



In brief: Baluchistan – Pakistan’s forgotten conflict

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With the world’s attention predominantly on Afghanistan and the Pashtun borderlands of northwest Pakistan, the protracted low intensity conflict to the southeast in Pakistani Baluchistan (often also called Balochistan) has often been relatively eclipsed. Only developments in the provincial capital, Quetta, also known as ‘Taliban Central’, and the ‘Pashtun belt’ in the north of the province, feature regularly in the international media. In recent years, pro-independence Baluch insurgent groups have been stepping up their military attacks against the Pakistani security forces. The security forces, which have been the real source of political and economic power in the province since 1947, are accused by human rights groups of committing serious and systematic human rights violations.

In November 2009, the Pakistani government, acknowledging that the province had long been marginalised and deprived, launched a three-year ‘Baluchistan conciliation package’ (or *Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan*). It is intended to build confidence by addressing a wide range of Baluch grievances, by promoting demilitarisation and by creating greater economic opportunities, especially for the young. But [implementation](#) has lagged far behind official rhetoric, although there was a tripling of federal financial provision for Baluchistan in the

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2011-12 budget. Most Baluch nationalist leaders have rejected the package as inadequate.

Baluchistan makes up 43% the land-mass of Pakistan but Baluchs, at around six million in number, are only 4% of the total population. Much of the province is harsh, mountainous terrain. Over 80% of the population is said to live beneath the poverty line. The province's human development indicators are the worst in the country. When Pakistan experienced catastrophic floods in 2010, Baluchistan reportedly received the least state assistance.

Baluchistan is rich in uranium, copper, coal, gold, silver, platinum and aluminium and provides more than one-third of Pakistan's natural gas. Overall, it contains nearly 20% of the country's mineral and energy resources. One analyst claimed in 2006 that Baluchistan was receiving only 12.4% of the royalties due to it for the supply of gas.

The latest phase of insurgency in Baluchistan began in 2004, following previous outbreaks in 1948, 1958 and 1973-77. It was fuelled by the killing by the security forces in 2006 of local political leader, Nawab Akbar Bugti, a former provincial governor who had turned to insurgency. Last week, the Baluchistan High Court issued a warrant for the arrest of former military leader [Pervez Musharraf](#) in connection with the killing, and called for his extradition.

In October 2010, Amnesty International called on the Pakistani government to investigate the killing of more than 40 Baluch political activists by the security forces, in what it called a 'kill and dump' policy. In July 2011, Human Rights Watch highlighted dozens of enforced 'disappearances', in which the authorities had taken people into custody and then denied all responsibility. As part of the Baluchistan conciliation package, the regular army was withdrawn from the province but replaced by the even less popular Frontier Corps. Investigations into the alleged 'disappearances' of hundreds of Baluch civilians at the hands of the security forces have so far produced few results. The Pakistan army has promoted Islamic parties and schools as part of its attempts to weaken Baluch nationalism.

The most active insurgent group is the Baluchistan Liberation Army, established in the 1980s, which both the US and the EU have banned as a terrorist group. It is widely believed to be led by Brahumdagh Bugti, Nawab Akbar Bugti's grandson, who is in exile – although he denies that he supports violence. Recently, it and other insurgent groups have begun to undertake attacks against non-Baluch civilians in the province, including Hindus. Sectarian militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are also active in Baluchistan, primarily targeting Shia Muslims.

Baluch sentiment at the time of the creation of Pakistan was very much against incorporation. Today, some might still be persuaded to accept a fairer share of the wealth generated in the province and genuine political autonomy, rather than independence. The most prominent political party to take this position is the Baluchistan National Party, which has been the object of attacks by the insurgents as a consequence. But there seems little doubt that the attraction of independence, particularly amongst the younger generation, is currently on the rise.

According to one press [article](#):

[...] this insurgency seems to have spread deeper into Baloch society than ever before. Anti-Pakistani fervour has gripped the province. Baloch schoolchildren refuse to sing the national anthem or fly its flag; women, traditionally secluded, have joined the struggle. Universities have become hotbeds of nationalist sentiment. "This is not just the usual suspects," says Rashed Rahman, editor of the [Daily Times](#), one of few papers that regularly covers the conflict.

Two of Pakistan's naval bases are in Baluchistan, at Ormara and Gwadar, a Chinese-built port strategically located near the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz. There are US concerns that Gwadar might be used by the Chinese as naval base in future. Antofagasta, a UK-listed Chilean company which is developing a copper and gold mining project, Reko Diq, in Baluchistan with a Canada-based partner, is currently fighting what appears to be an official attempt to strip it of its contract and hand it instead to a Chinese company. Once operational, Reko Diq will become Pakistan's largest single source of foreign direct investment.

Much Afghan opium is smuggled through western Baluchistan. Arms and drugs trafficking help to sustain Baluch insurgent groups. US personnel have been based in Baluchistan, including at Shamsi base, from where drone attacks targeting Taliban and al-Qaeda figures are widely believed to have been launched since 2004. In the context of deteriorating relations between the two countries, Pakistani permission to use the base for this purpose was reportedly withdrawn earlier this year. US officials denied these claims. Pakistan undertook nuclear testing in the province in 1998. A gas pipeline is planned from Iran to India that would pass through Pakistani Baluchistan. The US backs a rival planned pipeline from Turkmenistan to India that would also pass through the province, but without involving Iran.

On 4 July 2011, the Foreign Secretary, Rt Hon William Hague MP, gave the following written [answer](#) to a relatively rare parliamentary question about Baluchistan:

Mr Douglas Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Balochistan.

Mr Hague: The Government of Pakistan face a difficult law and order situation in Balochistan where it has to tackle diverse militant and criminal threats. 737 attacks, including 614 by nationalist insurgents, were reported across Balochistan in 2010, claiming the lives of over 600 people. The UK regularly engages with the Government of Pakistan and the provincial government on matters of security, rule of law and human rights in Balochistan. Officials also meet representatives of the Baloch and Pashtun communities and political parties. We continue to press the Government of Pakistan to implement measures designed to address the causes of instability in Balochistan. In particular, the UK would like to see full implementation of the reform package for Balochistan announced by the Government of Pakistan in November 2009.

Further reading

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Human Rights Watch, "['We can torture, kill, or keep you for years'. Enforced disappearances by Pakistani security forces in Balochistan](#)", 28 July 2011