



General Assembly

Distr.: General
18 March 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 9

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance: follow-up to and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by Rajasthan Samgrah Kalyan Sansthan, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[27 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Plight of the People of Pakistan Administered Gilgit-Baltistan

Pakistan Administered Gilgit-Baltistan is part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a remote region of very high mountain ranges, glaciers and diverse ethno-linguistic and religious communities. The region has been under the occupation of Pakistan since 1947. It is the only administrative region of Pakistan that has Shia & Ismaili majority, who together constitute 70% of the total population of Gilgit-Baltistan .

The region was formerly known as "Northern Areas". It was not constitutionally made a province of Pakistan and was not given any representation in The federal parliament of Pakistan and neither could the people of Gilgit-Baltistan participate in general federal elections of Pakistan. The region was administered directly by Islamabad under a separate department called Ministry of Kashmir Affairs using Frontier Crime Regulations, a separate set of laws that were applicable to tribal regions of North Western Pakistan.

The region was later renamed as "Gilgit and Baltistan" and was accorded limited self governance in 2009, establishing a name sake Gilgit Baltistan Assembly with limited powers to make laws. Pakistan has kept the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan in limbo by linking its fate to the resolution of the Kashmir Region dispute between India and Pakistan.

The remote region is highly impoverished with little or no significant economic activity. Poverty and deprivation is widespread in this strategically located region. The region is so economically backward that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan heavily depend upon Pakistani federal government subsidy on wheat, the staple diet of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Any increase in price of subsidized wheat becomes a burning issue in the region bringing people of GB to protest on the streets for weeks. This has been happening at regular intervals over the last few decades. Even today people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been protesting against yet another increase in the price of subsidized wheat for the last four weeks.

Protests across Gilgit-Baltistan have erupted on the call of the Awami Action Committee, an alliance of political, social and religious organisations in Gilgit-Baltistan . The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been braving the harsh winter weather demanding a reversal of the federal government's decision to increase the wheat price. Massive protests and sit-ins have taken place and continue to take place in Skardu, the largest city of Gilgit-Baltistan. Protests have also been taking place in other districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, including Diamer, Hunza, Ghizer, Ghanche and Nagar.

Government authorities in Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan have ruthlessly clamped down on these protests. Authorities in the capital have banned demonstrations of any kind for the last three months. The move was challenged by local lawyers of Gilgit-Baltistan in the local Chief Court of Gilgit-Baltistan, which declared the ban on protests as illegal.

The federal government of Pakistan has been taking unilateral decisions for Gilgit-Baltistan for the last many years, even after establishing the so-called Gilgit and Baltistan Assembly in 2009. These decisions of the federal government in Pakistan have resulted in mass protests.

It is important to add that the Gilgit-Baltistan, formerly known as "Northern Areas" due to its disputed status and widespread poverty, was granted subsidy in the 1970s by the then prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who initiated reforms in the region. The subsidies were granted for the prices of wheat, oil, Pakistan International Airlines tickets, and some other essential items. Gradually, all subsidies were finished, except for wheat.

It is further important to add that although the wheat subsidy issue has drawn the most attention of the ordinary people of Gilgit-Baltistan, the list of their demands is not just restricted to withdrawal of the decision to increase the price of subsidized wheat. The protests also include the abolishment of taxes and suspension of the Finance Act, 2023, an end to power outages and an end to the exploitation of Gilgit-Baltistan's mineral resources, and increased share in Pakistan's National Finance Commission Award, etc.

Most of these demands are not new. In 2022, demonstrations across Gilgit-Baltistan began on similar issues. Their reappearance and similar demonstrations point towards both the failure and disinterest of the federal Pakistani government to resolve the matter.

Gilgit-Baltistan has been administered largely by Islamabad. The Finance Act, 2023, aims to generate revenue for Gilgit-Baltistan through taxes and other mechanisms. However, the local activists of Gilgit-Baltistan are demanding its suspension because of Gilgit-Baltistan's disputed status. The region does not have representation in the national legislature of Pakistan. The local activists of Gilgit-Baltistan have also accordingly coined the slogan of 'no taxation without representation'.

The local people of Gilgit-Baltistan are also frustrated by the long power outages, which have disrupted businesses and increased their suffering. The absence of electricity has pushed people of Gilgit-Baltistan to rely on firewood for heating, thus putting pressure on the already depleted forest cover of this mountain region with a highly fragile and vulnerable environment and ecosystem.

Over the past few years, contestation over Gilgit-Baltistan's land and mineral resources between the Pakistan state and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan has been increasing. Since the region's constitutional status is ambiguous, the locals argue that the land and mineral resources belong to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Common land has been used for grazing, collecting firewood and other purposes by the locals for centuries. The state, however, claims that land which is not transferred to any individual belongs to the Pakistani state. The locals believe that their right of rule (Haq-i-Hakimiyat) and right to ownership (Haq-i-Milkiyat) is being violated.

The local people of Gilgit-Baltistan are not just discontented with unresolved economic and political issues but are also concerned about the mistreatment of the federal Pakistani government towards local leaders of Gilgit-Baltistan. Local Human Rights activists have been drawing world attention to the draconian laws imposed in Gilgit-Baltistan and dictatorial measures used to crush the political dissent. They allege that those activists in Gilgit-Baltistan who raise their voice for rights are often booked under the infamous Schedule IV of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 (ATA).

Schedule IV of the ATA is directed at those individuals who are either part of a proscribed organisation, or involved in terrorism, sectarian or anti-state activities. Such individuals are placed on the list to bar them from taking part in unlawful activities. Their bank accounts are frozen, their movement from one city to another is banned, they can't address public rallies, and they are placed under surveillance.

Human Rights activists of Gilgit-Baltistan point that Schedule IV of ATA in reality is used by federal Pakistani authorities to harass critics and political opponents. They point out that the past few years, even civil rights activists, including some religious leaders, have been placed under Schedule IV.

In the recent protests against the latest increase in price of subsidized wheat, names of many prominent activists who were peacefully protesting against this move of the federal government of Pakistan were put under Schedule IV of the ATA. The move is seen as an attempt by the state to silence local voices of Gilgit-Baltistan protesting for their rights.

The activists of Gilgit-Baltistan also point to the nine year illegal imprisonment of Baba Jan, a political activist from Hunza region, who was imprisoned due to his political activism in the wake of the Pakistani state apathy in natural disaster caused by a land slide in Attabad Lake that caused widespread destruction in Gilgit-Baltistan. Baba Jan was sentenced to 71 years' imprisonment by the anti-terrorism court, despite being released by a civil court.

This kind of unilateral decision-making by the federal Pakistani government has been rejected by the local people of Gilgit-Baltistan, who want to be involved and consulted in the process.

Finally, Gilgit-Baltistan has also been paying a heavy price for its status as Pakistan's only Shia and Ismaili majority administrative region. In the past, Gilgit-Baltistan has been the target of many sectarian attacks by Sunni extremist organizations targeting Gilgit-Baltistan's Shias and Ismailis. Just last December in 2023, 10 people including 8 Shias & Ismailis were killed by unknown gunmen believed to be affiliated to Sunni extremist organizations near Chilas town. The gunmen attacked the passenger bus that was traveling from Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistani port city of Karachi.

Furthermore, just few months prior to that in August 2023, entire region of Gilgit-Baltistan erupted into massive mass protest over arrest of a prominent local Shia cleric protesting against proposed amendments by federal Pakistani government in Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws, which would make it easy for authorities to persecute Shias for violation of blasphemy laws.

The list of woes of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan is very long. The world must take note of the plight of the miserable people of Gilgit-Baltistan and help them in seeking justice
