

Testimony of
Senge Sering, Institute for Gilgit Baltistan Studies (IGBS)
Before
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United States Congress
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Respected Chairman

I am thankful to the commission for this opportunity to represent the indigenous people of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a UN-declared disputed territory under Pakistan's control. The worsening human rights situation of the indigenous people in Gilgit-Baltistan is a serious cause of concern and effective protection and promotion of their rights is urgently required.

Gilgit-Baltistan is home to more than one million people who belong to Balti, Shin, Burushu, Khowar and Wakhi ethnicity. They consider themselves different from predominant Pakistani groups and share strong cultural links with the Tibetans, Kashmiris, Tajiks, Uighurs and Mongols. The region is situated at the confluence of Central Asia, China and South Asia; and greatly helps China with access to the markets and energy strongholds in the Middle East and the Indian Oceanic Region. Gilgit-Baltistan is a resource-rich region where uranium, copper, and gold are found in abundance; and glaciated water bodies cover a catchment area equal to the size of South Carolina.

However, Pakistan and China's vested strategic and economic interests in Gilgit-Baltistan restrict the natives from benefiting from their own resources. Pakistan's unilateral decision to award mining licenses to the Chinese companies has endangered control of the natives over their land. Despite repeated local demands, Islamabad has failed to transfer legislative authority over trade and transit routes; and resource management to the indigenous political institutions, which limits access to annual revenue worth millions of dollars. Pakistan also denies natives the royalty and usage compensation over the rivers, which the Pakistani provinces currently receive on annual basis.

The disputed region remains in tight control of Pakistan's notorious secret service agency, ISI, and the situation forces the majority among the natives to remain silent and tolerate the oppression. As of now, more than one hundred and eighty activists remain behind bars for demanding political and religious rights and many face sedition charges for confronting Chinese and Pakistani companies.

Given the fact that more than half of the native population lives below the poverty line; majority of the valleys still lack basic facilities like clean drinking water, schools and health centers; and more than 300,000 educated youth remain jobless; it is vital for the natives to regain control over their land and benefit from the resources to enhance living standards.

According to the media sources, China would invest more than thirty billion dollars in Gilgit-Baltistan to construct large water storage dams which will displace hundreds of thousands of people and damage their link with their ancestral land. The situation will change social demography impacting indigenous languages, traditions and other traits of culture. It will also prevent the natives from accessing their resources like pastures, irrigation outlets, forests and minerals. The situation undermines regional security and creates environmental problems of great magnitude.

Without the consent of the natives, who are mostly Shias, Ismailis and Sufis by religious denomination, Pakistani secret service agents use Gilgit-Baltistan as a hide out and launch pad for the extremist militants who actively support Pakistan's Talibanization. On many occasions, natives clashed with these rogue elements but failed to oust them due to pressure from secret service agencies. In addition, native students of Gilgit-Baltistan are forced to learn religious courses, which contradict local secular traditions; lack regard for the local history and actively promotes Jihad and terrorism. The situation seriously undermines promotion of indigenous cultural beliefs and national identity.

The situation, in which thousands of Chinese personnel have assumed de-facto control of the region, poses serious political threats both for the natives and the international community. China's presence in Gilgit-Baltistan complicates the Kashmir issue and prolongs the dispute between India and Pakistan which is like oxygen to the terrorists and rogue elements within ISI. The situation could lead to a potential war between three nuclear nations creating political and economic instability at the global scale. Many among locals fear that Gilgit-Baltistan would end up like Tibet and East Turkestan if China's unwarranted interventions are not challenged. They emphasize that since both Pakistan and China lack constitutional rights and sovereignty over Gilgit-Baltistan; therefore international community must help in withdrawal of Pakistani and Chinese personnel and citizens from the region.

Protecting indigenous peoples' land rights serves U.S. interests in cost-effective conservation, mitigation of climate change, and global food security. The US should help prevent human rights violations caused due to these massive scale land grabs which pose threats to local livelihoods. It is once again stressed that social and cultural well-being of the indigenous peoples of Gilgit-Baltistan co-insides with U.S. national economic and security interests.

At the same time, USA must persuade both India and Pakistan to open channels of economic and cultural activity between Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan and enable the United Nations to take increase its role in Gilgit-Baltistan to protect the rights of natives. The Institute believes that substantial decrease in Pakistani influence in Gilgit-Baltistan will allow promotion of indigenous cultures and help neutralize extremism and Arab tribal influences that have been forced upon the natives in the name of Islamic values.

The Institute for Gilgit Baltistan Studies therefore calls for demilitarization of Gilgit-Baltistan, promotion of genuine autonomy and democracy, withdrawal of extremist elements, re-instatement of state subject rule¹ and people to people contact between Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan. It asks Pakistani rulers to

¹ State Subject Rule (SSR) prevents outsiders from acquiring land and immovable assets in Gilgit-Baltistan. The law was abolished by Prime Minister Bhutto in 1974 to enable Pakistani citizens settle in the region and help change

empower local political institutions including granting absolute legislative authority over the natural resources, tourism and trade to the legislative assembly in Gilgit.

I once again thank you Mr. Chairman for this opportunity.

local demography in Pakistan's favor. Local political parties demand reinstatement of the law as their primary demand.