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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

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

[13 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Pakistan: Persecution of Human Rights Defenders deserves effective international intervention

The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) would like to draw the UN Human Rights Council's attention to the threats to life facing human rights defenders in Pakistan. While arresting and torturing rights defenders is an old government tactic to silence dissent, the present enforced disappearance of social media activists is creating an atmosphere of fear and apprehension. Due to this worsening climate of fear and intimidation, many activists working for a tolerant, progressive and inclusive Pakistan have left the country, or are forced into submission.

Human rights defenders and social activists have traditionally been considered an irritant to state policies in Pakistan, and are often targeted by the state as well as non state actors. The Damocles sword of blasphemy allegation is often used against all critics of state policies by fundamentalist groups working under the direct tutelage of the state.

The year 2017 has begun with a crackdown on intellectuals and freedom of expression. Five human rights activist who were staunch critics of state policies were disappeared within a week. All of them were active on social media against state atrocities, particularly in Balochistan. Already being a dangerous place for journalists, the Pakistan state is now extending its influence over digital space, the last avenue of free speech.

The state has been using harassing tactics against several reputed and prominent human rights activists running their NGOs, including Ms. Bushra Khaliq of Women In Struggle for Empowerment (WISE) Mr. Zar Ali Afridi of FATA Commission of Human Rights, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) and Mr. Mohammad Tehseen of South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAPP). Ms. Bushra of WISE is under the investigation of Punjab Police and the Intelligence Bureau (IB); however, she has not been informed of the charges on which the investigation has started and why her organization has been banned. Ms. Bushra is also the focal person of Anti Torture Alliance of Pakistan (ATA), which documents the cases of torture and runs a rehabilitation centre for torture victims.

Although Balochistan has always been the Achilles heels for the establishment, it is now using the tactic of enforced disappearance against bloggers and social media activists who dare speak against the state atrocities. Supporting the Baloch cause has become a de facto crime. The National Action plan (NAP), a counter insurgency plan by the civil military alliance that was conceived following the Peshawar army public school massacre, also enunciated curbs on free speech, although those were originally meant to reduce space for hate speech. Instead, many journalists, especially from Balochistan, found themselves threatened into silence for speaking against Baloch ethnic cleansing.

The state's bend towards armed militias preaching hate and intolerance and against peaceful citizens practicing democratic dissent is not coincidental. Pakistan has a long history of intimidating critics. The ALRC's sister organization, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has long documented cases of intimidation, torture, enforced disappearance, and killing of activists. In many cases the state uses proxy non state actors such as the Taliban and other religious militant groups to teach the dissenter "a lesson".

According to the 2016 annual report of Front Line Defenders, three human rights defenders were killed in Pakistan in 2016. Many others suffered from harassment, detention, or were subjected to smear campaigns and other violations. The failure of the police to investigate or protect defenders from threat and harassment has led to increased self-censorship, a breakdown in activist networks and human rights defenders fleeing the country. Between 2011 and 2016, eight rights defenders were killed in the country. One of them is Mr. Khurram Zaki, a prominent defender who was murdered in broad daylight. Although he had informed the police of the threat to his life, the police refused to provide him security.

Other prominent human rights defenders assassinated in recent years are Sabeen Mehmood, Perveen Rehman, Governor Salman Taseer, former Federal Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, Mohammad Ali, Rashid Rehman, Malik Jarar, Saleem Shahzad, Sardar Arif Shahid, Mustansar Randhawa. Pakistan is a highly unsafe place for defenders and activists, who have been left to the mercy of militant groups and law enforcement agencies.

The systemic wiping out of intellectuals and rights defenders is deplorable. The intellectual genocide must halt immediately. By allowing extremists to propagate their hate and silencing the moderates, the state is infringing upon the people's right to freedom of speech.

In light of the above, the ALRC urges the Human Rights Council to urge the Pakistani government to:

- a. Formulate an effective legislative framework and put in place safety protocols to safeguard the lives and work of all human rights defenders.
 - b. Investigate and punish the perpetrators of violence against the human rights defenders. Witness protection is critical to ensure the prosecution of such perpetrators.
 - c. Pakistan authorities should be encouraged to sign the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to make it incumbent upon the state to ensure the safety and security of all rights defenders.
 - d. The Pakistani government needs to protect rights activists and promote an environment where they can carry out their work free from threats, attacks and intimidation.
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