

Record breaking Baloch march for justice nears completion despite threats and intimidation

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On a unique and historic long march protesting against disappearances, Baloch activists have been facing threats from Pakistan's notorious intelligence agency, the ISI. From Quetta to Karachi, and Karachi to Islamabad, the 20-strong member group has been walking carrying pictures of their disappeared relatives and chanting slogans. Covering a total of 2100 kilometers, the march has broken Gandhi's record; Gandhi's famous salt march from Ahmedabad to Dandi, was of 390 kilometers, with Gandhi being 61 years of age then, and the youngest member 18 years of age. Here, the oldest member is 72 years of age, and the youngest is 11 years. Marching for 103 days at the time of writing, all the participants are suffering injuries from their long journey on foot.

EIAV8N1P02-1.jpgEIAV8N1P02-2.jpgThe Voice of Baloch Missing Persons organized the 'Long March' comprising mainly women and children, as well as men, all of whom have disappeared loved ones. Earlier, the first phase of the march completed a distance of 730 kilometers from Quetta, capital of Balochistan to Karachi. The second phase of the long march began on 14 December 2013, from Karachi Press Club to Islamabad, a total distance of 1,400 kilometers.

As they left Kashmore, the last city of Sindh province, threatening calls from Punjabi government officials and the intelligence agencies started coming, warning the participants that they would face severe consequences and police resistance if they entered Punjab province.

On 20 January 2014, when the long marchers were walking on the national highway towards the city of Rojhan Mazari, led by 72-year-old Mama Qadeer Baloch, head of Voice for Baluch Missing Persons, two pickup jeeps arrived. One jeep had 'Pakistani Afwaj ko Salam' (salute to Pakistan's Armed Forces) on it, while the other (a blue colored double cabin) was occupied by four persons in civilian clothes. These persons called over the two policemen escorting the long marchers, and introduced themselves as ISI officers. They asked the police to convey the message that the protest march must be stopped and must not go further towards central Punjab.

Upon receiving a negative reply, they alighted and introduced themselves as ISI officials. In a threatening tone they said the military and the government was not happy with the march and would not allow it to go through Punjab province. When Mama Qadeer and the participants replied in unequivocal terms that they were not afraid of any threat and would continue their march, the officials told them they would face serious consequences. They warned that the police could resort to a baton charge first and then other 'methods' to stop their march.

Later that evening, further calls were made by persons claiming to be from military intelligence, warning the protestors to wind up the protest.

As of January 28, the marchers had reached Muzzafargarh in Punjab. Since entering Punjab they had been receiving threats not to go to Lahore and Islamabad. As in other areas, even in Punjab, when the marchers passed through cities and towns, people came out and joined them on their walk for some distance. Central Punjab is the base of the ruling elite. In fact, the province has long been the country's ruling province. It is also known as the army's recruiting centre. Despite the threats and warnings not to enter

Lahore, the marchers reached the provincial capital safely, escorted by many civil society groups. They received a rousing reception there.

As they proceeded towards Islamabad from central Punjab, the authorities started threatening them once more. Plainclothes persons forced activists who were marching with the protesters in solidarity to identify themselves and supply their home addresses. Mama Qadeer received threatening phone calls from an unknown number, with the caller stating categorically that the decision had been taken that the march would not be allowed into Rawalpindi, the garrison city. The caller warned that all preparations had already been made to ensure that the march would be stopped beforehand; the marchers would not be allowed to present their demands to the UN in “any way, shape, or form”.

At the time of writing the marchers had momentarily reached Rawalpindi (only 13 kilometers from Islamabad), with a dramatic increase in the police patrols surrounding them. In particular, a contingent of lady police was also present (such a contingent is only brought when women have to be arrested or controlled), causing great anxiety amongst the marchers.

Disappearances

Disappearances in Balochistan began swelling in mid-2000, when the then President Pervez Musharraf's government was cracking down hard on the Baluchistan insurgency. Baluch nationalists have been waging a low-level insurgency for decades, demanding greater autonomy and a larger share of Baluchistan's natural resources. Even though the province has huge amounts of coal, minerals and natural gas, it is one of Pakistan's poorest regions. Human rights groups have long accused intelligence and law enforcement agencies of arresting activists and political workers, detaining them for long periods, and then killing them extrajudicially. Baloch nationalist groups claim that up to the present day 18,000 persons are missing or have been extrajudicially killed, whereas independent sources claim that more than 6,000 persons are missing after their arrest. It is also reported that since June 2010, 730 missing persons were extrajudicially killed after their arrest and disappearance. The government of Balochistan has itself confirmed the extrajudicial killings of 530 persons during the same period. The official list also confirms that 2,500 persons are missing after their arrest.

This march is a brave and arduous task undertaken by people who have lost faith in their government and judiciary to provide them with justice. Although Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has promised to resolve the issue of disappearances as part of a still emerging peace effort in the province, so far commissions set up by the government and Supreme Court have made little progress. The large support the marchers received in each of their stops, as well as the generosity of their fellow citizens in feeding and housing them along the way is what keeps them going, and should be commended. Civil society should continue to stand in solidarity with them and ensure that no harm befalls them. If the ISI takes action against the marchers as threatened, the government will take control of the situation in Balochistan, which will not only lead to the destabilization of Pakistan, but also of its fragile democracy.

A clear message must be sent to the ISI and the government that true democracy demands people be given the right to protest. Democracy also requires everyone to have the right to a fair trial and the process of justice, which is taken away when people are disappeared. Their rights to life, to be free from torture, to liberty and security are also denied. In fact, the road to disappearances is a slippery one, with increasingly anyone being disappeared for any reason. The march of these Baloch activists is a march not

just for individual justice, but for social justice. Disappearances and suppression affects all Pakistani citizens.

Another reason this march is so important is the recent enforcement of the Pakistan Protection Ordinance (PPO), through which police and security forces are given the power to arrest any suspect and keep them in custody for three months. Enacted in October 2013, it came into force on 5 December 2013. An amendment made to the PPO in January 2014 further legalizes disappearances by allowing authorities to withhold the location of detainees as well as the grounds for detention. Moreover, it says that any person arrested or detained by the armed forces or civil armed forces and kept under arrest or detention before the issuance of the PPO, will deem to have been done so under the PPO. It is thus clear that the entire purpose of the PPO is to legalize disappearances retrospectively.

The long march is therefore a strong movement to deny the power of the state to arrest or detain any person on the flimsy charges of suspicion of terrorism. It is also a movement to deny the legalization of torture and extrajudicial killings in custody, under the cover of disappearances.

[UPDATE]: The long march participants reached Islamabad on February 28, completing their momentous journey.