

Balochistan: The untold story of Pakistan's other war

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By Ahmed Rashid.

Pakistan's on-off dialogue with the Taliban has been commanding headlines and the attention of politicians and diplomats. But there has been little interest in a dialogue that could end the longest civil war in Pakistan's history, says guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

On 17 January, 13 bodies were discovered from a mass grave in the village of Tutak near Khuzdar in Balochistan province. Only two of the mutilated, decomposed bodies have been identified so far - both were men who had disappeared four months earlier.

A heartbreaking account of the mass grave by Saheer Baloch, a journalist for Dawn newspaper, ends with the ominous prediction by an official that there are more bodies waiting to be found.

The Frontier Corps, the anti-Shia group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and other groups are all enmeshed in a decade-long campaign of "pick up and dump" in which Baloch nationalists, militants or even innocent bystanders are picked up, disappeared, tortured, mutilated and then killed.

The army, paramilitaries and the government have consistently denied being responsible for violence in Balochistan, pointing instead to the myriad of armed groups operating in the region.

But even though the Supreme Court has taken up some of the cases of the disappeared, the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has failed to engage with the issue.

Untold story. Nobody even knows how many people have disappeared - the figures are between hundreds and several thousand. Now the families of those disappeared are on a long march through the winter months from Karachi to Islamabad to register their loss and grievances with the government.

Wizened old men and women wrapped in chadors have been dragging children along and braving the cold and the rain. They entered Lahore earlier this month and have already been on the road for nearly four months. They said they do not even have a dead body to bury and want to know where the men of their families are. But the government has ignored them - it is almost as if they did not exist.

So many journalists have been killed in Balochistan that there are few honest reports from the province in the national print or electronic media because journalists are too scared. The story of this bloody civil war is going untold. The chief minister of Balochistan Abdul Malik Baloch, who heads the weak provincial government in Quetta, has demanded a dialogue with the nationalist leaders.

He is powerless unless the federal government and the army agree to rein in the violence many believe they are responsible for - something they utterly deny - and the militants agree to a ceasefire.

The fifth Baloch insurgency against the Pakistan state began in 2003, with small guerrilla attacks by autonomy-seeking Baloch groups who over the years have become increasingly militant and separatist in ideology. Their leaders who are mostly in exile abroad now demand independence from Pakistan.

Cycle of violence

Unlike in past Baloch insurgencies when militants only targeted the army, this time the militants have targeted non-Baloch civilians living in Balochistan in an attempt to drive out other nationalities. Every disappeared Baloch leads to many more youngsters taking up arms. Every attack on the security forces leads to more disappeared. It is an endless cycle of violence that has gone on for 11 years.

The tragedy is that although there is intense division in the country over talking to the Taliban - strong pro- and anti-lobbies hammer it out daily - there is no such dispute about talking to the Baloch nationalists.

All the political parties seem to be in agreement about the need for a dialogue, but it is the army that has to agree to one. "After the opening of negotiations with the Taliban, it is even more absurd to be not offering an opening to talk to the Baloch nationalists," said IA Rehman, secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

"The lack of response is causing incalculable harm to Pakistan," he added.

The Taliban have killed thousands of people in the past five years compared to the Balochistan insurgency where casualties have been far lower. But without a major initiative from the federal government to bring together the army, parliament, the political parties and other stakeholders in the establishment, it is unlikely there will be any move for opening talks with the Baloch militants.

Pakistan remains fragile, with all the violence that the state faces from the Taliban and mayhem in Karachi. Meanwhile the economy only gets worse. As long as the government stays silent on Balochistan, the longest civil war in Pakistan's history will only create more casualties and break more records for longevity and heartbreak end.