



GLOBAL HUMAN
RIGHTS DEFENCE

Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan: A human rights crisis

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FOREWORD

Enforced disappearances remain one of the gravest violations of human rights, tearing apart families, silencing dissent, and eroding the very foundations of justice. In Pakistan, this practice has persisted for far too long, leaving thousands of victims without answers and their loved ones in a perpetual state of agony.

At Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD), we believe that silence is complicity. This report sheds light on the harrowing reality of enforced disappearances in Pakistan—an issue that has affected journalists, activists, political dissidents, and countless innocent civilians. Their stories demand attention, not just from policymakers but from every individual who values justice and human dignity.

This publication is more than just an account of the missing; it is a call to action. It is a plea for accountability, transparency, and reform. Governments, international organizations, and civil society must work together to end impunity and bring perpetrators to justice. The families of the disappeared deserve answers, and those responsible must be held accountable.

As you read through this report, I urge you to reflect on the human cost of these disappearances. Every name, every statistic, and every testimony represents a life unjustly taken from society. Change begins with awareness, and awareness must lead to action.

At GHRD, we stand in unwavering solidarity with the victims and their families. We will continue to advocate, investigate, and demand justice—until every disappeared person is accounted for, and this dark chapter is finally closed.

Sradhanand Sital

Chairman GHRD
Global Human Rights Defence

INTRODUCTION

Enforced disappearances have remained one of Pakistan's most persistent and deeply entrenched human rights issues, dating back to at least the 1970s (Amnesty International, 2008). While instances of state-backed disappearances had been reported before, the phenomenon escalated dramatically in the early 2000s. This surge coincided with Pakistan's alignment with the U.S.-led "war on terror" following the events of September 11, 2001 (HRW, 2007). As part of counterterrorism efforts, numerous individuals accused of terrorism-related offenses—both Pakistani citizens and foreign nationals—were abducted, placed in secret detention facilities, and effectively "disappeared," often without trial or legal justification (Harding & Hatchard, 1993).

The scale and geographic distribution of enforced disappearances in Pakistan vary, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, and Sindh being the worst-affected regions. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, counterterrorism operations, conducted primarily by the military and intelligence agencies, have led to the forced disappearances of numerous individuals, including activists, students, and journalists (Joseph & Castan, 2013). In Balochistan, a province long plagued by unrest and separatist movements, enforced disappearances have been widely documented, disproportionately targeting Baloch nationalists, human rights defenders, and suspected militants (HRCP, 2009). Sindh has also seen a pattern of disappearances, particularly among Sindhi nationalist activists, journalists, and individuals advocating for greater regional autonomy (Kundi, 2006).

The practice has been facilitated by a culture of impunity, where security forces routinely deny involvement in disappearances, while the government fails to hold perpetrators accountable. This has resulted in hundreds of families left in an agonizing state of uncertainty, searching for missing loved ones while facing intimidation and threats from authorities.

1. International Legal Framework and Pakistan's Non-Compliance

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), adopted by the United Nations in 2006, remains the primary legal instrument addressing enforced disappearances. It defines enforced disappearance as:

"The arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty by State agents or individuals acting with the State's authorization, support, or acquiescence, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or the concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, placing them outside the protection of the law." (Joseph & Castan, 2013).

Despite its legal and moral obligations, Pakistan has neither signed nor ratified the ICPPED (Conde, 2004). However, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has acknowledged that enforced disappearance violates the right to life, a fundamental right protected under Article 9 of Pakistan's Constitution (Ishaq, 2014).

Pakistan is also a party to other key international human rights treaties that impose binding obligations to prevent enforced disappearances, including The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Joseph & Castan, 2013) and The Convention Against Torture (CAT) (Klein, 2008). Although these treaties do not explicitly mention enforced disappearance, the act inherently violates multiple human rights, including the prohibition of arbitrary detention, torture, and inhumane treatment (Macken, 2013).

2. Short-Term Enforced Disappearances and Emerging Trends

In recent years, an alarming trend of "short-term enforced disappearances" has emerged, impacting a broader range of individuals, including bloggers, journalists, human rights activists, and political dissidents (Darraj, 2010). Unlike traditional cases where victims remain missing for years, in these cases, individuals are abducted and held in secret locations for weeks or months before being released without formal charges (HRW, 2007).

Victims of short-term enforced disappearances report being subjected to severe forms of psychological and physical torture, including beatings, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, and forced confessions (Macken, 2013). Many disappearances are linked to individuals expressing anti-state sentiments on social media, participating in protests, or exposing human rights violations.

This new form of disappearances serves a dual purpose for the state: it allows security agencies to intimidate critics and dissenters while avoiding long-term international scrutiny associated with long-term disappearances.

3. UN Concerns and Government Inaction

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) has repeatedly raised concerns about the widespread and systematic nature of enforced disappearances in Pakistan. In 2012, the UN conducted a country visit and issued a detailed report in 2013, outlining key recommendations for Pakistan to address the issue (Conde, 2004). However, a follow-up review in 2016 revealed that most of the recommendations remained unimplemented, and disappearances continued at an alarming rate (Ishaq, 2014).

Between 1980 and 2019, the WGEID received 1,144 cases of alleged enforced disappearances from Pakistan, with an unprecedented increase in cases between 2015 and 2016 (HRCP, 2009). By the end of 2019, 731 cases remained unresolved, reflecting the Pakistani government's failure to provide justice. The government has consistently denied involvement and, in some cases, attempted to justify these disappearances under the guise of national security (Amnesty International, 2008). It bears notice here that the numbers of enforced disappearances should be presumed to be even higher in practice, given that only a fraction of cases will be reported to UN mechanisms.

Despite repeated international condemnation, successive administrations have either ignored the issue or actively enabled the continuation of enforced disappearances.

Since Pakistan aligned with the "war on terror", the government has systematically used counterterrorism laws and national security concerns as a pretext to target political activists, journalists, and critics of the state (Mawdudi, 1995). While counterterrorism measures are necessary for security, Pakistan has exploited these laws to silence dissent and justify human rights violations (HRW, 2007).

4. Impact on Minorities, Families and Society

The consequences of enforced disappearances extend far beyond the direct victims, affecting entire families and communities, and, most notably in the case of Pakistan, ethnic and religious minorities. The loss of a family member, particularly under uncertain and unresolved circumstances, creates deep legal, economic, psychological, and social repercussions (HRCP, 2009). Simultaneously, enforced disappearances are specifically used to target minorities such as Balochs, Sindhs and Ahmadiyyas.

4.1 Legal Challenges and Bureaucratic Barriers

One of the most immediate and distressing consequences of enforced disappearances is the legal limbo in which families find themselves. Since missing individuals are neither declared dead nor officially acknowledged as detained, their families struggle with complex bureaucratic obstacles (Darraj, 2010). They face difficulty in obtaining death certificates, which in turn affects inheritance rights, access to pensions, and property transfers (Amnesty International, 2008). Additionally, the lack of legal recognition prevents families from pursuing justice, as they cannot file formal charges or seek legal recourse against unknown perpetrators.

4.2 Economic Hardship and Financial Vulnerability

Enforced disappearances disproportionately affect economically vulnerable families, especially when the missing individual is the primary breadwinner (HRCP, 2009). The sudden loss of income places severe financial strain on families, forcing them to liquidate assets, rely on informal labor, or seek external aid. Many families spend years navigating the legal system in search of their loved ones, often at significant financial cost, further deepening their poverty (Darraj, 2010).

4.3 Psychological and Emotional Trauma

The psychological toll of enforced disappearances is immense. Families of missing persons experience severe mental health issues, including chronic anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Amnesty International, 2008). The uncertainty regarding the fate of the disappeared—a condition referred to as "ambiguous loss"—creates an ongoing cycle of grief and hope. Many families live in constant distress, oscillating between desperation and denial, unable to achieve closure (HRCP, 2009).

4.4 Disproportionate Impact on Women and Children

Women and children suffer unique hardships in cases of enforced disappearances. Wives of disappeared individuals, often referred to as "half-widows," find themselves in precarious legal and social positions, unable to remarry or access financial support (Darraj, 2010). Children of disappeared individuals are often forced to drop out of school, as families can no longer afford education expenses. Many children struggle with social stigma and emotional trauma, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into normal life (Amnesty International, 2008).

4.5 Broader Societal Consequences

On a broader level, enforced disappearances contribute to a climate of fear and suppression in society. They discourage political activism, stifle free speech, and weaken democratic institutions (HRW, 2007). The impunity surrounding these disappearances fosters mistrust between citizens and the state, eroding public confidence in law enforcement and the judiciary (HRCP, 2009).

Hundreds of individuals, including both Pakistani and foreign nationals, have been arbitrarily detained, often in undisclosed military detention centers, with no access to legal representation or a fair trial (Kundi, 2006).

Reports from survivors indicate that foreign intelligence agencies, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, have also played a role in Pakistan's enforced disappearances. Several victims have reported being interrogated by foreign agents while in illegal detention, demonstrating international complicity in these violations (Harding & Hatchard, 1993).

4.6 Targeting of Minorities

In Pakistan, enforced disappearances are repeatedly used to target ethnic and religious minorities. This particularly affects Balochs, Sindhs, Hindus, Christians, and members of the Ahmadiyya community.

The situation of Baloch people paints a picture of the grim reality faced by minorities in Pakistan. According to the Paank February 2025 report, 134 cases of enforced disappearances were recorded across 14 districts of Balochistan in the month of February alone, with some incidents also reported in parts of Punjab and Sindh. The Awaran district had the highest number of cases, with 26 individuals reported missing (PAANK, 2025).

The human rights situation in Balochistan remains an especially grave concern, with ongoing reports of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and restrictions on civil liberties. The February 2025 data reflects a pattern of arbitrary detentions and unlawful executions attributed to Pakistani security forces. Additionally, 50 individuals were released after experiencing detention, with reports indicating instances of physical and psychological mistreatment, amounting to torture (PAANK, 2025). In 2024, a total of 619 cases of enforced disappearances were documented. Data indicates notable increases in May, October, and November, suggesting recurring patterns in such incidents (PAANK, 2024).

These incidents have led to widespread demonstrations across Balochistan, as families of missing persons continue to advocate for their safe return. Protests, including sit-ins and highway blockades, have impacted daily life and transportation. The Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) has been actively protesting for over 5,751 days, urging authorities to address the issue. Despite repeated appeals from human rights organizations, official commitments have yet to result in substantial action, contributing to increasing public concern.

Similarly to Baloch people, Sindh, Ahmadiyyas, Hindus and Christians continue to be targeted through enforced disappearances due to their perceived political resistance and opposition, their activism for their communities, as well as for the exploitation of their lands and resources. This constitutes a violation of their rights under international human rights law, particularly their right to self-determination, freedom of religion, and other cultural rights. The systematic oppression of minority communities by State forces further fosters a

dangerous culture of human rights violations with impunity and greatly contributes to a climate of fear within the country.

5. UN Recommendations and Call for Action

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has expressed deep concerns over Pakistan's persistent human rights violations, particularly those targeting ethnic and religious minorities. Despite being a signatory to multiple human rights treaties, Pakistan continues to struggle with widespread discrimination, enforced disappearances, and systemic oppression of marginalized communities. In response, the UN has issued several recommendations urging the Pakistani government to take immediate action to address these issues and uphold international human rights standards (CERD, 2009).

One of the key recommendations is for Pakistan to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). Enforced disappearances remain a critical human rights issue in Pakistan, where individuals—especially those from Baloch, Pashtun, and Sindhi communities—are often abducted by security forces or unidentified actors without due process (HRCP, 2021). Families of the disappeared are left in a state of uncertainty and fear, with little recourse for justice. By ratifying the ICPPED, Pakistan would be legally bound to take stronger measures against enforced disappearances, ensuring transparency, accountability, and protection for vulnerable groups (Amnesty International, 2022).

Another crucial recommendation emphasizes the need for adequate resources to investigate and prevent enforced disappearances, particularly among ethnic and religious minorities. Reports indicate that security forces and intelligence agencies have been involved in arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and torture of activists, journalists, and community leaders from marginalized groups (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Religious minorities—including Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, and Shia Muslims—also face systematic persecution, with incidents of mob violence, blasphemy accusations, and forced conversions becoming alarmingly frequent (USCIRF, 2021). Without sufficient governmental action and resources dedicated to addressing these abuses, impunity prevails, and affected communities continue to suffer.

To combat this culture of impunity, the UN has called for perpetrators of human rights violations to be held accountable through independent investigations and judicial reforms. The Pakistani legal system has often been criticized for its failure to prosecute those responsible for abuses, allowing discrimination and violence to persist unchecked (ICJ, 2019). The lack of judicial independence, coupled with the influence of extremist groups, has led to widespread fear among victims, many of whom are either too afraid to report crimes or face retaliation when they do. Strengthening the judicial system and ensuring fair trials for those accused of committing human rights violations is essential for fostering justice and restoring faith in Pakistan's legal framework (HRCP, 2022).

Lastly, the UN has urged Pakistan to provide reparations to victims and their families, acknowledging the profound psychological, social, and economic impact of human rights violations (UNHRC, 2020). Many families of disappeared persons, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, face immense financial struggles as their primary breadwinners are taken away without explanation (Amnesty International, 2023). Victims of religious violence and blasphemy laws often lose their homes, livelihoods, and even their lives due to false accusations or community backlash (USCIRF, 2022). Implementing a structured system for compensating victims, offering psychological support, and reintegrating them into society is a crucial step toward healing and reconciliation.

Pakistan's failure to implement these recommendations continues to draw international criticism, with human rights organizations and advocacy groups urging the government to take decisive action (HRW, 2023). The systematic targeting of ethnic and religious minorities, coupled with a lack of accountability, fuels instability and deepens social divisions. Without urgent reforms, the cycle of violence, discrimination, and state oppression is likely to continue, further undermining Pakistan's commitments to human rights and democratic principles. The UN and other international bodies will continue to monitor Pakistan's progress, pressuring the government to uphold its responsibilities and ensure protection for all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs (UNHRC, 2023).

Global Human Rights Defence therefore issues an urgent call for action. In particular, in strong support with our partners, we call for the following:

1. **Independent investigations:** The first step towards accountability and guarantees of non-repetition is the independent investigation, both on the national and international level, of all cases of enforced disappearances. Inquiries and investigations must be conducted by impartial and independent bodies in order to ensure truth and fact-finding, leading to effective and independent trials.
2. **Legal accountability:** Those responsible for enforced disappearances must be prosecuted. It is essential for Pakistan to uphold the rule of law.
3. **Government Transparency:** Enforced disappearances can only adequately be addressed with the cooperation of the State of Pakistan. It is important that records of detained persons are made available and that due process is ensured for anyone arrested.
4. **International Pressure:** Ongoing violations should be addressed by the United Nations and other States. Through diplomatic measures and economic sanctions the international community can contribute to the safeguarding of human rights in Pakistan.
5. **Support for victims' families:** Legal, psychological and social rehabilitation assistance should be provided to the families of forcibly disappeared persons. To ensure justice, it is essential that the families of victims are not forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Enforced disappearances in Pakistan represent one of the most serious human rights violations, disproportionately affecting political activists, ethnic minorities, journalists, and individuals critical of the state. Despite domestic and international pressure, Pakistan continues to deny, justify, and enable enforced disappearances, creating a culture of impunity that leaves families in agony and weakens democratic institutions.

Pakistan must take urgent steps to criminalize enforced disappearances and ensure that those responsible are held accountable. To achieve this, the government should ratify and implement the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) while strengthening legal protections to prevent future violations. Additionally, it is crucial to protect human rights defenders and minority groups, who often face persecution, threats, and violence for advocating justice and equality. Ensuring judicial oversight of security forces and guaranteeing fair trials for all individuals, including victims of enforced disappearances and political repression, is essential to restoring trust in the legal system and upholding fundamental human rights.

Without urgent reform, Pakistan risks international isolation and the continued erosion of fundamental human rights.

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