21 December 2023

Statement - Pakistan: Excessive use of force and arrest of Baloch human rights defenders and peaceful protesters

On 20 December 2023, Pakistan authorities in Islamabad used excesssive force, including including tear gas, batons and water cannons against peaceful protesters engaged in '**the Baloch long march**' led by women against continuing repression and human rights violations including enforced disappearances in the State of Balochistan. The authorities blocked protesters from entering Islamabad, beating and detaining many of them, including human rights defenders.

'The Baloch long march', is a women led peaceful protest campaign which started on 6 December 2023. It is a campaign that highlights historic and ongoing violations by Pakistan authorities against the Baloch community including enforced and involuntary disappearance, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention and torture. Protesters have been walking since 6 December 2023 on a peaceful march led by women human rights defenders.

On 20 December, Pakistan police and state authorities prevented the peaceful Baloch protesters from reaching Islamabad, and put up barricades to impede them. On the night of 20 December, police used excessive and brutal force against the protesters which included elderly people and minors. Those attacked included human rights defenders, namely families of the Baloch disappeared who have been campaigning for years, seeking the truth about their loved ones, and campaigning for their relese and redress for violations committed against them. Instead of adhering to the demands for an end to violations, state authorities have chosen to perpetrate a pattern of brutal violence and arrest of protesters, many of whom are injured and around 226 persons of which still in jail.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned for the safety of those arrested, including woman human rights defender Mahrang Baloch who has publicly shared the repisals that protesters have been facing, including the mass arrests. Front Line Defenders believes the arrest of these protestors is an act of reprisal against their peaceful human rights work and the exercise of their legitimate right to peacefully protest. Given the history of criminalization, abuse of anti-terror laws, and custodial violence, we are deeply concerned for the safety of all those in custody. We are also concerned about the possibility of reprisals including surveillance, false legal cases, raids and other forms of violence against the Baloch human rights community as punishment for their support for, or participation in, the Long March.

Front Line Defenders calls on Pakistan authorities to:

1. Immediately release those currently held in detention and dismiss all legal cases against them

2. Initiate impartial and effective inquiries into the exessive use of force against peaceful protesters, including human rights defenders, with a view to holding those responsible accountable and publishing the findings;

3. Ensure credible engagement with the Baloch human rights community and those engaging in the peaceful Baloch Long March protest towards addressing their legitimate grievances,

4. Ensure that all human rights defenders in Pakistan, including those from traditionally opporessed, minority communities, such as the Baloch community, are guaranteed the right to carry out their human rights work in a safe environment, free from reprisals and violence.