

Committee on Interior Affairs, GB, FATA & AJK

Sectarian Killings in Gilgit Baltistan

Outline:

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- ✓ *The Legal measures to counter sectarian killings*
- ✓ *Recommendations*

The Issue of Sectarianism:

Traditionally peaceful and serene Gilgit-Baltistan-(G-B) areas are in grip of sectarianism and extremism. These areas are strategically located and surrounded by troubled areas. To its east and northeast Chinese troubled region Xinjiang is located, to its north Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor is placed, AJK to its south west and Indian held Jammu and Kashmir to its south east makes it strategically vital region for Pakistan.

There are four main sects in G-B, Shiites, Sunnis, Ismaelis, and Noorbakshis. Shia is the largest sect in G-B and mostly resides in Gilgit, Skardu, and Ghanche Distt. Sunni is the second largest community in G-B; they are mainly in Diamer district but also live in other parts of G-B. Ismaelis are also in majority in some parts of G-B, like in Ghizer District and sub division of Hunza. Noorbakshi community is in majority in areas like Skardu and Ghanche. Almost 2 million people lives in G-B region and almost 75% of the population of this area is Shiite. Traditionally these people are peace loving and has nothing to do with violence. But in recent time a wave of sectarian violence has jeopardized the peace of this area.

Sectarian violence is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan; it has plagued our society even before partition of sub-continent. But in recent times sectarianism has emerged unprecedentedly. Hundreds of innocent people lost their lives in sectarian clashes. Shia-Sunni clashes emerged after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and General Zia's policy of Islamaization. Both sects targeted each other with impunity. Saudi Arabia and supported Sunni Wahabi sect and Iran provided support and funding to Shiites in Pakistan. According to South Asia terrorism Portal- (SATP), more than 7,594 people lost their lives in sectarian violence in last 20 years.

In recent times Quetta, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Gilgit- Baltistan, Kohat, Peshawar, Lahore, Hangu, Parachinar and D-I-Khan have witnessed increased sectarian violence. Gilgit-Baltistan- (G-B) has been peaceful as compare to other areas but in last few weeks this area is under fire.

G-B is facing sectarian violence after the Kohistan bus carnage that resulted in death of 16 innocent passengers in March 2012. More than a dozen people were killed in the aftermath. Religious leaders given calls for strikes and whole G-B came to standstill. . This saw worst violence of its kind in G-B after a rally of Sunnis was attacked with a hand grenade, killing six and injuring 50 others. In retaliation, 10 Shia passengers were killed in Chilas where an enraged mob set alight four buses, resulting in the imposition of a curfew and suspension of cellular phone service. Now Pakistan army is controlling the area but this is not the long term solution of the problem. Pakistan government has to take some concrete steps to ensure peace and stability in this region.

There has been a rumor that foreign hand is involved in G-B's unrest, but in reality this menace of sectarianism is home grown and religious zealots are responsible for this mayhem and uncertainty. G-B police Inspector General Hussain Asghar has denied any foreign involvement. He said "I don't think there is any foreign hand involved in the sectarian riots. The key thing in my understanding is the high rate of literacy without employment opportunities, which allows the frustrated youth to be easily used by some elements." Recent sectarian violence in peace loving G-B is an eye opener for the government of Pakistan. This is the time that they must take effective steps on emergency basis to ensure peace in G-B. Government must establish industries in G-B and engage unemployed youth; otherwise our young generation in G-B may indulge in sectarianism.

The Ulema of both sects must come forward and play their due role and ease situation in G-B. Civil society must also play a positive role and try to bridge gaps between both sects and promote inter-sect peace, harmony and tolerance. Major political parties must also work for the stability of this region and should never allow their vested interests to override the peace of G-B. Religious parties in G-B must also promote peace, love and harmony between both sects. Regular dialogue and avoidance of hate speeches can do the trick. Last but not least, G-B is blessed with enormous natural resources. There is enormous potential in agriculture, hydro power, mineral and tourism sector in G-B. With peace in G-B these natural resources could be utilized for the betterment of the people. (Khattak 2012)

Legal Measures to counter Sectarian Killings

The authorities issued shoot-on-sight orders to the law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order situation after 17 people were killed and more than 50 wounded in sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan on Tuesday.

The attacks led to an army deployment and imposition of curfew in the city, confining the inhabitants to their homes, as the situation turned violent.

The ISPR in a statement said the Army has been summoned to Gilgit to control the law and order situation. The casualties occurred in two separate incidents in the northern towns of Gilgit and Chilas.

In Gilgit, gunmen opened fire during a strike called by Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) over the arrest of one of their leaders, Attaullah Saqib, for his alleged involvement in a sectarian attack in February that left 18 dead.

The rioters ran amok when police refused to release Attaullah Saqib. Angry protesters opened fire and pelted the anti-riot police with stones, leaving several officers injured. Some unknown men hurled hand grenades at Ittehad Chowk that injured two policemen and a passerby. "At least seven people were killed and 50 others were wounded," said an official.

Senior local police official Ali Sher told AFP the gunmen opened fire on a group of Sunnis appealing to people to close their shops in response to the strike call. It is pertinent to mention here that a complete shutdown strike was observed against the arrest of Attaullah Saqib, who is said to be chief of Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Gilgit chapter.

A curfew was imposed in the city after the incident to bring the situation under control, the official said. Soldiers were given orders to shoot at anyone who defied the curfew order, the local media reported.

A total of 14 people have reportedly been arrested in the city following the clashes. In the February incident, gunmen disguised in military fatigues hauled 18 Shias off buses and shot them dead in cold blood in the northern district of Kohistan, which neighbours the Swat valley. A local intelligence official, who did not want to be identified, confirmed Tuesday's death toll and also said a hand grenade had been used.

"But we still don't know who the attackers were," he said. He added that tensions had been mounting between the Shias and Sunnis in recent weeks.

In Bonar Das area of Chilas, a Sunni-dominated town about 100 kilometres south of Gilgit, a mob blocked the main Karakoram Highway and killed ten Shias, local police official Alam Jan said.

"The mob took out ten men from buses and shot them dead," an official said.

Hundreds of people took to the streets in Chilas protesting the killings in Gilgit, he said, adding that the rioters set four buses on fire.

A local intelligence official confirmed the death toll.

Meanwhile, a police officer and his bodyguard were also injured while driving to a bus station in the city to provide security for the passengers from Rawalpindi.

The deteriorating situation in Chilas had prompted the local authorities to impose a curfew there.

Gilgit is the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan region and is popular with mountaineers as a gateway to the Karakoram and Himalayan mountain ranges.

Recommendations:

Demonstrations all over Gilgit–Baltistan including Diamer and Chilas are testimonial to peace and harmony among the people of the region. People of Gilgit–Baltistan want peace and they are, by large, peace loving nation.

History of sectarian killing in Gilgit is not a new issue. One cannot relinquish the atrocities of a brutal dictator General Zia in Gilgit. His regime seeded the extremism in the whole country and Gilgit-Baltistan was not an exception. In 1988 people were massacred and villages were destroyed in Gilgit.

The sectarian strife has now become a challenge for federal and the government of GB to tackle. It is, however, expected if all segments of the society play their roles positively, peace can be restored and conflicts can be resolved. There are horizons beyond the sectarian ambit and people have to understand that.

As a resident of Gilgit-Baltistan and student of political science, I would like to suggest the following measures:

- 1. Empower the local government with financial, technical and logistic tools to deal with the terror factor in Gilgit-Baltistan.*
- 2. Initiate an independent judicial inquiry into the chronics of sectarian conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan— from 1988 onward— in order to get to bottom of the issue.*
- 3. Persuade the religious leaders to propagate love for humanity and shed light on importance of cross-cultural communication.*
- 4. Provide the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan with better opportunities and healthy entertainment to keep them away from menace of sectarian conflicts.*

5. *Government has to deal with the terrorists harshly and there should not be any way for them to get away.*

Besides, in the larger context, people do talk about foreign elements and we the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan do not believe in conspiracy theories whatsoever, for even though there are foreign elements behind the incidents, it still shows the weakness of our own government. (Karim 2012)

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