

Pakistan: The Killing of Shias- It is hard to Refute the Accusation that Military was involved

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کوئٹہ میں شیعہ مسافر بوسوں کے قتل کے واقعے کا ایک منظر (اسٹریٹ نیوز)

In a cold blooded attack by men in uniforms of the Pakistan Army, 18 persons from the Shiite community of Islam were targeted and killed. The incident occurred in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province close to the border of Gilgit and Baltistan area where Shias reside almost in good numbers to the Sunni population. On February 28 passengers in four buses were going to Gilgit town the capital of the Gilgit-Baltistan from Rawalpindi, Punjab province when, in the mountainous Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, men dressed in army uniforms stopped and disembarked the Shia passengers after identifying them from the rest of the 117 passengers. The Shias were put in a queue and shot down by the men.

Kohistan, which belongs to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), has a rich local history as a crossroads between Central, South and Southwestern Asia and Kohistan is used for a region that stretches from the border with Azad Kashmir in the east to Afghanistan's Nuristan province in the west. FATA served as the backyard of the security establishment's policy of attaining strategic depth. Together with the red tape, endemic to the bureaucracy, the delays in justice delivery and the ban on political activity created a vacuum in which the Islamic militant groups found it easy to run their terror activities.

Though no militant organization, who in the past were involved in killing the Shias, has claimed responsibility for the killings, the media has been accusing first one, and then another organisation in an attempt to cover up the alleged involvement of military men in the killings of members of the second largest sect of Islam. No statement of clarification has been forthcoming from the Pakistan army about the men involved in the attack despite the fact that they were in military dress. According to media it was first claimed that a notorious anti-Shia organisation, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi were responsible for the killings but then, after some time it was said that Jundulla, a banned Sunni militant group was involved.

In Kohistan areas civilian movement is highly controlled and monitored by the military. The first question to be raised is as to how in such a highly military controlled and monitored area, the militants dressed in army uniforms and highly armed were able to stop the busses which were carrying mostly Shiite passengers and then shot them one by one after identifying them as Shiites.

In the recent target killings of Shias, the majority of the incidents were recorded in those areas which come under high security regions or under the control of the military and its Para-Military troops like, Balochistan, Kurram agency-close to the Afghan border and Gilgit Baltistan area close to the China border. In all those areas there are military check posts within short distances to monitor the activities of terrorists and no civilians, including the government officials, can move without their identification papers. However, on this occasion the killers and terrorists from banned organizations are free to move their convoys armed with sophisticated ammunition and stop vehicles for hours at a time to complete their nefarious designs.

It is inconceivable in this day and age of modern communications, when every person owns a cell phone that the killers were able to operate on their own without any fear that they would be stopped at a military check post. This can only mean that they were military personnel themselves. The same incidents happened in Mastung and other parts of the Balochistan province where members of the Hazara ethnic group, also from the Shia sect were targeted and killed in the same fashion. The check posts of the Frontier Corp, a Para-Military force, were not far away from the places where the incidents occurred and where the sounds of the gunshots could be heard. Three examples are self explanatory where within 15 days in three different incidents 44 persons from Hazara community were killed. The areas were not far away from the check posts. On September 19, In Mastung, Balochistan, 28 persons were disembarked from the bus in which they were going to Iran to visit holy sites. They were disembarked from the passenger bus and whole episode or target killing took some time to complete without any fear of discovery. The next day another incident took place in Quetta city, close to Mastung, where three more Hazara persons were killed. Within 15 days, on October 4, another incident of same kind occurred where four gunmen on motorbikes stopped a bus and identified Shiites from the Hazara group, made them stand in a row and then opened fire, killing 13 persons. This incident took place in the outskirts of Quetta city where nobody can travel without identifying themselves at the check posts.

Human Rights Watch says that since 2008 at least 275 Shias, mostly from Hazara Community have been killed in Balochistan province.

During the first two months of 2012 more than 100 Shias were killed in different parts of the country including the Gilgit Baltistan incident. Among them 34 in Khanpur, Punjab province, 49 in Parachinar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and 18 in Gilgit.

Over the past three decades, violence between Sunnis and Shias has ebbed and flowed, but two things are clear. First, despite spawning banned violent sectarian outfits of their own, the Shias have largely been on the receiving end of the violence. In recent years, the violence has spread from southern Punjab and (sporadically) Karachi to Quetta in Balochistan, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas on Pakistan's troubled border with Afghanistan.

After the incident of February 28, no doubt remains that the security forces were involved covertly or overtly in the sectarian target killing. No doubt has been left on the issues of target killings, the Pakistani spy agencies ISI and military intelligence (MI) has played a vital role along with the militant organisations from the rear to run the target killings.

The target killings of Shias in Gilgit shows a great failure of the law enforcement on the area, even after killing a large number of people the militants were able to escape as is common in almost all the events of target killings and the perpetrators of such organised crime remain untouched.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) urges that the government must immediately avail all possible efforts to bring the perpetrators of target killings of innocent Shiites to book whether they are in military uniforms or not. The government must probe the links between the banned militant organisations.

The AHRC urges the government to ensure the security of the survivors, family members and relatives of those who were killed in the target killings and immediately pay compensation and rehabilitate them.

The government should arrange proper forensic investigations of the dead bodies without involving the army in the process. The government should specify the lethal arms used on the killings and more importantly secure the source of such lethal arms used in the killings.

The government and parliament must immediately introduce a hate speech law, to punish those who offend the feelings of the religious by disturbing a religious ceremony or creating public calumny. The law should also prohibit public expression of insults of a person or a group on account of national, ethnic, racial, or religious affiliation or the lack of a religious affiliation.

The AHRC expresses the view that target killings give us a clear picture of the lack of accountability and transparency in dealing with the organised crimes done by militants organised backed by the intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies.

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