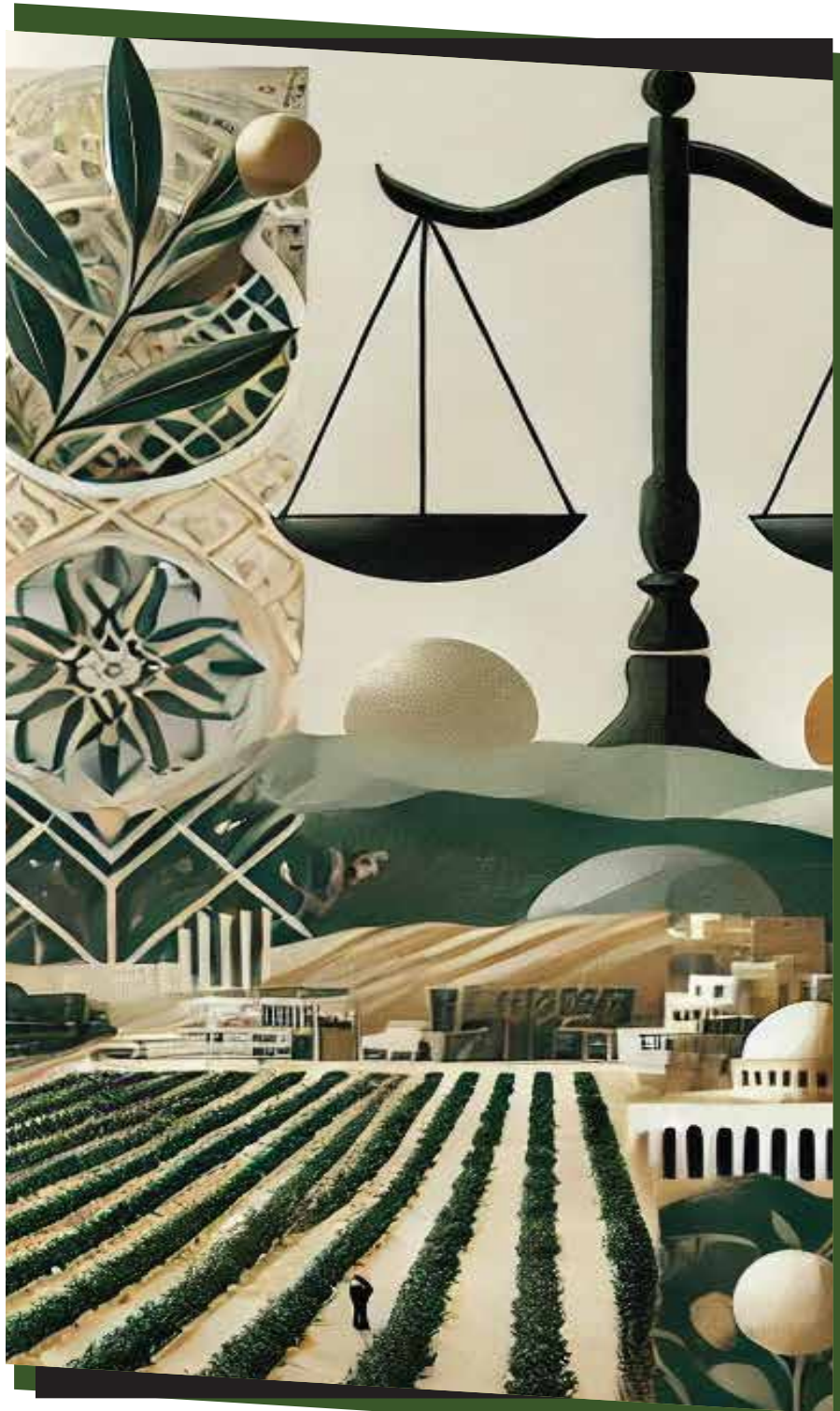


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Director's Message

The year past was quite interesting as well as productive. CGR represented the Civil Society Alliance and participated in all the Constructive Dialogues in Vienna held under the aegis of UNODC on Firearms, Technical Assistance, International Cooperation, Trafficking in Persons, and Smuggling of Migrants.

It was an honour for me to be elected in Geneva-based Board of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in Feb 2024 for an initial period of three years. I also participated in the global board meeting in Montreux, Switzerland in July 2024.

As Vice Chair of the Board of Vienna-based Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, it was a unique opportunity to be part of the drafting committee on the first-ever Civil Society Declaration on the UNTOC Review Mechanism. The Declaration was presented by the Alliance at the 12th Conference of Parties in Vienna in October 2024.

CGR and Centre for Human Rights, in collaboration with GI-TOC held a Roundtable on Transnational Organised Crime on 15 November 2024 in Lahore on the first international day against TOC. It was a huge success. John Collins, Director Academic Engagement of GI-TOC participated in person.

CGR and CFHR are actively contributing to the establishment of GI-TOC's South and Central Asia Observatory on TOC.

Finally in December 2024, I put together a team of experts to carry out an assessment of Pakistan's Firearms Legislation on behalf of the Firearms Trafficking Section (FTS) of the UNODC. A two-day Workshop was held at the National Police Bureau (NPB) on 11-12 Dec 2024 where the draft report was presented.

So all in all, it turned out to be an extremely productive and professionally rewarding year. We plan build up on the initiatives launched last year and hope to accomplish much more during 2025. This can only be achieved due to excellent team work and collaboration between the CGR and CFHR.

Our association with GI-TOC and Alliance of NGOs is also flourishing which is a cause of satisfaction.



TARIQ KHOSA

Director

Two soldiers martyred, 8 terrorists killed in two separate operations in KP's Khyber, Bannu districts



Captain Muhammad Zohaibud Din (L) and Sepoy Iftikhar Hussain (R). — ISPR

Eight terrorists were killed in two separate engagements with security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Khyber and Bannu districts, the military's media wing said.

A statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that an intelligence-based operation was conducted in the Baka Khel area of the Bannu district on the reported presence of terrorists (Khawarij).

"During the conduct of the operation, troops effectively engaged with the terrorists' location and consequently killed five khawarij, while nine others were injured," the ISPR said.

However, Sepoy Iftikhar Hussain (29), having fought gallantly, embraced martyrdom, the statement added.

In a separate operation conducted in the general area of Shagai in Khyber district, three terrorists were killed while two others were apprehended by the security forces, it said.

"Captain Muhammad Zohaibud Din (25), who led the troops from the front, fought bravely, paid the ultimate sacrifice and embraced martyrdom," the ISPR said.

According to the statement, the terrorists were involved in numerous terrorist activities against the security forces as well as innocent civilians.

Sanitisation operations were being conducted to eliminate any other terrorists found in the area, it said, adding that security forces were determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism and “such sacrifices of our brave soldiers further strengthened our resolve”.

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif praised the security forces for their successful operations in the districts, commending their bravery for eliminating terrorists in two separate operations.

The president and prime minister paid tributes to Captain Zohaibuddin and soldier Hussain and acknowledged their sacrifices, President Secretariat Press Wing and PM Office Media Wing said in separate press releases.

President Zardari emphasised that the sacrifices of the martyrs for the country’s security would not be in vain and that the entire nation would remember the those who laid down their lives.

He reiterated the commitment to continue operations till the eradication of terrorism and assured that they would stand with their brave security forces in the fight against terrorism.

Prime Minister Shehbaz prayed for the elevation of the martyrs’ ranks in Jannah and patience for their families.

The fight against terrorism will continue till the complete eradication of terrorism, the press release quoted the prime minister as saying.

The prime minister said everyone was proud of the brave officers and soldiers, adding that the sacrifices of martyrs would never be forgotten.

He said the nefarious designs of terrorists and enemies to spread chaos would never succeed, reiterating that the entire nation stood with their armed forces in the fight against terrorism.

In July, the government, through an official notification, designated the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as Fitna al Khawarij, while mandating all institutions to use the term khariji (outcast) when referring to the perpetrators of terrorist attacks on Pakistan.

The country has lately witnessed a sharp uptick in the number of attacks targeting security forces, other law enforcement agencies, and security checkpoints, particularly in Balochistan and KP.

Attacks escalated after the TTP broke a fragile ceasefire agreement with the government in 2022 and vowed to target security forces.

Earlier this month, security forces killed 10 terrorists and injured eight others during three different engagements in North Waziristan.

On Nov 7, security forces killed five terrorists during an exchange of fire in South Waziristan, while four soldiers were martyred in the operation.

In another incident on Nov 4, security forces killed seven terrorists in separate operations, with one terrorist killed in Balochistan and the other six killed during two operations in KP.

Likewise, on November 2, four terrorists were killed during an intelligence-based operation in KP’s South Waziristan region.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 1, 2024

Online oppression

THE government appears to be on some sort of mission to create regulatory bodies and introduce amendments to laws.

Its recent plan to bring changes to Peca 2016, including the establishment of a new Digital Rights Protection Authority, shows how the state continues to prioritise control over real cybersecurity concerns. There is no mistaking it. It is simply another attempt to suffocate dissent. This is not the first time Peca has been weaponised against free speech. Since its inception in 2016, the law has faced persistent criticism from journalists, CSOs, and digital rights advocates for its vague provisions that enable state overreach. The 2022 Peca ordinance, later struck down by the Islamabad High Court, had similarly attempted to criminalise criticism of public officials. Now, we see history repeating itself with even more draconian measures.

The proposed amendments are particularly troubling in their expansive definition of 'social media platforms' to include tools used to access such platforms. With the government without a legal cover to block VPNs, it is a not-so-thinly veiled attempt to regulate them. And while misinformation is a real issue, its vague definition under the proposed law raises critical concerns. What qualifies as 'fake or false information'? Who decides its authenticity?

This, coupled with 'fake news' carrying five-year imprisonment terms, creates an environment of fear and self-censorship. The irony should not be lost on anyone: as traditional media faces increasing curbs and economic pressures, citizens naturally turn to social media for information and expression. Instead of addressing the root causes of misinformation by fostering media literacy and protecting press freedom, the state's response is to create yet another regulatory body with sweeping powers to block content and prosecute citizens.

The creation of DRPA, following the uncertain fate of the recently established National Cyber Crime & Investigation Authority, reflects a bureaucratic tendency to multiply institutions rather than strengthen existing ones. The NCCIA, formed just months ago to replace the FIA's Cybercrime Wing, already appears to be in limbo with its governing rules repealed. This pattern of creating overlapping bodies while failing to address fundamental issues of digital rights and cybersecurity does not inspire confidence.

The state must realise: the more it clamps down on legitimate discourse, the more it fosters a climate of rumour-mongering and conspiracy theories. When citizens cannot trust traditional media due to state interference and find themselves muzzled online, social media platforms become fertile ground for unverified narratives. This fuels the very chaos the government claims it seeks to prevent. Rather than heavy-handed measures, the government should foster a culture of open dialogue. Empower citizens to discern fact from fiction, hold social media platforms accountable through fair regulation, and rebuild trust in traditional media by ensuring its independence.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 4, 2024

Five terrorists shot dead in Lakki

PESHAWAR/SOUTH WAZIRISTAN: Five terrorists were killed and two others wounded in an exchange of fire with security forces in Lakki Marwat district, according to the military's media wing.

A statement issued by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said the security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation (IBO) after receiving reports about the presence of terrorists in the area.

The security forces surrounded their hideout during the operation. Five of them lost their lives in the exchange of fire, while two terrorists were injured.

"A sanitisation operation is being conducted to eliminate any other Kharji found in the area, as security forces of Pakistan are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country," the ISPR said.

TTP leader shot dead

A local commander of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was shot dead by unidentified persons in the Birmal Tehsil area of Lower South Waziristan, on Wednesday.

According to sources, Mehmood Wazir was wanted by police in different cases, including attacks on police, civilians and security forces.

A loud explosion was heard in Birmal Tehsil late on Wednesday night, followed by heavy gunfire.

Sources said Mehmood Wazir's killing could have been the result of squabbles within the banned TTP. His funeral was held in Darabalai, his native village.

Attack foiled

Security forces foiled an attack near a post of the Frontier Constabulary in Nandron area of Birmal on Wednesday. The militants escaped due to heavy firing by the security forces.

Wazir tribesmen have called upon the government to take action to improve the law-and-order situation in both parts of Waziristan.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 5, 2024

Terrorism-related fatalities surge 69pc in November

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan experienced 61 terrorist attacks in November 2024, marking a 27 per cent increase compared to the previous month. The number of fatalities rose sharply by 69 per cent, increasing from 100 in October to 169 in November. Another 225 people were injured in these attacks.

The proscribed Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) carried out 12 attacks last month, including three major or high-impact incidents. These attacks claimed 45 lives, more than the fatalities caused in attacks by the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This surge in frequency and intensity in BLA attacks reflects a significant evolution in the group's operational strategy and capabilities, which necessitates a revised approach by the Pakistani state to address the growing threat.

These details were revealed by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based think-tank working on conflict and peace-related affairs in the country and the wider region, in its 'Monthly Security Review of Pakistan'. The report noted that a total of seven incidents of sectarian violence were recorded during the month in Kurram tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), including two terrorist attacks and five incidents of violent sectarian clashes. As many as 115 people lost their lives and 137 others were injured in these incidents.

The recent spree of violent clashes started following the Nov 21 attack on passenger buses. As many as 41 terrorist attacks occurred in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, including two sectarian attacks in Kurram, which left 114 people dead and 95 others injured.

The banned TTP, Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, Lashkar-i-Islam, and a few local Taliban groups were reportedly involved in most of these attacks.

Balochistan experienced 19 terrorist incidents, which resulted in 55 deaths and injuries to 130 people.

Most of these deaths (about 91 per cent) resulted from three major or high-impact attacks that targeted passengers including security personnel at the railways station in Quetta, a police van in Mastung, and a security check-post in Kalat.

No terrorist attack took place in Sindh in November 2024. However, militants attacked a security checkpost in Dera Ghazi Khan district in Punjab, which was repulsed.

A total of six incidents of border violence or incursion were recorded at Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. As many as 25 militants were killed and 11 others injured in these incidents.

Security forces and the counterterrorism departments (CTDs) of the police also conducted 19 anti-militant operations, which resulted in the killing of 53 militants.

Fourteen out of the 19 total reported operations took place in KP, while five operations happened in Balochistan province.

Overall, 98 incidents of various forms of conflict-related violence were documented across the country in November 2024.

These incidents resulted in the death of 338 individuals and injuries to 411 others.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 6, 2024

Humanity at risk

HUMAN trafficking continues to remain an area where the state has utterly failed its citizens. While global partnerships – the likes of those with the US embassy and various NGOs – have strived over the years to combat this menace, Pakistan’s own efforts have been lacklustre to say the least. The numbers tell a sombre story: thousands are trafficked annually, yet convictions remain negligible. In 2023 alone, out of over 18,000 cases investigated, a mere 10 convictions were secured. When the FIA reports arresting 109 traffickers in the Gujranwala region alone in a single month, it shows the scale of this human rights crisis. The 2024 US State Department trafficking report highlights that for the fifth consecutive year, no significant action was taken against officials complicit in trafficking crimes. This culture of impunity allows traffickers to operate with near-total freedom, often using their ill-gotten wealth to bribe their way out of justice. The situation is further worsened by legal loopholes. The 2018 Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, despite amendments, continues to allow fines instead of imprisonment, weakening its deterrence. Law-enforcement agencies lack specialised training and resources to dismantle sophisticated trafficking networks, which often operate transnationally. Recent cases of human smugglers exploiting air routes and holding migrants for ransom underscore the evolving tactics of these networks.

Socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, and illiteracy make individuals easy prey for criminal enterprises. These factors are exploited to force such people into bonded labour and sex work, or lure them into illegal migration schemes. Women and children suffer the most, enduring unspeakable abuse. Despite some efforts by the FIA and NGOs such as SSDO, the state needs to do much more. Until there is genuine political will through sustained enforcement and corruption-free implementation of anti-trafficking measures, vulnerable citizens will continue to fall prey to this modern-day slave trade. This includes empowering the FIA, ensuring accountability of complicit officials, and implementing robust victim rehabilitation programmes. The scale and brutality of human trafficking should outrage society, yet public awareness is low. The government must take the lead in raising consciousness and fostering a zero-tolerance approach to trafficking. Pakistan’s failure to address this issue has not only tarnished its global image but also undermined the rights of its citizens. Silence and inaction are no longer options.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 7, 2024

13 terrorists killed in North Waziristan operation

NORTH WAZIRISTAN: At least 13 terrorists were reportedly killed and several others injured as militant hideouts near the Afghan border were targeted by security forces in the North Waziristan tribal district.

Although there was no official word from Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), sources said 13 militants, including a key commander of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), were killed and several others wounded in two separate actions, which took place in the Gazum Mandi area of North Waziristan's Shawal tehsil.

The attacks were carried out on different hideouts of terrorists in the area, locals said, adding that the dead also included a key TTP commander, who was said to be the mastermind of a number of suicide attacks.

Sources also said that two other commanders, Gauhar and Abu Bakr alias Mohsin, were injured in the attacks.

Locals said a cloud of dark smoke billowed from their hideout following the security operation. They said many militants abandoned the bodies of their accomplices and fled.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 9, 2024

The grave reality of violence against women in Pakistan

MEHAK ANWAR

"Every year, the world marks 16 Days of Activism against violence towards women, but one stark question persists: Are we genuinely advancing toward a world free of gender-based abuse, or are we merely celebrating progress that remains largely elusive?"

As the world has recently observed the 16 Days of Activism for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a troubling question remains: can we truly end the centuries-old atrocities that women have faced, or are these observances simply empty rituals, signaling little more than symbolic acknowledgment? The answer, regrettably, is no. The reality we live in is far from a utopia where women are revered like royalty. Instead, it is a world where gender-based violence continues to dominate the lives of millions of women. Although we are witnessing greater independence and achievement among women, these strides forward do not erase the grim truth: violence against women is deeply entrenched across the globe, with Pakistan being one of the worst affected countries.

According to a report by UN Women, a woman is killed every 11 minutes globally, reflecting the tragic prevalence of violence that plagues societies worldwide. In Pakistan, a country where certain rural traditions claim that a daughter is worth "seven Holy Qurans", the custom of karo-kari i.e. honour killing is shockingly still practised. According to the Aurat Foundation's 'Annual Statistics 2020' report, over 11,000 cases of violence against women were documented in 2020. The most prevalent forms of violence included domestic abuse, with 4,775 reported cases, followed by rape and gang rape, which accounted for 2,297 cases, and murders, totaling 1,033 incidents. These numbers are staggering, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. The silence surrounding unreported cases adds to the enormity of the crisis.

A similar tragedy recently unfolded in Saeedabad neighbourhood of Karachi, where Afshan Jamali, an educated and accomplished secondary school teacher, was murdered by her husband. Despite her education and professional achievements, Afshan found herself trapped in a cycle of abuse. Her father revealed that the core reason behind this atrocity was the demanded dowry, even though she had already sacrificed everything to build a life with him. The man she once trusted ended her life, leaving their child motherless.

If a well-educated, empowered woman like Afshan, who was fully aware of her rights, can fall victim to such violence, what hope is there for those who lack resources or support? The suffering of women like Afshan illustrates the depth of societal devaluation of women's lives and the dire need for systemic change.

At the core of this ongoing violence lies a complex web of patriarchal norms, cultural misinterpretations and economic dependence that systematically oppress women. In Pakistan, deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes place women in subservient roles, limiting

their autonomy and reinforcing gender inequality. This imbalance fosters a culture where men are viewed as the primary breadwinners, perpetuating harmful power dynamics that validate violence against women.

Religion in Pakistan is often misused to justify these inequities. Many men selectively manipulate religious doctrines to entrench their power and control. These misinterpretations, often rooted in pre-Islamic cultural practices, perpetuate the marginalisation of women. The result is a skewed view of religion that, rather than empowering women, enables the continuation of violence and oppression.

Additionally, economic dependence deepens gender inequality in Pakistan, where women are significantly underrepresented in the workforce. In 2022, just 22% of women participated in the labour force, one of the lowest rates globally, compared to 84.79% of men. This financial vulnerability leaves many women trapped in abusive relationships, unable to break free due to a lack of resources. The widespread economic disempowerment of women in Pakistan acts as a powerful tool of control, reinforcing their subjugation and limiting their ability to escape cycles of violence.

Despite the existence of laws protecting women rights, their enforcement is notoriously poor, and legal loopholes are often exploited by perpetrators to evade justice. The fear of retribution, societal stigma and distrust in the justice system keep many women from reporting their abuse. Additionally, a prevailing culture of victim-blaming within both the legal system and society at large prevents many survivors from seeking justice, fearing that they will be held accountable for the violence they endured. This cycle of impunity only strengthens the grip of abuse, leaving women vulnerable and unheard.

However, the time for action is long overdue. The systemic gender-based violence in Pakistan demands an immediate and comprehensive response. The legal system must be overhauled to ensure robust protection for women. Laws exist, but they must be enforced with greater commitment. Law enforcement agencies need specialised training to handle gender-based violence cases with sensitivity, and the judicial system must act swiftly and decisively.

Equally important is the need for cultural transformation. Patriarchal norms that justify violence must be dismantled, and widespread public education on gender equality and women's rights must be prioritised. Similarly, media outlets should play a key role in amplifying the voices of women, showcasing successful legal cases, and challenging harmful stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination.

The fight against violence toward women is no longer a matter of debate; it's a fight for the very soul of the nation. As the old adage goes, "When women rise, we all rise." The time to act is now, before more lives are lost, before more women are silenced by fear. If Pakistan is to break free from the chains of abusive realities, it must stand united in its commitment to justice, equality and the fundamental dignity of all its citizens. Let us not be remembered for our inaction, but for our collective resolve to build a future where no woman's life is marred by violence, fear or oppression.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 10, 2024

Security forces kill 6 terrorists in KP, Balochistan



BANNU: Police officials take part in the last rites of a martyred cop.

PESHAWAR / LAKKI MARWAT: Six terrorists were killed, while a policeman embraced martyrdom, in gun battles and a bomb explosion in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the military and Levies said.

Security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation in the Kulachi area of Dera Ismail Khan district on the reported presence of terrorists from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a statement issued by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said.

Security forces effectively engaged their location and killed two of them, while one was captured with injuries, adding that weapons and ammunition were recovered from them.

According to ISPR, the outlaws were involved in terrorist activities against security forces, as well as targeted killing of innocent civilians.

A sanitisation operation was being conducted to eliminate any other militant found in the area, as security forces were determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country.

Bannu clash

Meanwhile, two militants were killed in a clash with the police about an hour after they targeted a cop near Kiri Bridge on Haved road in Bannu.

Regional Police Officer Imran Shahid told journalists that two armed militants riding a motorcycle attacked Head Constable Ali Bahadar Khan while he was on his way to the cantonment police station for duty.

He said the cop was critically wounded and was immediately shifted to DHQ Hospital, but he could not survive.

Mr Shahid said the incident prompted swift and commandos of Quick Response Force (QRF) were sent to the area to chase the attackers and ensure their arrest.

The regional police chief said that police commandos came across the militants in the Miryan area, where an exchange of fire forced the attackers to abandon their motorcycle and take shelter inside a house.

He said an additional force, including policemen from nearby police stations and counter-terrorism (CTD) commandos led by DPO Ziauddin, was dispatched to the area to assist the QRF personnel.

“The militants opened fire on law enforcers when they tried to lay a siege to the house, injuring a cop identified as Amanullah Khan,” he said, adding that the suspects snatched weapons from the house owner and used them against the police.

He said police, backed by an armoured personnel carrier, responded effectively and neutralised both militants, adding that two 9mm pistols and ammunition were seized from the dead militants, while the wounded cop was shifted to hospital, and later referred to Peshawar for better treatment.

He said one of those killed was identified as Safeer alias Hamza, adding that he was the cousin of militant ‘commander’ Ibrahim alias Zarar. He further said that both the men were wanted by the police and CTD for their involvement in over a dozen militancy-related cases.

Attack on Levies foiled

In Qila Abdullah, two suspected attackers, who wanted to target a Levies station in the Mazai Adha area, were killed in a bomb explosion.

Levies officials said the blast took place in an orchard behind the Levies police station.

The Levies and personnel of other forces shifted the bodies to the trauma centre in Mazai Adha.

Qila Abdullah Assistant Commissioner Shahek Baloch said the killed men were apparently carrying the bomb to attack the Levies station on a motorbike but before reaching their target the device went off killing them both on the spot.

“They wanted to attack the Levies police station but the bomb exploded in an orchard behind the Levies police station,” the officer said, adding that the bodies were blown up and were beyond recognition.

He said a motorcycle was found at the explosion site while pistols were recovered from the deceased's possession.

It was the fourth blast in Qila Abdullah over the past two weeks.

Levies officials said that bomb disposal squad was called for combing the area. Further investigation is in progress.

Security forces praised

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif commended the security forces for carrying out a successful operation against terrorists in the Kulachi area.

In separate statements, the president and the prime minister paid tribute to the officers and personnel of the security forces for killing two terrorists and arresting another during the operation.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 10, 2024

1 soldier martyred, 7 terrorists neutralised in separate Waziristan operations

A soldier was martyred, while seven terrorists were killed in two separate operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan District, the military's media wing said.

According to a statement from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), an intelligence-based operation (IBO) was conducted by the security forces in the Miran Shah area of the North Waziristan District upon the reported presence of terrorists.

"During the conduct of [the] operation, own troops effectively engaged the khwarij's location, as a result of which four khwarij were sent to hell," the statement said.

It added that another encounter between the security forces and terrorists took place in the Spinwam area of the district, as a result of which three more terrorists were neutralised.

"However, during the intense fire exchange, one brave son of the soil, Lance Naik Muhammad Amin (aged 34 years, resident of District Faisalabad), having fought gallantly, embraced Shahadat," the statement said.

The ISPR further added that a sanitisation operation was being conducted in the said areas to "eliminate any other kharji".

"Security forces of Pakistan are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism and such sacrifices of our brave soldiers further strengthen our resolve," the statement said.

In July, the government, through an official notification, designated the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as Fitna al Khawarij, while mandating all institutions to use the term khariji (outcast) when referring to the perpetrators of terrorist attacks on Pakistan.

The country has lately witnessed a sharp uptick in the number of attacks targeting security forces, other law enforcement agencies, and security checkpoints, particularly in Balochistan and KP.

Attacks escalated after the TTP broke a fragile ceasefire agreement with the government in 2022 and vowed to target security forces.

On December 9, the ISPR said that two terrorists were killed and one was arrested in an operation carried out by security forces in KP's Dera Ismail Khan area. It added that a "large quantity of weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from the killed terrorists."

Last week, six soldiers were martyred and 22 terrorists were eliminated during three different engagements in the province.

At least 245 people, including 68 security personnel, were killed in a string of terrorist attacks and clashes across Pakistan in November.

The fatalities included 127 terrorists, and 50 civilians, according to data released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, an Islamabad-based think tank.

November is the second deadliest month after August, when 254 people lost their lives, including 92 civilians, 108 militants, and 54 security forces personnel.

However, in terms of casualties involving security personnel, it is the deadliest month this year compared to October when 62 soldiers were killed.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 11, 2024

Legalising Big Brother

USAMA KHILJI

WE are reaching a point where we are unable to count the number of times the expression ‘yet another attempt’ has been used for the state’s efforts to restrict freedom of speech and undermine the right to privacy in Pakistan.

But, here we go again: ‘yet another attempt’ has been made to further tighten the noose around Pakistani citizens through proposed amendments to the already draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (Peca), which was passed by the PML-N government in 2016.

This attempt consolidates a range of past legislative proposals, ordinances, and rules that have been rolled back by the higher judiciary in Pakistan for being unconstitutional. Presumably, the renewed confidence in passing such a package in the shape of an amendment comes due to a compliant parliamentary majority with questionable legitimacy that also passed the controversial 26th Constitutional Amendment in October.

The proposed amendment will erode democratic civic space and roll back rights in several ways, and give legal cover to several tactics the state has already put in place to clamp down on criticism of the state and the ruling hybrid regime.

First, the amendment adds new definitions to Peca. It expands the definition of social media by including “website”, “application”, and “communication channel” that allow people to access social media and post content. This is presumably being done after the government’s legal opinion that VPNs cannot be blocked under the law due to lack of ambit.

The new definition will bring VPNs under the definitional scheme, hence legitimising the illegal blocking of VPNs, the use of which spiked after the government controversially blocked X after evidence of rigging started to emerge on the platform following the Feb 8 general elections. Additionally, “any person managing a system that allows access to social media” has also been added to the definitions in the law.

Second, the amendment proposes the creation of a new authority called the ‘Digital Rights Protection Authority’, which is ironic given that the authority’s function is the opposite of what the name suggests: it will have the power to ask the government and social media companies to block or remove “unlawful content”.

The definition of unlawful content has also been expanded to include 16 different scenarios, including “fake or false information” and “aspersion” against constitutional institutions and their officers, including the judiciary and the armed forces. This could mean that parliament – the supreme constitutional institution – and its elected members cannot be criticised by those who pay their salaries through taxes and vote them into office in case the DRPA, appointed by the government, thinks the criticism is “aspersion”.

This also means that the judiciary and the armed forces cannot be criticised for established unconstitutional moves such as the 1999 military coup or the 2007 emergency, including the

Provisional Constitutional Order of the dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf, under which several judges took oath, while others refused. Hence, perfectly legitimate speech is likely to be censored “lawfully” under the proposed amendments.

The amendment further claims that the authority will incentivise and facilitate social media platforms, but says that it will “enlist” social media platforms to abide by its rules and set conditions for them “in addition to the requirements of this [law]”. It is important to note that platforms have consistently refused to comply with such conditions, which violate international human rights law standards that they and the government are liable to uphold as signatories to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Platforms have made this clear through the Asia Internet Coalition and the Global Network Initiative. Further, the authority will clearly not be independent if the government is appointing the chairperson and three other members out of the total six and relies on majority decisions. It appears that the state wants to continue the judge, jury, and executioner role of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), but through a new authority.

It is worthwhile to take away content regulatory powers from the PTA, which needs to focus on making internet and telecommunication services better and faster instead of the slow and fragmented state they are currently in. However, the solution is not to create a new censorship body with a friendly sounding name.

Third, and very alarmingly, the amendment proposes adding the offence of “fake or false information” as Section 26(A), stating that any person who “intentionally” posts any information “which he knows or has reason to believe to be false or fake and likely to cause or create a sense of fear, panic or disorder or unrest” shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to five years or with fine which may extend to a million rupees, or with both.

This is dangerous, because an authority appointed by the government cannot make a decision on what is true and what is not. As it is, a large amount of disinformation emanates from government functionaries. It is ironic that they will become arbiters of truth for the entire citizenry and retain the privilege of sending those who disagree with them to jail for five years under the garb of “fake or false information”. As the disappearances and arrests of journalists in the past few years show, this provision will be used to further undermine press freedom protected under Article 19 of the Constitution and the Journalist Protection Act.

In the current context, where police is profiling citizens by checking their phones to see what political party they support and detaining them on the basis of arbitrary findings; where VPNs are blocked without legal cover, damaging the IT industry and privacy in general; where essential apps are slow or non-functional, depending on the whim of the state; and where a controversial and opaque firewall has been installed, the need of the hour is legislation that protects access to quality internet without Big Brother snooping on every click by citizens with the intention of jailing them in complete disregard of their fundamental rights.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 12, 2024

Pakistan has made progress against terror financing: US assessment

WASHINGTON: Pakistan has made substantial progress in countering terrorist financing and addressing regional extremist networks, a US State Department report states while also highlighting significant security challenges including a sharp rise in terrorist attacks in 2023.

The report released this week commends Pakistan for completing its updated National Risk Assessment (NRA) on money laundering and terrorist financing in 2023. This assessment evaluated 87 terrorist organisations, conducted sectoral vulnerability analyses, and identified donations and extortion as key funding sources for terrorism.

According to the assessment, 41 groups remain active in Pakistan, leveraging cash couriers and illegal money transfer services. Porous borders with Afghanistan are flagged as critical vulnerabilities facilitating illicit financial flows.

The report notes that consistent with its commitment to relevant UN resolutions, Pakistan prosecutes its returning citizens who participated in foreign wars. “There were about 100 Pakistani nationals in northeast Syria” in 2023, it mentions. “To date, Pakistan has declined to repatriate any of its nationals,” it adds.

The State Department underscores Pakistan’s efforts to disseminate the findings to law enforcement and other stakeholders, directing them to implement targeted policy and operational priorities. Notably, Pakistan extradited a dual US-Pakistani citizen to the US in December to face prosecution for terrorism-related crimes.

The US report notes that Pakistan collects biometric information at land crossings through its International Border Management Security System.

The Customs Service attempted to enforce anti-money laundering laws and foreign exchange regulations at all major airports, in coordination with other agencies.

In 2023, Pakistani customs managed the entry of dual-use chemicals for legitimate purposes through end-use verification, while also attempting to prevent their diversion for use in IEDs.

FATF, rising threat

Pakistan’s removal from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Grey List in October 2022 is highlighted in Washington as a ‘pivotal achievement’. This followed sustained efforts to address strategic deficiencies identified in 2018.

The FATF acknowledged Pakistan’s improved compliance with international anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorist financing (CFT) standards, culminating in a strengthened regulatory framework.

Despite advancements in combating terrorist financing, the report paints a grim picture of the security landscape in 2023. Terrorist attacks increased by over 50pc compared to 2022, with civilians and security forces being frequent targets.

Provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan experienced concentrated violence, with groups like the TTP, Balochistan Liberation Army, and local ISIS affiliates employing explosives and small arms in their attacks.

Madressahs' compliance

The report notes Pakistan's continued efforts in countering violent extremism, including operating "deradicalisation" camps in KP that provide corrective religious education, vocational training, and counseling.

The National Counterterrorism Authority (Nacta) also expanded its Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) office in 2023, signing an MoU with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) to implement CVE initiatives across universities.

However, concerns remain regarding madressahs failing to comply with registration and funding documentation laws, some of which continue to promote ideologies that could lead to violent extremism.

Pakistan's active participation in multilateral counter-terrorism forums, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, as well as the inclusion of cities like Karachi and Peshawar in the Strong Cities Network, underscores its commitment to regional stability.

Political, strategic dimensions

Security analysts note that while Pakistan has made progress in countering terrorist financing, its domestic security remains precarious.

"The rise in terrorist activity alongside progress in countering terrorist financing highlights the complex reality Pakistan must navigate," says Agha Murtaza Haider, a security analyst, while highlighting the dual challenges the country faces.

He also addressed domestic political concerns such as the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's call for US sanctions over alleged democratic backsliding. But he believed Washington's strategic interests in counter-terrorism and regional stability are likely to take precedence over such demands.

"Washington's approach has consistently favoured stability over punitive measures," he observed, adding that Pakistan's cooperation in addressing terrorist financing remained a key US priority.

While Pakistan's efforts have earned international recognition, the steep rise in terrorist activity in 2023 underscores the daunting challenges ahead in ensuring both domestic stability and global trust.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 16, 2024

Remembering APS



PESHAWAR: Family members gather at the Army Public School memorial to martyred students, on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack that claimed 147 lives.

It was a day of infamy – unfortunately one of many in this country’s turbulent history. On this day in 2014, the brutal nature of the militant threat in Pakistan painfully manifested itself as terrorists attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, massacring nearly 150 students and teachers. While terrorists had shed innocent blood in previous incidents as well, APS was the breaking point, when a shell-shocked nation demanded answers from those who rule this land. The cancer of terrorism was fast devouring the country, and unless the state took action, it threatened to spread across Pakistan. Pledges were made – particularly to crush the TTP, which was responsible for the atrocity, and other terrorist gangs – while the National Action Plan was hammered out to cleanse the country of armed militancy and extremism. Ten years later, where do we stand?

Though NAP was updated in 2021, Pakistan is still far from being free of terrorism and violent extremism. While militant attacks on civilian targets have come down, the TTP – as well as other violent actors – have staged a resurgence. These groups were given a big boost after the Afghan Taliban swept into Kabul in 2021. Today, it is primarily security personnel, belonging both to the military and police, who are being targeted by terrorist groups, though civilians have also been hit. In fact, a Pakistani representative told a UN meeting recently, the TTP “poses a direct and daily threat to Pakistan’s security”, adding that the terrorist group

was poised to become the “arm” of Al Qaeda in the region. While the Afghan Taliban may be providing the TTP safe havens, the state has failed to evict the group from all of Pakistan’s territory. Moreover, fanatical elements that provide the ideological fuel to violent extremists continue to function, though they may be keeping a low profile. This includes sectarian groups, as well as outfits that have weaponised the sensitive issue of blasphemy to forward their dark agendas. Unless these groups are decommissioned, the battle will be impossible to win.

The heirs of the APS martyrs have time and again demanded that the state fully implement NAP. Indeed, this is the only way to end the menace of militancy and reverse the process of radicalisation. Countering extremism may take a generation or two – the seeds planted during the Zia dictatorship have today turned into tall trees bearing bitter fruit. Yet the state must fully commit itself to these efforts if Pakistan is to be rid of terrorism and fanaticism. Sadly, the state appears more enamoured of silencing the political opposition; counterterrorism does not appear high on its list of priorities. This attitude must change if we are serious about ensuring that the events of that dark day are never repeated.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 16, 2024

2 cops martyred, 3 injured in attack on police checkpoint in KP's Shangla



This photo combo shows policemen who were martyred in an attack on a checkpoint in KP's Shangla district.

Two cops were martyred while another three were injured when terrorists attacked a police checkpoint in the Gunangar area of Shangla district's Chakesar Tehsil in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, officials said.

After the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) broke a fragile ceasefire agreement with the government in 2022, the country witnessed a sharp uptick in the number of attacks targeting security forces and other law enforcement agencies, particularly in Balochistan and KP.

According to the interior ministry, in the past 10 months, 948 out of 1,566 terrorism incidents reported occurred in KP, resulting in 583 deaths (out of a total of 924 martyrdoms).

Umar Rehman, spokesperson for the Shangla district police officer (DPO), told Dawn.com that Mohammad Hassan, an assistant sub-inspector from Alpuri, and head constable Nisar Ahmad got martyred in the attack, while three constables were injured.

Rehman added that preliminary information suggested the checkpoint was struck with heavy weapons, such as rocket launchers and hand grenades, due to which the walls of the checkpoint's small building collapsed, burying a constable beneath.

The injured police personnel were moved to the district headquarters hospital in Battagram by locals and officials of the Dandai police station, Rehman said.

The incident took place in Chakesar tehsil's Gunangar, which is a remote area near the Karakoram Highway and the Indus River.

Police have cordoned off the area and began a search, while more police contingents have been called.

It is the second attack in Shangla in the last three days as a civilian was killed and two cops were injured in an attack on a checkpoint in Puran tehsil on Saturday.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi condemned the attack, paying tribute to the martyred policemen.

Expressing his grief on the loss of lives, he prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured.

"The martyrs are our pride. We are standing tall with their families," Naqvi said in a statement.

He highlighted that the KP police has played a leading role in the war against terrorism, stressing that their sacrifices could not be forgotten.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 17, 2024

28,000 Pakistanis applied for ‘protection’ in EU in a year: report

ISLAMABAD: Pakistanis lodged 28,000 applications for international protection in the European Union Plus countries between October 2023 and October this year, the EU’s Agency for Asylum (EUAA) said in a Pakistan-specific report.

The monthly figures have followed a downward trend since reaching a peak in October last year, when Pakistanis lodged around 3,400 applications. The number for October this year stands at 1,900.

Italy was the main receiving country for asylum applications by Pakistanis, followed at a distance by France, Greece and Germany.

According to the “Country Focus on Pakistan Report”, EU Plus countries issued around 20,000 decisions at first instance on Pakistani applications, with just 12 per cent of the applicants being granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.

At the end of October this year, there were nearly 34,000 decisions pending at first instance, according to the report.

The report outlines the political and security context in Pakistan, the main actors involved in shaping it, the role of the judiciary, as well as the treatment of certain groups of the country’s population.

It provides an overview of the political and security context of the country, the treatment of certain profiles and groups of the country’s population and the situation of Afghan refugees.

With an estimated 2.4 million people experiencing forced labour or forced marriage, Pakistan is rated as one of the countries with the highest vulnerability to modern slavery in the region.

The country is located on a major trafficking route, including trade in human organs.

Despite having laws in place to combat trafficking in human beings, the country’s fragile democracy and poor state of accountability were said to have hindered an effective enforcement of those laws.

As of 2023, Pakistan did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, although the government has made significant efforts to this end.

However, corruption and complicity of state officials in trafficking crimes have hampered law enforcement action and created a culture of impunity.

Bonded labour

The main human trafficking issue in Pakistan is bonded labour (or debt-bondage). Estimates of people affected by this evil range between three million and 4.5m.

The system of debt-bondage is based on a traditional practice of giving ‘Peshgi’, or Begar, a loan given to a labourer.

Repayment of such loans is said to be virtually impossible due to high interest rates and exploitative practices of creditor-employers.

Due to weak implementation of the law, authorities have failed to protect individual victims of bonded labour.

The report says that violence in Pakistan has escalated since October last year, particularly in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) have intensified their “insurgent activities”.

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an offshoot of the militant Islamic State (IS) group, has also intensified its activities and dissemination of propaganda. It even makes use of artificial intelligence (AI) to spread its narrative.

By September this year, there were over three million Afghans residing in Pakistan. The government’s Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) has led to the return of 738, 583 Afghans and resulted in arrest, harassment, and an increasingly hostile environment for Afghans.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 19, 2024

Dreams to despair

RABIYA JAVERI AGHA

LIKE many developing nations, Pakistan's economy relies heavily on its migrant workers – individuals who leave home with dreams of a better future, not just for themselves but for their families. In 2023, 860,000 Pakistanis ventured abroad for employment, becoming the lifeline of our economy through their remittances. The sweat and blood of these overseas workers flowed back \$30 billion into Pakistan's economy last year alone.

Pakistan's migrant population falls into three overlapping groups: regular economic migrants contributing critical remittances, irregular migrants seeking opportunities through informal channels, and detainees abroad – many held for immigration or labour violations. These groups reflect the vulnerabilities of Pakistan's labour migration system and the need for reform.

Today, 23,456 Pakistanis languish in foreign prisons, primarily in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, and other countries. Over 7,800 of them await trial, while the rest serve sentences for infractions like overstaying visas, labour violations, or working without permits.

Behind these numbers are human beings – individuals who lacked the legal awareness, language skills, and support to navigate unfamiliar justice systems, turning their dream of opportunity into a living nightmare.

The challenges that Pakistan's migrants face – regular or irregular – are deeply rooted in Pakistan's flawed labour migration system. The recruitment process, intended to ensure fair employment, remains a minefield of exploitation. While the country's 2,157 licensed Overseas Employment Promoters operate out of only seven cities, the majority of rural migrants rely on unregulated sub-agents who often deceive them with false promises and illegal 'azad visas'. Irregular migrants are most vulnerable to exploitation since they often lack formal protections and face harsher penalties when caught.

This is not merely an administrative issue – it is a human rights crisis. Migrants are not just economic contributors; they are citizens whose dignity and safety the state is obligated to protect. Yet our fragmented system has failed to shield them. Weak enforcement of laws, limited pre-departure training, and poor oversight of sub-agents leave migrants unprepared and unsupported when they face foreign legal systems.

The absence of a comprehensive consular protection policy adds to their plight. Diplomatic missions, constrained by limited resources and unclear guidelines, often fail to offer timely assistance. In the 2017 Asma Shafi case, the Lahore High Court directed the formulation of a 'Uniform Consular Protection Policy' to ensure legal aid, repatriation, and rehabilitation for detained Pakistanis. Seven years later, progress remains glacial. The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, in February 2024, issued a 90-day deadline for finalisation of the policy – a deadline that has now expired, marking a missed opportunity.

To address these systemic gaps, the government must strengthen recruitment mechanisms by ensuring that sub-agents are regulated and by expanding access to licensed Overseas Employment Promoters in the rural areas. Mandatory pre-departure briefings should be implemented to prepare all migrants – regular and irregular – with knowledge of their rights, the risks they may face, and the systems they can turn to in times of crisis.

At the same time, Pakistan's diplomatic missions must be equipped with the resources and structured policies needed to respond effectively to the needs of overseas workers. The formulation of prison transfer agreements with countries hosting large numbers of Pakistani detainees can allow these individuals to serve their sentences at home, closer to their families and support systems.

For those facing the death penalty abroad, consular access and immediate legal representation must become a national priority. These are not bureaucratic formalities; they are matters of life and dignity.

Pakistan's migrant workers are our ambassadors abroad – heroes who sacrifice their comfort to support our nation. Whether they send remittances home, seek better lives through irregular means, or find themselves trapped in foreign legal systems, they are part of our collective responsibility. We owe them more than praise; we owe them protection.

The future of Pakistan's migrant workforce rests on our ability to act. The world observed International Migrants Day yesterday; let us commit to reforming systems, enforcing laws, and, above all, honouring their sacrifices with action.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 19, 2024

Greek tragedy

AASIM SAJJAD AKHTAR

AMONGST the biggest stories of 2023 was the stranding and eventual capsizing of a boat in the Mediterranean carrying hundreds of people trying to smuggle themselves into Greece. The fated passengers hailed from many countries, but Pakistan's was the biggest contingent of all – according to official figures, 262 Pakistanis perished in the disaster.

Fast forward 18 months and yet another boat carrying migrant workers has sunk off the Greek coast. This time approximately 40 Pakistanis died. As was the case in 2023, officialdom blamed human smugglers for the latest Greek tragedy and vowed to hunt them down.

But if things carried on as usual after 262 deaths, why would they change after 40 more? This is not about human smugglers. This is about a venal, militarised ruling class that defends its own interests and a wider socioeconomic order that immiserates tens of millions. So long as the dominant nexus of state and capital remains intact, the desperate working masses will continue to put everything on the line to find a way out of this country to chase the promise of a better life.

The swathes seeking to make it to Greece, Italy and other southern European countries are mostly from central Punjab, which by all accounts is Pakistan's most developed region. Young people from the 'core' are now forced to play with death in increasingly similar ways to their peers from the ethnic peripheries. Akbar Notezai has reported time and again on the perilous business of human smuggling from Balochistan into Iran. What is actually reported constitutes but a small proportion of the whole.

In case anyone has been living under a rock, Pakistan is an extremely young country. Upwards of 160 million people are below the age of 25 years. Formal estimates suggest that some 2m young people join the labour force annually – the actual figure, after accounting for the so-called informal sector, is probably closer to 4m. White-collar professionals who enjoy generational class privilege are emigrating in unprecedented numbers. The blue-collar majority faces even more dismal prospects of gainful employment and a decent life in an economy that is choking on debt and a regime of 'development' based on natural resource grabs and conspicuous consumption.

Once upon a time, the Gulf kingdoms offered a temporary escape route for working-class migrants. Many rural Punjabi and Pakhtun households sent millions to the Gulf from the mid-1970s onwards, and experienced significant social mobility as a result. But that window is also closing now. Saudi Arabia and the UAE now require far less unskilled workers, with already putrid working conditions deteriorating further for the few that do make it.

So more and more workers look to human smuggling rings to get them out. This is not a cheap process; a single migrant can pay up to Rs30 to 40 lakhs before they cross a border. If they make it, they can forfeit months of their meagre incomes to fulfil their monetary obligations

to those who got them there. Then they are faced with the lifelong prospect of trying to secure legal residence in societies that are increasingly under the sway of racist and right-wing leaders.

And what about the tens of millions who cannot get out, no matter how hard they try? They are left to try all sorts of precarious work to earn a living. Most beg to be taken in by patrons who treat them like slaves and pass on all the risk of their particular profiteering racket. Human smuggling rackets — like all other rackets in this country — are enabled by state functionaries. They function because of the wilful complicity of profiteers within the state apparatus, and so all rhetoric about cutting these rackets down to size is just noise.

The crux of the matter is that a state which still lives on fables about 'national security' couldn't care less about the basic needs of the working-class majority. The establishment and its political lackeys watch tragedy after tragedy unfold, almost all of them due to the structural violence over which the ruling class presides. The government then issues meaningless statements and moves on to the next cynical game for power and profit.

This is why young people are increasingly drawn to the fantastical schemes to overturn a decrepit system, convinced that their preferred choice of charismatic leader will wave a magic wand and get rid of all the bad guys. The problem, however, is not selected bad guys, but a bad system that is imploding under its own myriad contradictions. Our youth are being thrown to the fire.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 20, 2024

Troubled waters

LURCHING from one crisis to the next, the Pakistani state has been consistent in failing its vulnerable citizens. According to reports, in the latest tragedy at sea, at least 39 Pakistanis out of 83 illegal migrants, drowned after their boat capsized off a Greek island – a chilling reminder of the 262 Pakistanis who drowned in the same waters last year. The incident has set a predictable chain reaction in motion: the news cycle spins around another tragedy, the FIA registers fresh cases against those suspected of trafficking people from Punjab to Libya and the prime minister demands a report on instances of human trafficking in Pakistan. The prime minister was informed that out of the 174 people accused of human trafficking only four were convicted. But these actions are hardly enough to plug the disturbing scale of human trade from the country.

We cannot be timid about dismantling a ruthless human trafficking industry that dupes the indigent to make a pretty penny, particularly in times of acute unemployment, poverty, absence of opportunities and socioeconomic insecurity. This coercive curse, which includes bonded labour, sexual exploitation and using the youth and children as drug mules, continues to flourish because of the shortsighted and uncaring approach of the authorities. It is way past time to change the narrative whereby migrants are seen as victims, and not culprits, enforce the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018, and Integrated Border Management System as well as establish technological assistance in deterring migrant smuggling rings. Greater accountability of the authorities tasked with dismantling these rings is also essential to make sure that complicit elements are weeded out. For improved protection and to honour international humanitarian laws, the government must ensure the victims are documented. Sadly, the government is likely to overlook such measures until it realises the importance of safeguarding the integrity of the poor.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 20, 2024

2 FC personnel martyred, 4 injured by roadside bomb in Turbat

Two Frontier Corps (FC) personnel were martyred and four injured by a roadside bomb in Balochistan's Turbat district, officials said.

The incident occurred in the Dasht Tehsil of Kharan, situated between Turbat and Gwadar, when a group of Arab sheikhs were returning to their camp after hunting, Dasht Assistant Commissioner (AC) Hameed Korai told Dawn.com.

The Arabs remained safe, AC Korai confirmed, adding that “two FC personnel were martyred while four were injured and were immediately shifted to Turbat.”

The same was confirmed by senior local administration official Abdul Hameed to AFP.

A second local administration official also confirmed to AFP the details of the attack on condition of anonymity and said the Arabs belonged to the Qatari royal family, adding that they had provided “extra security” after the blast.

Neither official said which members of the Qatari royal family – which numbers in the thousands – were in the hunting party.

It was also unclear whether the Qataris were specifically targeted.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Hunting enthusiasts among the Gulf elite travel to Balochistan every winter to catch the rare and reclusive houbara bustard using falcons.

Animal rights groups have long criticised Pakistan for allowing wealthy Arabs to hunt houbara birds that migrate by the thousands from Central Asia every winter.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies the houbara as a vulnerable species.

In the Arab world, the bird's meat is said to be an aphrodisiac and Pakistan's willingness to issue hunting licences is often referred to as a form of “soft diplomacy” targeting wealthy Gulf nations.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 25, 2024

Through the telescope: What to watch for in 2025

BY MARK SHAW

War and peace

A massive stash of trophy weapons has been piling up in Ukraine and Russia. De-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2025 could trigger an outflow of weapons and an increase in violent crime on both sides of the border while a continuation of the conflict could see Russia step up its weaponization of criminals abroad to carry out its dirty work, such as sabotage and assassinations.

Criminal convergence in North Africa and the Sahel

Criminal ecosystems in North Africa and the Sahel are being shaped by conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan. Violence and instability are fuelling illicit markets in weapons, fuel, gold and mercenaries, and shaping the movement of people and goods in the Sahel. Criminal actors in the region have benefited from these markets and the demand by migrants and refugees to move northwards. These dynamics increase the likelihood of further democratic backsliding and instability in countries in the region in the coming year.

Test case Haiti

As criminal gangs expand their control in Haiti, the international community will be tested to take an operational response to reduce the violence, humanitarian crisis, and threats to governance in this battered country.

Palermo Convention turns green on its Silver Jubilee?

In 2025, UN member states will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (the Palermo Convention). In 2024, the GI-TOC asked the question, is the UNTOC working? Will the anniversary be solely a nostalgic remembrance of a bygone international consensus to fight organized crime, or usher in a new era of cooperation to combat a common threat, which has evolved greatly since the Convention was adopted? In 2025, member states will also begin discussions, under the auspices of the UNTOC Conference of Parties, to consider whether an additional protocol on environmental crimes is needed, marking a key milestone in discussions on this topic.

Trouble along the cocaine supply chain

Cocaine could have an impact on elections in Ecuador in 2025, where political violence may occur, and anti-organized crime policies are a central theme in the campaigns. The opening of the Chancay Port in Peru is also something to watch. This massive infrastructure project, supported by China, could enable increased imports of precursors, counterfeit goods, and trade-based money laundering, as well as the potential establishment of direct cocaine routes

to Asia. Unprecedented volumes of cocaine are transiting West Africa en route to Europe, underpinned by some of the most sophisticated organized crime groups in the world. Meanwhile, the demand for cocaine in Europe remains high. At the same time, the use of crack is spreading across Europe. In 2025, watch for growing violence in Europe as a result of competition over this lucrative market.

Wild West Africa

Armed non-state actors, including violent extremist groups, separatist groups and mercenaries, are drawing from criminal economies to expand their power and reach in West Africa. Their influence is spreading south across the region. Some of the illicit activities that finance these groups are cattle rustling, informal artisanal gold mining and trafficking of motorbikes. Criminal economies are also driving violence in Nigeria, perpetrated largely by armed bandit groups in the North West who have moved from cattle rustling, to kidnapping, to gold mining and forced labour. Watch this space in 2025.

Good morning, Vietnam?

States will gather in Hanoi in 2025 for the signing ceremony for the new UN cybercrime convention, with all eyes on the US, whose membership of the convention will be key to its impact. The current US administration, despite joining consensus on the treaty's adoption, is lukewarm about prospects for signing and ratifying, following intense lobbying against the treaty from the private sector. The pieces are in place for the Trump administration, with its close links to big tech, to kick it into the long grass or flatly reject joining.

Tech for fraud

Scam compounds, for example in South East Asia, have defrauded thousands of victims globally, stealing billions of dollars. 'Pig-butcherer scams' were just the start – what will the new scam in 2025 be? In the wrong hands, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and deepfake technology could exponentially increase the number of victims targeted by both humans and automated bots designed to extort, commit fraud and carry out other malicious activities such as identity theft.

No quick fix: opioid problem spreads

Incidents with deadly synthetic opioids have been on the rise across Europe. The main entry point is the flourishing illicit online market for prescription drugs – a problem thus far underestimated by authorities. Meanwhile, nitazenes – extremely potent synthetic opioids – have exploded across areas of West Africa in the form of 'kush', which has ravaged Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. There is a serious risk that the opioid problem could spread further in 2025.

Sudan's internal conflict drives displacement

Next year will mark the second year of the current civil war in Sudan. The chilling déjà vu unfolding in a country once described as a 'petri dish for ... every conceivable form of apocalyptic man-made misery' has brought about the world's largest displacement of people, which in turn has rapidly shaped regional human smuggling networks. A key question in 2025 will be whether the displaced will remain within Sudan's neighbours, mainly Egypt,

Chad and Libya, or whether worsening conditions facing them in the region will drive a growing number to embark for Europe.

More of the same on the road to Abu Dhabi?

Throughout 2025, states begin the preparatory process for the 15th UN Crime Congress, to be hosted in Abu Dhabi in April 2026. Through a set of regional meetings, and then the first negotiation sessions of an outcome document, states will have the chance to reflect on the growing seriousness and evolving nature of organized crime. Recent Crime Congresses have largely agreed on a business-as-usual collection of agreed language. In 2025, could states shift gears or will it be more of the same?

Will sanctions be a Trump card?

During his first term in office, President Trump used targeted economic sanctions to counter organized crime and corruption. His re-election could well portend an even more robust use of sanctions to counter a growing set of criminal challenges. A key question will be whether the incoming Trump administration can develop more nuanced strategic thinking on the aims of sanctions on crime, as distinct from those imposed on state-linked actors, which has tended to be lacking in the US and international community broadly.

Grey markets

If a trade war is ignited between the US and China, Mexico and Canada as well as Europe, watch for a boom in illicit trade in excisable goods, namely the illicit transport, distribution and sale of excise consumer goods to evade customs and taxes.

Back to the wall

Can Mexico's new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, reduce homicides, disappearances, extortion, and other manifestations of organized crime-related violence? Ongoing judicial reforms, aimed at reducing corruption but criticized as a step backward for justice, add to the challenge, alongside potential U.S. border tightening and increased deportations.

SOURCE: [HTTPS://GLOBALINITIATIVE.NET/ANALYSIS/THE-TELESCOPE-WHAT-TO-WATCH-FOR-IN-2025/](https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-telescope-what-to-watch-for-in-2025/)

Balochistan in 2024: The year of the women

KIYYA BALOCH



As we bid adieu to 2024, Balochistan finds itself at a critical juncture – grappling with a year shaped by political turmoil, devastating floods, spiralling violence, and the rise of grassroots rights movements.

The year began ominously enough – with a direct confrontation in Islamabad between the state and protesters demanding to know the whereabouts of missing persons as well as escalating tensions between Pakistan and Iran, culminating in an exchange of missiles in January. This was followed by a series of terror incidents, including suicide bombings, ambushes targeting security forces, and coordinated attacks across the province.

According to a report by Balochistan’s provincial home department, 296 people, including civilians and military personnel, were killed, and over 500 injured in 563 reported attacks between January 1 and December 20, 2024. February, coinciding with general elections, and August, marking the country’s Independence Day, were the deadliest months, with 187 attacks, including suicide bombings, claiming 119 lives.

Amid the chaos, a silver lining that shone through was that young, educated women emerged as powerful agents of change, leading peaceful rights movements such as the Baloch Yakjehti

Committee (BYC) and the Baloch Women Forum (BWF). But even as these young women took to the streets, the already fragile security situation in the restive province further deteriorated. The rising insurgency, coupled with the year's major political upheavals, has left observers concerned about what 2025 might hold for Balochistan. This article is an attempt to explore the factors fuelling unrest and how the situation may unfold in the coming year.

Tensions between Iran and Pakistan

The start of 2024 saw an alarming escalation between Iran and Pakistan, as both countries engaged in a rare exchange of missile strikes. On January 16, Iran targeted Pakistan's Panjgur district, claiming to have struck two strongholds of the anti-Iran militant group, Jaish al-Adl. This Sunni Baloch militant group has long been accused by Tehran of orchestrating unrest and ambushes in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province — a region with a restive Sunni Baloch population that alleges discrimination in Shia-majority Iran.

Pakistan responded the next day with retaliatory strikes, reportedly targeting hideouts of the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), a separatist group responsible for unrest mostly in the Makran coastal region. While both countries moved quickly to de-escalate, the exchange drew fresh attention to the activities of both Jaish al-Adl and Baloch separatist insurgents operating on either side of the border.

The aftermath of the missile exchange was far from contained. On January 27 and 28, nine Pakistani workers were killed by unidentified attackers in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, highlighting the fragile security dynamics in the border regions.

Days later, between January 29 and 30, the banned Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) launched one of its most sophisticated and deadly offensives in Balochistan's Mach town. The coordinated attack targeted security installations in the city of Mach, firing at least 15 rockets from nearby mountains, before attacking a security forces' camp near the central jail and also entering the Mach railway station.

This was a turning point for the BLA, showcasing its evolution from a small guerrilla force into a highly lethal terror outfit, capable of executing complex operations. The Mach attack not only highlighted the growing operational capacity of Baloch insurgents but also showed the deepening instability in a region plagued by overlapping militant movements and cross-border tensions.

As the year progressed, these events showed the fragile and combustible nature of relations between Iran and Pakistan, with militant groups exploiting the vacuum of security on both sides of the border. The year ahead may see both nations struggling to manage these volatile dynamics while addressing their domestic insurgencies.

The march to Islamabad

In late January, a month-long protest by Baloch activists, led by Dr Mahrang Baloch, ended outside Islamabad's National Press Club (NPC), with activists expressing "disappointment with the state".

The sit-in, which began in December 2023 amid freezing weather, ended with the protesters facing harassment, police cases and a sustained media campaign against them. Caretaker Prime Minister Anwarul Haq Kakar repeatedly accused these families of missing persons of

being “terrorist sympathisers”, further deepening tensions and aggravating the long-standing distrust between Islamabad and Balochistan.

For decades, Balochistan has accused Islamabad of neglecting its grievances, with the treatment of the protesters in Islamabad underlining what many see as heavy-handed tactics. Reports of harassment of Dr Mahrang and her fellow activists drew sharp criticism and anger in Balochistan. Although the NPC briefly requested police to remove the protest camp – a decision reversed following public backlash – the damage had already been done. Dr Mahrang’s decision to call off the protest disheartened many young people in Balochistan, who perceived it as yet another instance of systemic disregard for their concerns.

Dr Mahrang’s return to Quetta told a different story. Thousands gathered to greet her, with supporters honouring her with pearls and the Balochi turban, a traditional emblem of immense respect. Musicians and poets dedicated songs to her, and some dubbed her “The Sardar of the Baloch” – a title traditionally reserved for male tribal leaders.

Ironically, the state’s heavy-handed approach in Islamabad had elevated her standing, turning her into a fiery young leader who people believed was not afraid of challenging the powerful.

Elections amid rising violence and controversy

February saw Balochistan go to polls under the shadow of escalating violence and tensions. The home department described February as one of the most volatile months in Balochistan, second only to August. On the eve of the general elections, twin bomb blasts in Pishin and Qila Saifullah claimed the lives of more than 30 people and injured dozens. Meanwhile, the Baloch Raaji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), an umbrella organisation of Baloch separatist insurgents, issued a post-election statement claiming responsibility for 161 terror attacks on polling stations across the province.

Overall, the elections were widely regarded as controversial, with Baloch and Pashtun nationalist parties labelling the process as flawed. Following the results, the Balochistan National Party (BNP Mengal), National Party (NP), Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), and Hazara Democratic Party (HDP) formed a four-party alliance to protest the alleged rigging. Against the backdrop of violence, frustration among the youth, and growing alienation, the elections were a critical opportunity to defuse tensions between Islamabad and Balochistan.

However, accusations of rigging and the alleged imposition of what nationalist parties described as “artificial leadership” deepened mistrust and further alienated the province. A credible and impartial government could have helped ease tensions, particularly by engaging with the BYC, which emerged as a vital political force in 2024, comprising activists from various political parties and civil society. Instead, the government’s decision to sideline the BYC and frame its leadership in police cases disillusioned Baloch youth, intensifying feelings of hopelessness and anger in a province already plagued by violence and disillusion from the centre.

A year of natural disasters

With the province already reeling from political instability and escalating violence, it was also severely affected by natural disasters that compounded its existing challenges. In late February and early March, heavy rains devastated the Gwadar, Makran, and northern and central regions of the province, causing widespread disruption to daily life and halting traffic across affected areas.

The 30-hour downpour triggered flash floods that submerged large swaths of land, overwhelming the already fragile infrastructure. The district administration in Gwadar was forced to declare a state of emergency as the rains inundated homes, roads, and agricultural fields, further deepening the province's crisis. The situation was exacerbated by poor infrastructure, insufficient urban planning, and the blocking of natural water pathways due to unregulated construction on traditional riverbeds.

These factors worsened the already dire conditions, making it clear that Balochistan's lack of preparedness for such calamities had been a long-standing issue.

A strategic shift in Baloch insurgency

The year 2024 also witnessed a dramatic escalation in both the intensity and strategy of terror outfits operating in the province, particularly the BLA. Once known for its hit-and-run tactics, the BLA has, since 2018, employed suicide bombings on and off as part of its operational repertoire. However, where the group previously managed only one or two such attacks annually, 2024 saw a dramatic surge with six claimed suicide attacks.

This shift speaks of a broader evolution of the terror outfit from rural guerrilla warfare to urban-targeted militancy. The group's focus has shifted toward striking strategically significant urban centres, which highlights a growing operational sophistication. A notable example came in March, when the BLA targeted the Gwadar Port Authority, a linchpin of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and a symbol of economic and strategic importance. The attack, carried out in one of the province's most heavily secured zones, was a reminder of the grim trajectory of violence in Balochistan and the increasing capabilities of insurgent groups and terror outfits.

Despite the lingering fallout from the March attack on the Gwadar Port, the BLA struck again, attempting to target PNS Siddique in Turbat just days later. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said the attack was thwarted due to a "swift and effective response by the troops, ensuring the safety and security of personnel and assets".

However, the attempted strike highlights several key issues: the insurgents' growing ability to exploit security loopholes and the increasing manpower at their disposal. The frequency and scale of such attacks also raise concerns about the rising number of Baloch youth joining armed groups.

August 26 – a turning point in the Baloch insurgency

The flashpoint of this violence came on August 26, when the BLA launched a series of coordinated attacks across 11 districts which shocked the authorities and marked one of the deadliest days in the two-decade-long insurgency. The assaults included blocking highways, a suicide bombing by a young woman at a military camp in Lasbela, sabotage of gas pipelines

and railway tracks, and the killing of 23 passengers, mostly Punjabis. In total, 72 people were killed in these attacks.

The timing was symbolic, commemorating the anniversary of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti's 2006 death, an event seen as the catalyst for the current wave of insurgency. The scale and sophistication of the attacks in areas such as Lasbela and Musakhail on the border with Punjab – which had previously been unaffected by the insurgency – along with the involvement of a young female law student, highlight the BLA's alarmingly growing operational capabilities.

BLA's increasing use of suicide bombings

The BLA's increasing reliance on suicide bombings is a scary shift in its tactics, as seen in Quetta, where a suicide bomber targeted the Quetta railway station, killing over two dozen people, including 16 security personnel, and injuring more than 100 in November. Similarly, in October, a suicide bombing near Karachi's international airport killed two Chinese nationals and injured 11 others.

Traditionally, Baloch armed groups have avoided attacks in densely populated public areas such as railway stations and highways. However, this restraint appears to have diminished, reflecting a troubling evolution in their strategy. The attacks also point to the BLA's ability to recruit and mobilise manpower, even as the state intensifies its crackdown on insurgent outfits in the province.

Punjabis the soft target

According to official reports, 44 per cent of the total attacks in the province targeted armed forces, while a staggering 56pc were directed at civilians. Among the most vulnerable groups were settlers from Punjab, who have become a frequent target of insurgent groups. In the second week of April, the BLA carried out an attack in Nushki District, where the terrorists offloaded nine passengers from a bus, checked their identity cards, and executed them on a deserted roadside. The victims were all from central Punjab.

On May 9, seven barbershop workers were killed in Surbandar in Gwadar. These targeted attacks underline the persistent insecurity faced by non-local civilians, particularly those from Punjab, who are increasingly viewed as symbols of the state's presence and economic interests in Balochistan.

These attacks in Balochistan are part of a broader surge in violence that has spilled over into neighbouring Iran. On April 4, gunmen launched simultaneous attacks on multiple security and military compounds in the southeastern Iranian towns of Rask and Chababar, killing 11 Iranian security personnel. This cross-border violence signals the growing regional ramifications of the Baloch insurgency and highlights the increasing volatility across the Goldsmith Line.

Given this scenario, it is imperative that the state makes every effort to stem this ethnic violence. Allowing it to simmer will only result in further escalation, as seen in other areas of the country.

Increasing attacks on freedom of speech

As violence escalated and the law enforcement agencies struggled to contain the insurgency in Balochistan, one of the most concerning developments has been the growing clampdown on freedom of speech and the press.

For the first time in decades, police and local authorities locked the gates of the Quetta Press Club to prevent members of the BYC from holding a seminar on the situation in Gwadar. This unprecedented move sent a chilling message about the extent to which the authorities are willing to go to stifle free expression. At the same time, however, rights activists gained international recognition for their advocacy against enforced disappearances and alleged human rights abuses.

In May 2024, Sammi Deen Baloch became the first Pakistani recipient of the Front-Line Defenders Human Rights Award, an honour given to her by the Ireland-based human rights organisation. Later in October, TIME magazine named Dr Mahrang Baloch among its 100 next emerging leaders, acknowledging her as a rising voice for change.

The recognition, however, came at great personal cost for Dr Mahrang. In June, she was named in a police case for disrupting government officials from performing their duty, rioting, condemnation of the creation of the state, advocacy for the abolition of its sovereignty, and sedition during an event at the Quetta Press Club in May. The authorities also placed her on a no-fly list in October, preventing her from traveling to New York to attend TIME's gala to accept her award. In December, she was named by the BBC as one of the 100 most inspiring and influential women of 2024. In July 2024, the BYC organised the 'Baloch Raaji Muchi' (Baloch National Gathering) in the coastal city of Gwadar to raise awareness about what they termed as the exploitation of Balochistan's resources and to highlight alleged human rights abuses in the region.

The protest, which aimed to draw attention to these pressing issues, was met with a violent crackdown by provincial authorities, leading to clashes between protesters and security forces in Gwadar and Mastung.

The unrest led to the deaths of at least three people, with several others injured. Despite roadblocks set up by authorities to prevent the protests, hundreds of protesters from across the province successfully made their way to Gwadar's Marine Drive for the gathering. Earlier, on their way to Mastung, 14 protesters were shot and wounded by security forces. For more than a week, the city of Gwadar was effectively shut down. The crackdown on peaceful protesters sent a chilling message to the people of Balochistan. It reinforced the growing belief among the youth that their calls for change, even through peaceful means, would be met with hostility by the state. This violent response to a nonviolent protest only fuelled the narrative among Baloch nationalists that the authorities reject dialogue and peaceful struggle, which further alienated the province's already disgruntled youth.

The rise of young women leaders

But even as the state has attempted to clamp down on dissent, more and more young men and women took to social media, leveraging modern communication technologies to amplify their voices. The vast majority of these activists, especially women, hail from middle-class backgrounds and expressed growing disillusionment with traditional nationalist leaders,

accusing them of failing to address their community's pressing concerns. One example of this shift is Dr Shaale Baloch, an emerging new voice in Balochistan's activism. With an MBBS degree, Dr Shaale has been mobilising women under the banner of the Baloch Women Forum, focusing on some of the most neglected areas such as Awaran and Mand, often overshadowed by Balochistan's urban politics. Having grown up in a small neglected remote village in Kech district during a period of heightened militancy, Dr Shaale's activism is deeply personal, driven by her experiences of repression and neglect.

She has a large number of young followers, especially women from the peripheries. "Baloch politics and activism have long been centred in urban areas," says Dr Shaale. "My mission is to bring the peripheries into focus." Activists like Dr Shaale, Dr Mahrang and Sammi now have the power to rally thousands to protests and sit-ins within hours, which shows their influence and the public's growing trust in women-led movements.

"There has been a huge political vacuum, and masses have been disappointed by traditional nationalist parties, who have only benefited from Balochistan's conflict," says Sadia Baloch, a young activist from Quetta. "Movements like the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) and the Baloch Women Forum, led by young women, are filling that gap. They are trusted because they are women, they are young, and majority of them are victims themselves. This places an immense responsibility on their shoulders." The rise of women leaders like Dr Shaale Baloch and Dr Mahrang is a transformative moment in Balochistan's political landscape, as a new generation of educated and middle-class women activists from the peripheries attempts to reshape the narrative and give a voice to the region's most marginalised communities.

Challenges and opportunities in 2025

Thus, the year 2025 in Balochistan hinges on Islamabad's engagement with the province's young, educated activists. The challenge for the state is that even as it cracks down on insurgents and focuses on counter-terrorism measures, it must do so without further alienating the youth. Providing space for discussions with groups like the BYC and the Baloch Women Forum, while addressing deep-rooted grievances, could turn these grassroots movements into agents of peace.

Regional dynamics will also shape the province's trajectory. With its porous borders, Balochistan's stability is somehow also tied to Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and Iran, both of which can influence cross-border militancy and insurgent networks.

Furthermore, the economic ambitions tied to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) hang in the balance as violence against Chinese nationals continues to rise. The toll – 20 Chinese nationals killed and 34 injured since 2021 – suggests the fragility of these investments amid unrelenting unrest. For the Baloch youth, the state's apparent indifference to their activism, coupled with Pakistan's internal political distractions, presents both challenges and opportunities. Moreover, Islamabad's preoccupation with political crises in Punjab and power struggles between the PTI and the establishment has left Balochistan on the margins of national priorities. Thus, the interplay between local activism, state policies, and regional geopolitics will ultimately determine whether Balochistan moves toward greater stability or deeper conflict in 2025.

SOURCE: DAWN, DECEMBER 31, 2024