

Testimony of Ms. Fatima Gul Sindhi-American Human Rights Activist.

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This statement will discuss a variety of issues effecting populations in Pakistan. Pakistan has four different provinces—Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—and multiple different religions including Islam, Sufism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, etc.. However, Pakistan is primarily run by Pakistani Army and Islamic extremists’ groups. The vast majority of Pakistani citizens experience oppression, violence, and religious and political persecution by government authorities and their supporters daily. Pakistan is also one of the most dangerous countries for women—thousands of whom experience violence, rape, forced conversion, and forced marriage every single day. Citizens who utilize their rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press are targeted by the government with political persecution, enforced disappearances, torture, and often death. With the U.S. directly supporting the Pakistani government economically, Pakistani authorities have been able to persistently increase their stranglehold on citizens across the country. While this statement will go into depth of the abuses described above, it will also provide recommendations of action to both the Pakistani and U.S. governments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kashmir is not exactly the size of New York State (as Pakistan’s civil and military leaders equate the size of Kashmir while beating the drums of ‘Indian atrocities in Indian Kashmir’). On September 15, 2019, religious extremist groups and gangs of local thugs attacked temples, houses and businesses of the Sindhi Hindu Community in Ghotki, a town in the Sindh Province of Pakistan that is roughly the size of the Bronx and Brooklyn. The attackers left chaos and terror across the neighborhoods of Sindhi Hindus, with many fleeing.

These attacks on the Sindhi Hindu community were carried out on the pretext that a professor, Notan Lal, had committed blasphemy. Lal and his wife had run a private school in Ghotki for almost two decades. One day, when Lal reprimanded a student for bad behavior, the angry student went to the police station and told officers that the Professor had insulted Mohammad, the Prophet of Islam. Despite the lack of evidence, Lal was taken into police custody. He has not been heard from since.

Blasphemy laws guarantee the death penalty or life imprisonment. With this, it has become extremely common for radical Islamic groups to claim blasphemy charges on locals who are unwilling to convert, in effect killing many innocent people throughout the country. Since 1990, at least 75 people have been killed for blasphemy. In addition, at this time, 40 people are serving life sentences or are on death row for blasphemy.¹ Many times, people facing blasphemy charges are killed extrajudicially by fellow prisoners or even mobs and bystanders. A Human Rights Watch report states: “The government has not amended the law and has instead encouraged discriminatory prosecutions and other abuses against vulnerable groups.”²

Junaid Hafeez 32, a teacher and a candidate for the MPhil in Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan was falsely accused of blasphemy by a group of students and teachers. He was arrested on 13th March 2013. Police and persecution have failed to conclude the trial till date. His lawyer Mr. Rehman was assassinated in May 2014.

Even outside of Sindh, the persecution of religious minorities remains a salient feature of Pakistan. Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Hazaras, Shias and Zikri Baloch Muslims are common and helpless victims at the hands of religious extremist groups. These groups operate with government impunity. For example, the baliyya Muslim Community are mostly located in Punjab province. In 1974, Pakistan’s Parliament declared that Ahmadiyyas are ‘Kafirs’ (heretics). Since then, Ahmadiyyas have effectively been forced out of the political process because they are required to declare themselves non-Muslim in order to be granted a ballot. “The choice is between practically renouncing our faith or vote,” an Ahmadi activist told Human Rights Watch. “This is not a real choice.”³

As with the Sindhi Hindus described above, the Ahmadiyya community also continues to be a major target for prosecutions under the nation’s blasphemy laws. There are constant migrations of Ahmadis out of Pakistan due to continued persecution and violence in Pakistan. Human Rights Watch reports that the “Pakistan penal code continues to treat ‘posing as Muslims’ by Ahmadis as a criminal offense.”⁴ Ahmadis are required to declare to the state that they are not Muslims, thereby renouncing their faith. They constantly face social discrimination as militant groups and the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) continue to accuse them of “posing as Muslims.” Anyone who is accused of this vague crime can be convicted.

Likewise, Shias and Hazaras are often major targets by militant sectarian organizations. Many Hazaras—who practice the Shia faith—complain of violence against them by Pakistani authorities, as they are of Mongol descent. Based on eyewitnesses, they claim that the Pakistani military

¹ Asad Hashim, "Pakistani police detain Hindu school principal over 'blasphemy'," Al Jazeera, September 16, 2019.

² "Pakistan: Events of 2018," Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019.

³ "Pakistan: Ensure Ahmadi Voting Rights," Human Rights Watch, June 28, 2018.

⁴ "Pakistan: Events of 2018," Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019.

establishment often supports terrorist groups who have carried out massacres of Hazaras in the region.

The Pakistani army accuses them of being allied with the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan. In 2000, the Taliban carried out an ethnic cleansing of Hazaras in Bamyan. The international community discovered the massacre only after Human Rights Watch discovered their mass graves in Afghanistan. Massacres of Pakistani Hazaras, including women, men and children, continues in Quetta and the surrounding area of Balochistan. According to a Hazara human rights activist, Ishaque Muhammadi, who lives in self-exile in New York, Hazaras live in a state of virtually siege as they are confined to their homes and neighborhood due to insecurity and terror unleashed by radical groups with full impunity from the government. For the last four years many Hazaras have been nervous to do even small tasks, like traveling to their jobs or having their children walk to school.

Christian communities are another large and vulnerable group that suffer at the hands of state and non-state actors. Reports suggest that, in February of 2019, two young Christian men were charged with committing blasphemy against Islam. Patras Masih, 18, and Sajid Masih, 24, were taken into custody in Lahore. Later, Sajid Masih alleged that the torture he endured by police while being held for conviction led him to attempt suicide by jumping out of the interrogation room window.⁵ Sadly, state-stationed violence is often the fate of the victims of blasphemy law charges.

Even unsuspecting government officials and ministers are made targets by pro-blasphemy law groups and religious fanatics. These groups have committed acts such as firing at and severely injuring a former federal minister (under the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif government) during elections in Narowal, Punjab. Previously, the same terrorist group had also killed two ministers including a woman and the Governor of Punjab Province.

II. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

When comparing violence against women in countries throughout the world, Pakistan, a country comprised of roughly 200 million people, is ranked as the 6th most dangerous country for women with regards to violence and rape.⁶

According to reports released by the *White Ribbon*, a civil society group working for the human rights of women in Pakistan, “4,734 women faced sexual violence between 2004 and 2016. Over 15,000 cases of honor crimes were registered. There were more than 1,800 cases of domestic violence and over 5,500 kidnappings of women during this period.”⁷ Human rights activists

⁵ Sulman Ali, "Christians protest FIA torture on Sajid Masih," Pakistan Today, March 2, 2018.

⁶ "Factbox: Which are the world's 10 most dangerous countries for women?," Reuters, June 25, 2018.

⁷ ASHfaq Ahmed, "Two Pakistani sisters kidnapped, gang raped in Punjab," Gulf News, October 12, 2019.

estimate that over 1,000 women are killed in the name of honor in Pakistan every year. It is also highly possible that an equal or greater number of honor killings go unreported by the police and media every year.

In January 2019, a high-profile case of Zainab Ansari was reported from Kasur in Punjab province. Human Rights Watch (HRW)'s Report on Pakistan described a devastating picture on child abuse in Pakistan: "Child sexual abuse remains disturbingly common in Pakistan with 141 cases reported just in Lahore, Punjab, in the first six months of 2018. At least 77 girls and 79 boys were raped or sexually assaulted in the first half of 2018, according to police reports, but none of the suspects had been convicted at the time of writing and all had been released on bail."⁸

According to the same report, around 1,000 young Hindu girls and 700 young Christian girls were forcibly converted to Islam and married to Muslim men. Despite the Child Marriage Prevention Act in Sindh, the forced conversion and marriage of young Sindhi Hindu and Christian girls goes overwhelmingly unchecked. Police and the courts remain passive in most of the cases. According to a female pediatrician, "there are laws in Sindh but there is no will in Sindh."

The importance of this statement is evident from recent events. On October 8, 2019, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which has always claimed to be the "champion" of minorities' rights, once again turned down a bill against forced conversions during a Sindh Assembly. Earlier, in November 2016, the Sindh Assembly introduced a similar bill meant to address the ever-prevalent issue of forced conversions and violence against young women and girls in the region. The PPP had first supported and appreciated the move to pass such a bill, however they soon retracted it after threats from Islamic religious groups. After the retraction, the former-Governor of Sindh, Justice (Retd) Saeeduzaman Siddiqui, said "when Hazrat Ali can convert to Islam at a young age, why can't Hindu girls?"

After yet another failure to take action against this epidemic, Goklani, a member of the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), stated his grim view of the PPP, and suggested "that they stop proclaiming themselves as the champions of minorities' rights... our girls are being kidnapped and converted and I have been struggling for the past few years to pass a law against the menace but today the Sindh government has proved that it is unwilling to address the issue."⁹

With regards to child abuse in general, the statistics released by Sahil, an Islamabad-based NGO, are shocking. An April 2019 Sahil report reveals:

- 3,832 cases of child abuse were reported in 2018
- There has been a 33 pc rise seen in child sexual abuse cases
- Girls were found to be more vulnerable between ages 0-5 and 16-18
- Boys were found to be more vulnerable between ages 6-10 and 11-15

⁸ "Pakistan: Events of 2018," Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019.

⁹ Hafeez Tunio, "PPP lawmakers turn down bill against forced conversions," The Express Tribune, October 9, 2019.

- Most child abuse cases were reported from Punjab, followed by Sindh and KP¹⁰

The Pakistani government commits a different kind of child abuses, owing to its gross neglect of medical care. At one time, Pakistan had the lowest prevalence of HIV, but over time that has changed. Pakistan now has the second-fastest growing HIV rate in Asia, with 20,000 new cases in 2017 alone. Many of these cases are due to unsafe medical practices. More than 800 Sindhi children alone have been infected with HIV. The outbreaks have typically been concentrated in the city of Larkana in Sindh Province, with roughly 700 HIV cases in children being confirmed in the region.¹¹ Sadly, the numbers are continually rising. Since August 2019, 25 more children diagnosed with HIV have died according to local sources.

The situation has been deemed a “public health failure,” as much of the issue could have been avoided if health initiatives were properly funded. In early May of 2019, parents began bringing their children to clinics with prolonged fevers, a symptom of the HIV virus. A link was quickly made to a man named Muzaffar Ghangaro. Reports have stated that Ghangaro used the same IV on around 50 different children. However, it is likely that the outbreak was the result of multiple doctors with negligent pediatric practices.

According to the Center for Global Development, between 2009-2014 the U.S. gave the Pakistan \$7.5 billion dollars for economic and development-related assistance, including aid in the public-health system.¹² Since 2013, USAID gave \$30 million to Pakistan specifically tailored for Global Health & Child Survival in the region. With the amount of aid Pakistan consistently receives for its public health sector, this HIV crisis should not have occurred at all. Yet, despite pressure on the Pakistani government, changes (including increases in medical training and advanced medicine) have yet to occur in the region.

III. POLITICAL PERSECUTION OF OPPONENTS, DISSIDENTS (INCLUDING ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES)

Persecution of political opponents and political dissidents by Pakistani state institutions, including military and its intelligence agencies, continue to run rampant in Pakistan. Arbitrary arrests, beatings, harassment of their families, detentions and enforced disappearances go unchecked and unabated. A prime example of this is the female human rights activist Gulalai Ismail, a member of Pushtoon Tuhufuz movement (PTM) who was enforced disappeared, released and hounded by military and its spy agencies merely because of her activism. Gulalai Ismail alleges she was on the “kill list” of Pakistan’s military and its intelligence agencies. Gulalai Ismail went into hiding in

¹⁰ Shah Nawaz Mohal, "Almost 12 children abused in Pakistan every day, report reveals," Pakistan Today, August 30, 2018.

¹¹ "Cast Out By HIV," The Telegraph, Undated.

¹² Cneter for Global Development, Aid to Pakistan By the Numbers, September 2013.

Pakistan and made her escape into the United States in August of this year. Her aging parents were framed and charged for terrorism for “receiving funds from India.” The rest of her family members were also harassed after her escape from Pakistan.

Likewise, in September 2019, heavy contingents of paramilitary rangers and intelligence agents in plain clothes raided the house of Masood Shah, a missing Sindhi nationalist activist in Karachi, without any search warrants. During the raid, they took his four brothers away, namely; Syed Manzoor Shah, Syed Aftab Shah, Syed Junaid Shah and Syed Abdul Ghafar Shah. Each brother was kept hidden from the public for a long time. Eventually, they were produced before a court in Karachi, along with their 7 other colleagues. They are now indicted on treason charges. The complaint against them says the accused raised slogans and made speeches against Pakistan. Eyewitnesses say they were arrested in the middle of the night by paramilitary rangers because they organized and participated in a protest rally for the release of Masood Shah. He was the only eyewitness to the mob killing of his party colleague, Irshad Ranjhani, who was killed by an elected city official with the help of some police officials. Masood has remained missing since September 20, 2019.

In Balochistan, hundreds of Baloch political dissidents have been forcibly disappeared by military and intelligence agencies for years. Many of them have also been tortured to death. Among the many who remain missing are: Shaukat Markhand, Ayub Kandhero, Murtaza Junejo, Shahid Junejo, Shadi Khan Soomro, Rafiq Umrani, Gulsher Taggar, Kashif Taggar, Sohail Raza Bhatti, Sohbat Khoso, Fatah Khoso, Hyder Khoso, Hafeez Hakro, Niaz Lashari, Mohan Meghwar, Javed Singhar and Masood Shah. Judges who hear cases of enforced disappearances seem reluctant to take up the cases because of the involvement of the Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies. Lawyers themselves receive threats to refrain from defending disappeared individuals.

With this, hundreds of members of the Shia Community are missing from Karachi, the capital of Sindh Province. Baba Jan, a leftist political activist from the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region who is affiliated with the Pakistan Workers Party, was convicted and sentenced to 14 years in prison in 2011 for merely making a speech in the Hunza Valley of Pakistan. Dozens of leaders and activists of the Pushtoon Tuhfuz Movement (PTM) were enforced disappeared and reportedly tortured in unknown places, including members of Parliament Ali Vazir and Mohsin Davar.

In recent years, in Punjab, hundreds of activists in the Pakistan Muslim League of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif were rounded up.¹³ Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz Sharif are also under detention. Maryam, who has become the most popular leader in Punjab Province, was detained to prevent her from giving an address to a large rally. After her arrest, her receptions and rallies were officially banned by the government and hundreds of her party activists and supporters were taken away.

¹³ Mubasher Bukhari, "Hundreds of former Pakistan ruling party members detained, they say," Reuters, July 12, 2018.

Leaders and family members of Pakistan’s main opposition parties—the Pakistan People’s Party of former-President Asif Ali Zardari and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif—have been arrested under the guise of corruption. Their arrests are widely believed to be motivated, at least in part, by political vendettas by Imran Khan Government and military. Members like Maryam Nawaz Sharif, Faryal Talpur, Agha Siraj Durani (the speaker of Sindh Assembly), and Syed Kurshid Ali Shah (the former opposition leader in Pakistan's National Assembly) are among those arrested. At least two former PMs of Pakistan are currently also in prison.

IV. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

In Pakistan, most of the online and print media is controlled by strict national and self-censorship. Activities including protests and rallies of opposition political parties, and nationalist groups in particular, have been entirely banned from broadcasting and publishing in the country. There are many cases of terrorism charges being placed on reporters of local media and news agencies simply for covering corruption and government crimes. Hundreds of journalists and workers in the Pakistani media are rendered jobless after pressure is placed on news agencies from the nation’s government and military officials. “They have now chosen (to kill us) economically,” says an anonymous Chief Executive of a Sindhi media house in Karachi, Sindh. He chooses to keep his name hidden because of fear of reprisal by the military.

The consequences of reporting against the government’s wishes even leads political opponents to take steps to censor their own press during elections for fear of reprisal. General Asif Ghafoor, the head of the Pakistani military’s media arm, held a press conference in Islamabad and asked media personnel to “broadcast positive news” for the next six months. He made it clear to the media that they were not allowed to promote the Pushtoon Tuhufuz Movement (PTM).

Senior members of the media and human rights groups in Pakistan see the current state of the freedom of the media in Pakistan as worse than the years of military dictatorships in the country. Words like “military,” “ISI,” “Mama Qadeer,” (Head of the Voice of Baloch Missing Persons), “Generals,” “Mullah” (Clergy) and “CPEC” (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) can never be mentioned in a negative fashion. Additionally, the recent attacks on Sindhi Hindus in the town of Ghotki were completely blacked out by national media and news.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Index, Pakistan is the ninth most dangerous country for journalists.¹⁴ In Balochistan and KPK provinces, independent journalism is not only difficult but nearly impossible.

It is common for bloggers (or even those who simply like their posts) to be forcibly disappeared for what they post on social media. This was the case for the blogger, Waqas Goraya. An individual

¹⁴ CPJ's 2018 Global Impunity Index.

in Punjab Province was abducted because he had “liked” some of Waqas’s posts on Facebook. This led to the arrest, disappearance and torture of the blogger himself.

In Sindh, there are numerous cases reporters being charged with terrorism simply for covering governmental corruption and crimes. With this, there are hundreds of cases of the Pakistani government encroaching on their citizens’ and agencies’ natural rights to the freedom of press, only some of which are included below:

- A female editor of the magazine *Tanqeed* who wishes to remain anonymous was forcibly disappeared in Karachi and questioned for hours before she was released two days later.
- In 2017, Mehwish, an editor and highly educated Danish citizen, was abducted in suspicion of interviewing a Baloch militant leader, Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch.
- In June 2018, Gul Bukhari, a human rights activist and articulate op-ed writer in Pakistan’s media, and cousin to Hina Jilani and Asma Jehangir (Pakistan’s prominent human rights defender sisters), was also forcibly disappeared. She was only released after pressure from the international community was placed on the Pakistani government.
- In July 2018, a Norwegian journalist, Kadafi Zaman of Norway’s TV2, was arrested and beaten by Pakistani police when he was covering a rally of Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League. He was eventually released on bail but is still facing criminal charges in court.
- A female journalist, Zeenat Shahzadi, affiliated with a local TV channel of Lahore, continues to remain missing after she had disappeared while traveling to report about the disappearance of an Indian citizen in Pakistan.
- In October 2016, circulation and broadcasts of the country’s largest group of English-language publications, *Herald Group of Publications*, were disrupted because of a columnist named Cyril Almeida, who worked for the agency’s newspaper, *Dawn*. The journalist had interviewed Nawaz Sharif, a former Prime Minister of Pakistan, in which he had stated that while visiting the U.S. officials had asked him and the Army Chief to stop supporting terrorist groups. Afterwards, Parvaiz Rasheed, a senior official and information minister, and Tariq Fatmi, an official of Pakistan’s Foreign Office, resigned under pressure. Because of this, the columnist and newspaper editor were indicted for high treason.

Senior journalists, famous writers and columnists, and human rights defenders are frequently summoned by the head of the military’s media arm (Inter-Services Public Relations) in its headquarters and debriefed for hours. Intelligence agents often also visit their homes unannounced and harshly question them.

Hundreds of journalists and workers in Pakistani media are rendered jobless after ISPR pressures their employers. Independent reporting from restive provinces of Balochistan and KPK is not only difficult but nearly impossible.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

This testimony has discussed a multitude of issues occurring throughout the communities and provinces of Pakistan. The question, now, is what can be done about it? If Pakistan was serious about addressing these issues, it would take the following actions:

- Appoint a special prosecutor to investigate and prosecute crimes against the press.
- Pass legislation that criminalizes forced conversions and forced marriages.
- Increase efforts to enforce already-standing laws against child marriage in the country.
- Allow journalists and media full access to Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Increase the amount of foreign aid allocated towards public health.
- Enact journalist safety legislation.
- Facilitate and successfully enforce compulsory sex awareness and education through a national education plan.

To encourage Pakistan to address these issues, the United States should take the following actions:

- Congress and the Executive Branch should pressure Pakistan to immediately release and save the life of Professor Notan Lal in the town of Ghotki, Sindh.
- Conduct a fact-finding mission in Pakistan about religious persecution and the involvement of governmental authorities in it.
- Create an unbiased inquiry into the Ghotki incident involving various stakeholders of the town and listening to all members of the community.
- Voice of America (VOA) should publicly release the report of its investigations of enforced disappearances in Pakistan. VOA is a program made possible by American taxpayer money. Therefore, it should be promoting American values rather than protecting the Pakistani government.

Investigate the Pakistani government's use of U.S. economic aid, specifically in public health. Based on the results, lessen the amount of U.S. aid to Pakistan or increase restrictions in foreign aid to Islamabad to ensure it used properly.