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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

The New York Times

## Another Insurgency Gains in Pakistan

By CARLOTTA GALL

7/12/2009

TURBAT, Pakistan — Three local political leaders were seized from a small legal office here in April, handcuffed, blindfolded and hustled into a waiting pickup truck in front of their lawyer and neighboring shopkeepers. Their bodies, riddled with bullets and badly decomposed in the scorching heat, were found in a date palm grove five days later.

Local residents are convinced that the killings were the work of the Pakistani intelligence agencies, and the deaths have provided a new spark for revolt across Baluchistan, a vast and restless province in Pakistan's southwest where the government faces yet another insurgency.

Although not on the same scale as the Taliban insurgency in the northwest, the conflict in Baluchistan is steadily gaining ground. Politicians and analysts warn that it presents a distracting second front for the authorities, drawing off resources, like helicopters, that the United States provided Pakistan to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Baluch nationalists and some Pakistani politicians say the Baluch conflict holds the potential to break the country apart — Baluchistan makes up a third of Pakistan's territory — unless the government urgently deals with years of pent up grievances and stays the hand of the military and security services.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, of Baluch were rounded up in a harsh regime of secret detentions and torture under President Pervez Musharraf, who left office last year. Human rights groups and Baluch activists say those abuses have continued under President Asif Ali Zardari, despite promises to heal tensions.

“It’s pretty volatile,” said Nawab Zulfiqar Ali Magsi, the governor of Baluchistan. “When you try to forcibly pacify people, you will get a reaction.”

The discovery of the men’s bodies on April 8 set off days of rioting and weeks of strikes, demonstrations and civil resistance. In schools and colleges, students pulled down the Pakistani flag and put up the pale blue, red and green Baluch nationalist flag.

Schoolchildren still refuse to sing the national anthem at assemblies, instead breaking into a nationalist Baluch song championing the armed struggle for independence, teachers and parents said.

For the first time, women, traditionally secluded in Baluch society, have joined street protests against the continuing detentions of nationalist figures. Graffiti daubed on walls around this town call for independence and guerrilla war, which persists in large parts of the province.

The nationalist opposition stems from what it sees as the forcible annexation of Baluchistan by Pakistan 62 years ago at Pakistan’s creation. But much of the popular resentment stems from years of economic and political marginalization, something President Zardari promised to remedy but has done little to actually address.

In interviews, people in and around Turbat said the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies were still doggedly pursuing nationalist sympathizers.

A case in point, they say, is that of the three political figures who were killed: Gul Muhammad, Lala Munir and Sher Muhammad, all prominent in the nationalist movement.

Government officials say the men were being prosecuted for activities against the state but deny any involvement in their deaths. People are not convinced and say that while the men supported independence, they were not involved in the armed struggle.

Mir Kachkol Ali, the men’s lawyer, who witnessed their abduction, said the killings represented a deepening of the campaign by the Pakistani military to crush the Baluch nationalist movement. “Their tactics are not only to torture and detain, but to eliminate,” he said.

The insurgents, who say they are led by the Baluchistan Liberation Army, have escalated their tactics, too. A prominent example was [the kidnapping in February of an American citizen, John Solecki](#), the head of the [United Nations](#) refugee organization in the provincial capital, Quetta.

The abduction was carried out by a breakaway group of young radicals who wanted to draw international attention to their cause and to exchange their captive for Baluch being held by the security services.

Mr. Solecki was released in April after the intervention of Baluch leaders, including Gul Muhammad. Baluch leaders speculate that the intelligence agencies may have killed Mr. Muhammad and his colleagues to provoke the kidnappers into murdering the American, which would have branded the Baluch nationalists as terrorists.

Instead, “the killing of these three has centralized the national movement of Baluchistan,” Mr. Ali, the lawyer, said.

He and others said they had no doubt that the intelligence services were responsible.

The three men were in his office on April 3 when a half-dozen armed men seized them, he said.

“They were persons of the agencies,” Mr. Ali said. “They were in plain clothes, but from their hairstyles, their language, we know them.” Mr. Ali has lodged a case with the police against the intelligence agencies for the abduction and murder of the three.

Nisar Ahmed, a shopkeeper and friend of the political leaders, said he saw them pushed into a pickup truck. He also said that the armed men appeared to be intelligence agents and that they were escorted by a second vehicle with 10 more armed men, also in plain clothes, who looked to be from the Frontier Corps paramilitary force.

While the insurgency remains strong in other parts of Baluchistan, the military has largely crushed the resistance around Turbat since March 2007, yet armed men are still in the hills and continue to be rounded up, residents here said.

Yousuf Muhammad, the brother of Gul Muhammad, one of the slain political leaders, said that in February he was hung by his hands from the ceiling for 48 hours in a Pakistani military camp.

“They came to arrest Gul Muhammad but they found me,” he said. Another brother, Obeidullah, said Gul Muhammad had received threats from people in the intelligence agencies warning him to stop his work. The latest came 10 days before his death, he said.

A group of students in the nearby town of Tump said they were rounded up and held in various army camps without charge for seven months in 2007. Some said they were

suspended by their hands or their feet until they passed out, were beaten and were held in solitary confinement. Each showed a blackened mark where a toenail had been pulled out.

The arrests and disappearances have hardened attitudes, townspeople said, particularly among the young.

Even the governor, who is the president's representative in the province, expressed exasperation at the Zardari government's inaction in addressing the needs of the population. Many Baluch are increasingly cynical about the government's ability to change things.

Sayed Hassan Shah, the minister for industry and commerce in Baluchistan, said his party was now demanding provincial autonomy.

"This is our last option," he said. "If we fail, then maybe we have to think of liberation or separation."