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country summary

Pakistan

In July Pakistan experienced a devastating flood that swamped one-fifth of the country, displacing 20 million people and causing billions of dollars in damage. Already reeling from attacks by militant groups and skyrocketing food and fuel prices, the fragile civilian government struggled to cope. Although criticized as chaotic, the flood relief effort was largely free of systematic discrimination against at-risk minorities.

The security situation continued to deteriorate in 2010 with militant groups carrying out suicide bombings and targeted killings across the country. The Taliban and affiliated groups increasingly targeted civilians and public spaces, including marketplaces, hospitals, and religious processions. In Karachi targeted killings of political activists escalated.

Ongoing rights concerns include the breakdown of law enforcement in the face of terror attacks; confrontations between the judiciary, lawyers' groups, and the government; continuing torture and mistreatment of criminal suspects; unresolved enforced disappearances of terrorism suspects and opponents of the former military government; abuses by the military during operations in the tribal areas and Swat; and discriminatory laws and violence against religious minorities.

Militant Attacks, Counterterrorism, and Reprisals

Suicide bombings, armed attacks, and killings by the Taliban, al Qaeda, and their affiliates targeted nearly every sector of Pakistani society, including journalists and religious minorities, resulting in hundreds of deaths. The country's largest cities bore the brunt of these attacks. Two attacks in late May against the Ahmadiyya religious community in Lahore claimed nearly 100 lives. On July 1 a suicide bombing at Data Darbar, shrine of the patron saint of Lahore, killed 40 people.

In the tribal areas and the Swat valley, suicide bombings against and targeted killings of police and civilians deemed to be army informants or peace activists were commonplace. On July 15 at least five people were killed and nearly 50 wounded in a suicide bomb attack near a crowded bus stop in Mingora, the main town of the Swat valley.

Security forces routinely violated basic rights in the course of counterterrorism operations. Suspects were frequently detained without charge or convicted without a fair trial. Credible reports emerged that a few thousand suspected members of al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other armed groups were rounded up in a country-wide crackdown that began in 2009 in Swat and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, but few were prosecuted before the courts. The army repeatedly refused to allow lawyers, relatives, independent monitors, and humanitarian agency staff access to persons detained in the course of military operations.

Since the military regained control of Swat in September 2009, Taliban-perpetrated abuses such as public floggings and hangings have mostly ended. Despite this, Human Rights Watch continued to receive credible reports of military and police abuses in the district, including summary executions, arbitrary detention, forced evictions, and house demolitions. Human Rights Watch investigated some of these allegations and documented scores of executions. Army chief Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani promised to investigate a video allegedly documenting soldiers executing a group of men and boys in Swat. At this writing, however, no perpetrators have been held accountable for the killings.

Abuses by Pakistani police, including cases of extrajudicial killing, also continued to be reported throughout the country in 2010.

Aerial drone strikes by the United States on suspected members of al Qaeda and the Taliban near Pakistan's border with Afghanistan escalated in 2010. As of October 15, 2010, 87 strikes had been reported, many more than in any other previous year. These strikes were accompanied by persistent claims of large numbers of civilian casualties but lack of access to the conflict areas has prevented independent verification.

In July the federal government presented amendments to anti-terrorism laws to the Senate (upper house of Parliament) that would enable authorities to place suspects under pre-charge detention for 90 days without judicial review or the right to bail. Confessions made before the police or military would be deemed admissible as evidence despite evidence that torture is routine. At this writing the amendments remain before the Senate.

Balochistan

A package of reforms aimed at improving provincial autonomy and providing redress for ethnic Baloch grievances was passed by Parliament in 2010. But civilian authorities struggled to implement the reforms as conditions markedly deteriorated in Balochistan. Armed groups launched several attacks against security forces in the province. Pakistan's military publicly

resisted government reconciliation efforts and attempts to locate ethnic Baloch “disappeared” during Gen. Pervez Musharraf’s military rule, a key source of continued tension.

As documented by Human Rights Watch, Pakistan forces continued to be implicated in the enforced disappearance of suspected ethnic Baloch militants. Militant groups increased attacks against non-Baloch civilians, teachers, and education facilities. At least nine education personnel were killed between January and October 2010. Many teachers, particularly ethnic Punjabis, Shia Muslims, and other targeted minorities, sought transfers out of fear for their safety.

Legal Reforms and the Judiciary

In April parliament unanimously passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, limiting presidential power and giving parliament, the prime minister, the judiciary, and provincial governments greater autonomy. Politicians and civil society groups hailed the amendment as an important step in restoring Pakistan’s parliamentary system of democracy. The Supreme Court sparked a confrontation with parliament by voluntarily agreeing to hear legal challenges to parts of the amendment, including those dealing with mechanisms for judicial appointments.

In June Pakistan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture. However, Pakistan made its ratification contingent on a number of broad and vaguely defined reservations, including excluding “anything repugnant” to the Constitution of Pakistan.

Relations between the judiciary and some of its erstwhile allies in the “Lawyer’s Movement,” which helped restore Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry to office in 2009, deteriorated markedly during the year. In October lawyers attempted to physically attack the chief justice of the Lahore High Court in his chambers. The following day provincial police permitted into the court premises by the Lahore chief justice beat and arrested some 100 lawyers and charged them under Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act.

In October Asma Jahangir, a highly regarded human rights activist and former UN rapporteur was elected the first woman president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, the country’s most prominent forum for lawyers. Jahangir emphasized the need to create professional distance between lawyers and the judges they helped restore to office in 2009.

Treatment of Minorities and Women

Violence and mistreatment of women and girls, including rape, domestic violence, and forced marriage, remain serious problems. The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, unanimously passed by the National Assembly in August 2009, lapsed after the Senate failed to pass it within three months as required under Pakistan's constitution.

On November 7, 2010, Aasia Bibi, a Christian from Punjab province, became the first woman in the country's history to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. The sentence was greeted with international and domestic condemnation amid renewed calls by rights groups for repeal of Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws.

In 2010 Ahmadis continued to be the primary target for prosecutions under various provisions of the blasphemy laws across Pakistan. Islamist armed groups also targeted them for attack. On May 28, militants attacked two Ahmadiyya mosques in Lahore, killing 94 people and injuring well over a hundred. Three days later, unidentified gunmen attacked Lahore's Jinnah Hospital where victims and one of the alleged attackers were under treatment. A Taliban statement "congratulated" Pakistanis for the attacks, calling people from the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities "the enemies of Islam and common people."

Media Freedom

Pakistan's media remained a vocal critic of the government and experienced less interference from the elected government than in previous years. However, the media rarely reported on human rights abuses by the military in counterterrorism operations.

As in previous years, journalists known to be critical of the military continued to be harassed, threatened, and mistreated by military-controlled intelligence agencies. On April 12, shots were fired at the house of journalist Kamran Shafi, a vocal critic of the armed forces and their influence over the state. In September investigative journalist Umar Cheema, who had reported critically on civilian and military authorities in 2010, was abducted, tortured, and then dumped 120 kilometers from his residence in Islamabad. Cheema alleged his abductors were from one of Pakistan's secret intelligence agencies.

Throughout 2010 the Taliban and other armed groups threatened media outlets over their coverage, a practice documented by Human Rights Watch in 2009, and a number of journalists were killed in the tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. On April 19 reporter Azmat Ali Bangash was killed in a suicide bombing in Orakzai tribal agency while reporting on food delivery at a displaced persons camp. On July 28, grenade attacks on the homes of journalist

Zafarullah Buneri and Imran Khan injured at least six women and children. Journalists Mujeebur Rehman Siddique and Mirsi Khan were both shot dead in September.

Bomb blasts in Quetta claimed by Islamist armed groups killed cameraman Malik Arif on April 16 and cameraman Ejaz Raisani and television station driver Mohammad Sarwar during a religious procession on September 3.

British-Pakistani documentary filmmaker Asad Qureshi was finally released on September 9 after being held captive for five months by a group calling itself the "Asian Tigers."

In October the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party announced a boycott of Geo TV, an anti-government television channel, and affiliated newspapers. When the government's former information minister Sherry Rehman appeared on the channel, President Asif Ali Zardari in retaliation ordered PPP activists to besiege Rehman's Karachi home for several hours, threatening her and her family.

Chief Justice Chaudhry and provincial high courts effectively muzzled criticism of Pakistan's judiciary in the media. Journalists told Human Rights Watch that major television channels were informally advised by judicial authorities that they would be summoned to face contempt of court charges for criticizing or commenting unfavorably on judicial decisions or specific judges. Publications including the English-language newspapers Dawn and the News had to apologize publicly to the court and editors of the former faced contempt proceedings for publishing a story alleging misuse of office by the chief justice of the Sindh High Court.

Key International Actors

The US remained Pakistan's most significant ally and was the largest donor to Pakistan's flood relief effort in 2010. However, as documented by Human Rights Watch throughout 2010, there were several instances where US aid to Pakistan appeared to contravene the Leahy Law. That law requires the US State Department to certify that no military unit receiving US aid is involved in gross human rights abuses, and when such abuses are found, they are to be thoroughly and properly investigated. In October the US sanctioned six units of the Pakistani military operating in the Swat valley under the Leahy Law even as it announced a US\$2 billion military aid package for Pakistan to help the country meet unprecedented counterterrorism challenges.

On July 6, British Prime Minister David Cameron announced a judicial inquiry into Britain's role in torture and rendition in Pakistan since September 2001. Several of the cases involve allegations of torture committed against British citizens in Pakistan with British complicity.

In April a three-member United Nations inquiry commission concluded its investigation into the December 2007 assassination of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The commission concluded that not only did Pakistani authorities fail to provide Bhutto the security that could have saved her life, but elements within the powerful military may have played a role in her assassination. The panel was highly critical of the "pervasive role" played by Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence.