two weeks later, on March 24, Baloch left his house just before evening prayers, saying he was going to buy new sandals. He was wearing a cream-coloured loose fitting shirt and trousers. His wife cooked fish biryani, his favourite, and waited for his usual call of “I'm home.”

When the proofreader did not return, his family assumed he had gone straight to work. Later they heard that he had been pushed into the back of one of two white SUVs spotted prowling Lyari after dark.

Although Baloch's relatives say they are certain he was picked up by security agencies, they have produced no hard evidence. They said it was impossible for Reuters to



WORLD AWAY: Exiled in Switzerland, Haji Mohammad Anwar Baloch holds a photo of his dead son Zaheer. REUTERS/ARND WIEGMANN

“He was tortured with a drill – an electrical drill to make a hole in the wall.”

Haji Mohammad Anwar Baloch

Zaheer's father

meet the people who reported witnessing his abduction since they were too scared to discuss the incident.

On April 6, almost two weeks after Baloch vanished, a group of men ransacked the Daily Tawar office in the early hours of the morning and set fire to files, according to the Committee of Pakistan Newspaper Editors. Baloch's family said the intruders took his computer.

The Daily Tawar's staff went into hiding. The paper has stopped printing but still posts stories online.

“There are lines you can't cross as a journalist in Karachi,” said a Baluch reporter. “Maybe he crossed one of those lines.”

“NO WAY TO PAY”

A week after he went missing, Baloch's sister Sarbazi saw her brother's number flash up on her cell phone. A man she did not know demanded 10 million Pakistani rupees (\$100,000) for his release. She could hear laughing in the background. Another call followed and the amount dropped to 1 million.

Then, nothing.

Several Karachi journalists told Reuters they suspected Baloch had been taken by Pakistani intelligence. The police officer in charge of the Baloch case rules out kidnapping for ransom, a common practice in Karachi.

“The family has no way to pay,” said Senior Superintendent of Police Niaz Ahmed Khosa, one of the city's most respected investigators. He declined to offer an alternative theory.

Raja Irshad, a lawyer who has represented the military, said security forces faced a dilemma since the judicial system was too weak to prosecute suspected separatist rebels.

“To my mind, these missing persons, they are militants. When they fight with the security forces, they get killed,” Irshad said in Islamabad. “Not a single innocent person in Baluchistan has been taken away by the security agencies. No unarmed young man gets killed.”

News Baloch’s body had been found broke on Vsh, a Balochi channel. The family’s television was out of order and word only reached them at midday; relatives rushed to the Abbasi Shaheed Hospital to identify his body.

At first they insisted there had been a mistake: Baloch’s face was so badly bloated it bore scant resemblance to the man they knew. Only the next day did Sarbazi confirm it was him, after a careful examination of the only part of his body that was not badly disfigured – his feet. He was wearing the same cream-coloured shirt he had donned on the day he vanished.

“TORTURED WITH A DRILL”

Baloch’s disappearance is not unique. Reuters has gathered testimony from several witnesses and relatives about two other alleged “kill-and-dump” cases in Baluchistan itself, one in April this year and one in May.

Haji Mohammad Anwar Baloch, a senior member of the Baluch Republican Party, which also supports Baluch independence, said he fled Pakistan in July 2011, after security forces repeatedly raided his house. He settled in Switzerland; some family members, including his son Zaheer, remained in Baluchistan.

Anwar said security forces raided his house in the province’s Panjgur District at four a.m. on April 22, and took away 32-year-old Zaheer, who had a masters in biology and worked as a volunteer teacher. Zaheer was also active in his father’s party, participating in rallies and strikes.

Zaheer’s body was found in the Suranji Town area of Karachi in early June, the same district where Baloch’s body would be



ANOTHER VICTIM? Asim Faqir, here with his son Gwahram, was the victim of an extra-judicial killing by Pakistani security forces in May, his family say. Pakistan’s military did not respond to a request for comment. **REUTERS/FAMILY/HANDOUT**

“I couldn’t recognise him at first. But then I knew it was him. I touched his face.”

Zareena

Asim Faqir’s sister

dumped. Zaheer’s body was accompanied by a paper bearing his name and the phone number of one of his friends: a common pattern with dumped Baluch bodies.

Anwar said relatives had showed him images of the body via Skype.

“He was tortured with a drill – an electrical drill to make a hole in the wall,” Anwar told Reuters in Geneva, running his finger from the base of his throat down to his stomach to demonstrate the path of the wounds.

Police said bodies of Baluch had been routinely dumped in Suranji Town this year; they could not provide details of each case. The military did not respond to a request for comment.

“WHERE IS ASIM?”

On Feb. 2, a young man named Asim Faqir left the Baluchistan town of Turbat on a packed minibus, with his wife Hanifa Baloch and their infant son. Hanifa said members of the Frontier Corps stopped the bus near a village called Nodez.

They asked the driver to identify Faqir, who Hanifa says had no political affiliation. When the driver refused, soldiers beat him. The paramilitaries then demanded other passengers identify Faqir; they also remained silent. The soldiers beat the driver again until he glanced at Faqir, whom they took away, Hanifa said.

Pakistan’s military, which handles media for the Frontier Corps, did not respond to a request for comment.

On May 26, a convoy of Frontier Corps arrived at Faqir’s village of Nazarabad, according to his sister and another resident who declined to be named. As the sister, Zareena Baloch, stood watching, the paramilitaries searched their compound.

“Where is Asim?” one of the men asked. “You should know. You people abducted him four months back,” Zareena replied.

The soldiers searched the house of Azim, Asim Faqir’s older brother. They emerged carrying framed photos of both men and set the house on fire.

As the soldiers left, Zareena heard a burst of gunfire which she took to be celebratory shots. Shortly afterwards, members of a local police force arrived bearing Asim Faqir’s body.

“I couldn’t recognise him at first,” Zareena said. “But then I knew it was him. I touched his face.”

Another resident of Nazarabad corroborated part of Zareena’s account, saying residents had emerged from their houses



ANGUISH: Baloch's sister Saeeda Sarbazi and other relatives identify their brother's body in Karachi last month. **REUTERS/STRINGER**

after hearing the shots and found Faqir's body. One bullet had pierced his left eye, Zareena said. Relatives provided what they said was a photo of the body, in a pool of blood, to Reuters.

Another relative of Faqir who lives outside Pakistan said: "They (the intelligence services) have long arms. If you talk about freedom, if you talk about anything, they will come and get you."

Long ignored in Pakistan, the allegations of abuses in Baluchistan have begun to be heard. Last year, Pakistan's chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry held a series of hearings over the disappearances and subjected the head of the Frontier Corps to a

rare public grilling. Sharif's new government has also begun to talk more openly about the accusations of extra-judicial killings in Baluchistan.

Abdul Malik, a veteran Baluch politician who was chosen by Sharif to head the provincial administration, has called on the military to end human rights violations as a prelude to talks.

"We will all together, me and Nawaz Sharif, tell the security establishment that these things have to end," Malik told Reuters in Islamabad in June. "We have to create an environment in which we are in a position to invite insurgents for negotiations."

Additional reporting by Mehreen Zahra-Malik and Syed Raza Hassan in Islamabad and Tom Miles in Geneva; Writing by Matthew Green; Editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith

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