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Hearing: “Pakistan – Ongoing Political Repression”
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives
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I thank Co-Chairs Representative Christopher Smith and Representative James P. McGovern, along with every Member of this Commission, for convening a hearing whose very title—“Ongoing Political Repression”—captures a truth Baloch citizens have lived for generations. I speak on behalf of thousands of families who still wait for sons abducted at checkpoints, fathers hauled from their beds in midnight raids, and daughters taken from university hostels by masked men who never identify themselves. The same fate forged our movement’s leader: Dr Mahrang Baloch was a medical student when her father was twice disappeared and, in July 2011, returned as a mutilated corpse—an experience that propelled her into human-rights defence and later won her a place in TIME 100 Emerging Leaders 2024, BBC 100 Women 2024, and a 2025 Nobel Peace Prize nomination.

Our purpose is not to recite grievances in search of sympathy but to demonstrate, with verifiable evidence, that the repression now disfiguring Pakistan’s national politics was refined in Balochistan long before it reached Islamabad. America’s strategic and economic interests cannot be insulated from that reality; addressing it forthrightly is therefore a matter of both moral coherence and pragmatic security.

Honorable Members, credible evidence shows that Pakistan’s security agencies routinely bypass due process in Balochistan. Individuals alleged to have links with banned groups are not charged in court; instead, families are blocked from filing First Information Reports, directed to a Commission of Inquiry that records cases without naming suspects, and threatened when they seek habeas corpus relief—an implicit admission the missing are in state custody. Local officials have signed written undertakings to produce specific detainees within set deadlines, contradicting the government’s public claim that many people have “self-disappeared.” If these detainees pose genuine security risks, formal prosecution would strengthen—not weaken—counter-terror efforts. If they do not, the intimidation of relatives and the refusal to publish a verified list of the disappeared undermine both domestic rule of law and international counter-terror cooperation. The policy is therefore counter-productive: it fuels mistrust, erodes the credibility of state institutions, and leaves thousands of families without legal remedy. Congressional engagement should press for transparent case registries, unrestricted access to legal processes, and independent oversight as baseline conditions for continued security cooperation with Pakistan.

Systemic Abuses in Balochistan

Balochistan remains one of the most militarized and inaccessible regions in the world. For over two decades, government and security forces have waged a counterinsurgency campaign that has criminalized dissent, erased due process, and normalized extrajudicial punishment. Under the guise of national security, entire towns have been razed, communications cut, and populations displaced. Targeted killings, abductions, and surveillance are part of daily life.

BYC has documented a range of grave violations over the years. These include:

- **Enforced disappearances:** Arbitrary detentions without charge remain a core counterinsurgency tactic. Victims are often taken from their homes or off the street by plainclothes officers or military vehicles without license plates. Many never return. In the first half of 2025 alone, BYC documented 752 new cases of enforced disappearance across Balochistan.
- **Extrajudicial killings:** These often follow disappearances. Victims are tortured and their bodies dumped in remote areas, sometimes falsely labeled as “militants killed in combat.” BYC has documented 117 cases of extrajudicial killing in 2025, including the death of Zeeshan Zaheer, who was abducted, tortured, and killed in June after previously being disappeared in 2022.
- **Mass graves and unidentified bodies:** Civil hospitals and cemeteries in Quetta continue to store unidentified bodies, many of which families suspect belong to missing loved ones. Following the Jaffar Express attack in March 2025, several bodies were buried secretly at Kaasi Graveyard. The government denied families access or information, heightening fears of a cover-up.
- **Legal reprisals and criminalization:** Victims’ families who speak out risk arrest under terrorism laws or harassment through travel bans, bank account freezes, and digital surveillance. Peaceful protestors are added to the Fourth Schedule of Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act, effectively rendering them stateless within their own country.
- **Gendered repression:** Women in the Baloch movement face unique forms of retaliation. In April 2025, BYC organizer Dr. Sabiha Baloch’s father, Mir Basheer Ahmed Zehri, was forcibly disappeared from a police station after she refused to abandon her activism. His whereabouts remain unknown.

IV. COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT BECOMES NATIONAL POLICY

The tactics honed in Balochistan did not remain there. After the vote of no confidence that removed Prime Minister Imran Khan in April 2022, security agencies executed wholesale arrests of his supporters in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, invoking the same MPO detentions and ATA terror clauses long used against Baloch activists. When protesters marched on military cantonments in May 2023, authorities shut down nationwide mobile-internet service, mirroring blackout protocols standard in Baloch districts during operations. Mr Khan—who once promised to criminalise enforced disappearance—now contends that his own detention constitutes disappearance-by-legal-fiction: bail in one case, immediate re-arrest in another, secret trials inside prisons, and evidence withheld under the Official Secrets Act.

Impunity at the periphery incubates authoritarianism at the core. If Washington seeks a democratic partner in South Asia, it must first insist that Pakistan dismantle the structures built in Balochistan, for those structures now menace every constituency, including formerly favoured political elites.

The Crackdown on BYC

BYC's growing influence has alarmed authorities. In December 2023, following the killing of a young man named Balach Mola Bakhsh in a staged encounter in Turbat, BYC mobilized one of the largest marches in the region's history. Over 400 families walked from Turbat to Quetta to Islamabad, demanding an end to extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

The sit-in outside Islamabad Press Club lasted 32 days. Authorities ignored the protest. State-aligned media branded it a foreign plot. After BYC returned to Balochistan, thousands came out to welcome the marchers. The military responded with a clampdown: highway blockades, travel bans, fake FIRs, and digital blackouts. In July 2024, when BYC called for a "Baloch National Gathering" in Gwadar, the military sealed off Balochistan, killed four civilians, injured dozens, and shut down the internet for 18 days. The rally became a sit-in.

Soon after, the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations held a press conference branding BYC a terrorist group—without presenting a shred of evidence. BYC leaders were added to no-fly lists, passports were confiscated, and dozens of members were placed under surveillance or detained.

The most brazen wave of repression began in March 2025.

Following the Jaffar Express attack—an incident for which no group claimed responsibility and in which BYC had no involvement—the government launched a full-scale campaign to dismantle the organization. In the early hours of March 20, Bibagar Baloch, a BYC member, was abducted from his home. When protestors gathered to demand his release, police opened fire. Three people were killed, including a child.

As families staged a sit-in with the bodies of the deceased, Dr. Mahrang Baloch, Beebow Baloch, and Gulzadi Baloch were arrested. Within days, several more activists and their family members—including elderly parents—were disappeared or detained.

A public relations campaign followed. Authorities accused BYC of ties to terrorist groups, presented no evidence, and weaponized state media to spread misinformation. Meanwhile, BYC members were tortured in custody. Surveillance cameras were installed in their prison barracks, legal counsel was denied, and their health deteriorated.

Legal Violations and Current Status

Dr. Mahrang Baloch and five other activists were initially detained under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) law, which permits up to 90 days of administrative detention. This period expired on June 22, 2025.

Yet instead of releasing them or presenting them before a mandatory judicial review board, authorities kept them in illegal custody for two weeks. Then, on July 8, just hours before the board was set to hear their case, the government preemptively filed new FIRs under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The accused were rushed to the Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC), which granted a 10-day police remand. This maneuver effectively nullified the review board's jurisdiction.

Dr. Mahrang and others are currently being held at Civil Lines Station in Quetta without access to family or legal representation. The lack of transparency, abuse of legal process, and credible threats to their safety demand urgent international scrutiny.

Targeted Abductions and Killings: A Pattern of Reprisal

BYC's documentation and fieldwork make clear that enforced disappearances in Balochistan are not isolated incidents. They are systematic, targeted, and often fatal.

On May 20, 2025, Balach Baloch—a BYC member—was abducted by intelligence personnel in civilian clothes in broad daylight. His family has received no formal notice, no legal documentation, and no confirmation of his whereabouts. Security forces have denied holding him. He has effectively vanished into the parallel system of illegal military detention that operates in Balochistan without oversight.

On June 29, Zeeshan Zaheer—a young BYC organizer and the son of a previously disappeared man, Zaheer Baloch—was abducted by a state-backed militia. Witnesses saw him taken into a vehicle outside his home in Kech district. The next day, his tortured body was discovered dumped near Turbat. His fingernails were ripped out. His limbs were broken. This is not an anomaly. It is a tactic of terror, designed to punish families for seeking justice.

In both cases, local police refused to register First Information Reports. Courts offered no remedy. Media coverage was absent or silenced. These patterns are emblematic of the lawlessness that prevails in Balochistan—not due to a lack of institutions, but due to the political choice to protect perpetrators and criminalize victims.

Collective Punishment and Harassment of Families

The repression extends far beyond BYC members. Families of human rights defenders are increasingly targeted to break the will of activists.

On April 5, 2025, Dr. Sabiha Baloch's father was summoned by the police in Quetta. He was pressured to convince his daughter to cease her involvement with BYC. When he refused, he was detained. His whereabouts remain unknown. His disappearance has been acknowledged by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, and by Front Line Defenders, which called it a “direct reprisal” for Dr. Sabiha's activism.

In another case, the elderly father of BYC member Beebow Baloch was arrested and disappeared following her arrest. No charges were filed, and no court appearance was granted. These incidents are part of a wider trend in which relatives—especially elderly parents and younger siblings—are used as hostages to suppress dissent.

Gendered Surveillance, Abuse, and Threats

Women in the Baloch rights movement face a double layer of repression: as political activists and as women. BYC organizers have faced threats of sexual violence, surveillance inside prison cells, and invasive searches.

During her transfer from Hudda Jail to Pishin Jail in April, Beebow Baloch was beaten and humiliated. Surveillance cameras were installed in her bathroom and sleeping quarters. No female officer was present. Her medical needs were ignored.

At Quetta's Hudda Jail, Dr. Mahrang and others were assaulted by CTD personnel on the night of April 24, 2025. Security personnel barged into their cell without cause. Legal counsel was denied access for over 10 days. No inquiry has been initiated.

Digital Censorship and Information Blackouts

The information blackout in Balochistan is nearly total. During BYC's national gatherings in Gwadar and Dalbandin, all mobile and internet networks were suspended. Journalists were barred from reporting. Social media pages of local activists were taken down or shadow-banned. Public statements from families of the disappeared were flagged as "terrorist propaganda."

In April and May, dozens of online accounts affiliated with BYC or independent Baloch journalists were suspended following requests from the authorities to major social media platforms. These actions, couched in vague claims of "national security," erase the very documentation of abuses that survivors and advocates depend on to push for redress.

Even organizations like Human Rights Council of Balochistan (HRCB), which compile verified lists of victims, face persistent takedowns and digital harassment. If no one can document or speak, the cycle of violence continues uninterrupted.

The Stakes of Silence: Why International Attention Is Urgent

Since March 2025, Pakistan's civil and military authorities have exploited a terror incident to dismantle the most prominent peaceful resistance movement in Balochistan. In doing so, they have violated constitutional safeguards, manipulated court procedures, and weaponized anti-terror laws to criminalize dissent.

With legal remedies inside the country exhausted, international visibility is one of the few remaining safeguards against complete impunity. Advocacy by organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations has helped prevent forced returns and disappearances in the past. Statements from Congressional leaders, however, carry a weight unmatched by others—particularly when tied to the threat of economic and diplomatic consequences.

Recommendations to the U.S. Congress and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

We request the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to undertake the following concrete measures to support peaceful human rights defenders in Balochistan:

1. Recognize Dr. Mahrang Baloch as a Prisoner of Conscience and press for her urgent release, alongside other BYC leaders who remain in detention on politically motivated charges.

2. Invite BYC representatives to present testimony before Congress under the Defending Freedoms Project. This platform would break the isolation imposed by Pakistan's media blackout and offer the first opportunity for Baloch voices to address international lawmakers directly.
3. Call on the U.S. State Department and Embassy in Islamabad to visit detained BYC members, issue public statements of concern, and monitor their court proceedings, which are currently being manipulated to prolong unlawful detention.
4. Pressure Pakistani authorities to end the misuse of anti-terror laws against peaceful political organizing and to comply with their constitutional obligations regarding due process, free speech, and the right to peaceful assembly.
5. Demand an immediate end to enforced disappearances by suspending U.S. military cooperation and security assistance until credible steps are taken to disband the network of illegal detention centers in Balochistan and across Pakistan.
6. Commission an independent international inquiry into extrajudicial killings, collective punishment, and digital censorship in Balochistan to establish accountability for crimes that have gone unpunished for decades.

The Root of the Crisis: Ignored Warnings, Compounded Repression

This moment of escalating repression did not emerge overnight. It is the product of decades of silence.

For over 50 years, Balochistan has been governed not by civilian consensus but by a military-led administrative model, where dissent is treated as sedition and communities are punished for the actions of individuals. Despite multiple uprisings and calls for constitutional guarantees, the region remained invisible in international conversations about human rights—reduced to a “national security” concern by successive governments.

That invisibility only began to shift in recent years—first through the post-2020 mass mobilizations of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, and more recently, as the international community belatedly took notice of Pakistan's broader democratic backsliding during the crackdown on Imran Khan's party. Ironically, the bill criminalizing enforced disappearances went missing from Parliament under Khan's own tenure, with no one held accountable. The same security apparatus that dismantled his political movement has long operated unchecked in Balochistan.

Peaceful Protest Is the Only Viable Counterinsurgency Strategy

Balochistan is rich in natural resources. The failure of projects like the Gwadar Port illustrates a critical lesson: no infrastructure investment, no matter how strategic, can succeed when the local population is excluded. Foreign

investors ignored the voices of those who live and work on that land. Without consultation, without safeguards, development became indistinguishable from occupation.

There is a clear causal relationship between the state's refusal to listen to peaceful actors and the growth of insurgency. When courts, media, and civil society are unavailable to address grievances, some will turn to arms. BYC emerged in opposition to that trajectory. We ask for constitutional rights. We invoke the law. We organize in public. How can such a movement be accused of recruiting for militant groups when its central demand is that the state treat the Baloch people in accordance with Pakistan's own laws?

If our demands are heard—demands grounded in legitimate concerns about forced disappearances, targeted killings, economic exclusion, and resource exploitation—then the youth will have options other than resistance through violence. If we are ignored or crushed, the space for peaceful politics will vanish.

Credibility on the Global Stage

National Repression Reflecting the Baloch Experience

What we now witness in Pakistan's mainstream political landscape—arbitrary detentions, legal persecution, media censorship—is not unprecedented. These practices mirror decades-old tactics employed first and most severely against the Baloch. PTI's current struggles with legal manipulation, media blackouts, and enforced disappearances reflect tactics that Baloch activists endured silently for decades, and which mainstream political parties, including PTI, once neglected or dismissed.

Understanding this continuity is critical. Pakistan's democratic fabric frayed first in peripheral regions, now unraveling nationally. Had abuses in Balochistan received the attention they deserved, perhaps this widespread repression could have been prevented.

Impact on International Investors and Regional Stability

Ignoring abuses in Balochistan has also compromised international economic projects. Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Reko Diq copper project face severe instability precisely because local communities, violently excluded from benefits and decision-making, reject and resist investments. Genuine, long-term foreign investments require stability and consent from local populations—both are impossible under conditions of extreme repression.

Therefore, supporting democracy and human rights in Balochistan is also strategically essential for U.S. economic interests and regional stability. No foreign investor, including the United States, can safely engage in a region where state-sponsored violence is routine and accountability nonexistent.

The Role of International Mechanisms

As legal avenues close within the country, international mechanisms must step in.

We ask global organizations to consider designating Dr. Mahrang Baloch as a Prisoner of Conscience. She was arrested for leading peaceful protests and remains imprisoned under laws intended for terrorists. This designation would not only signal international support but unlock other advocacy avenues, such as formal nomination under the Defending Freedoms Project of the U.S. Congress.

We call on U.N. special procedures, especially the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, to increase pressure for transparent investigations, family access to detainees, and protection for activists.

Above all, we call on international governments to recognize that silence is complicity. Engagement with Pakistan must not come at the expense of the rights of Baloch citizens.

Conclusion: Our Struggle Is for Life, Not Power

Pakistan's current political crisis is neither new nor surprising—it is the predictable outcome of international indifference to decades-long repression in its peripheries. The Baloch experience demonstrates that neglecting early warnings of state violence against marginalized communities risks destabilizing entire countries and regions.

To protect democratic values, international security, and economic investments, America must pay heed to voices previously disregarded. The crisis faced today by mainstream Pakistani politics could have been prevented if repression in Balochistan had been addressed when it first emerged.

The Baloch Yakjehti Committee asks not for special favors, but consistent and principled action in line with America's professed values. We stand ready to collaborate, to provide further evidence, and to support efforts toward genuine accountability.

The international community, particularly the United States, has the power—and the responsibility—to change this trajectory. The alternative is continued escalation, destabilization, and a profound moral and strategic failure.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our testimony.