

*Natural Resource Management, Human Rights and Environmental Security in
Central Asia
Gilgit-Baltistan: A Case Study*

Keynote Address of Chairman Abdul Hamid Khan

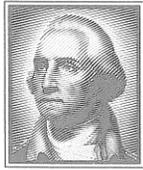
Environmental and Political Disaster in Gilgit Baltistan

It is an honor to finally be able to stand here before you today in The Land of The Free and to have the freedom to express and highlight some of the serious political and environmental issues engulfing our region of Gilgit Baltistan.

I extend my warm welcome to all the distinguished guests and express my gratitude especially to Michael J. Penders, Chairman of the Foundation for Democracy and Rule of Law for Regions in Conflict (DLRC) for his tremendous support, and also to his colleagues whose vital interest as human rights defenders, environmental and legal experts has enabled this august workshop to be organized to highlight the issues of natural resource exploitation, human rights violations, and recent unprecedented degradation of the environment in Gilgit Baltistan. I also extend my gratitude to the honorable academicians, scholars and other distinguished guests for being here today on the premises of world's prestigious George Washington University in Washington DC.

This Workshop was organized to support the 2 million down-trodden people of Balawaristan (Pakistan occupied Gilgit Baltistan). We believe that your participation and contributions will not only provide moral support but will also bring into light the un-told miseries of 2 million down-trodden people of Balawaristan (Gilgit Baltistan) and its deteriorating ecological systems.

Honorable Chairperson and guests, since for many of you this may be the first you are learning of the conflict of the region of Gilgit Baltistan, I would first like to outline the geographical significance of this region. Gilgit-Baltistan borders the Wakhan corridor of Badakhshan, province of Afghanistan and Tajikistan to the northwest, China's Xinjiang Uyghur Region to the northeast, the Indian-controlled state of Jammu and Kashmir to the south and southeast, and Pakistan controlled Jammu and Kashmir to the south, while Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtonkhwa Province (formerly the North West Frontier Province) lies to the west.



I submit several critical issues which are the most important for Environmental Security, Democracy and Rule of Law, consistent with the objectives of this workshop:

The Integrity of the Justice System is the only Assurance of the Rule of Law

As far as Gilgit Baltistan is concerned, it has been deprived from all rays of light of the world's widely recognized Justice Systems since it came under the control of Pakistan. In reality, a true Judiciary does not exist in Gilgit Baltistan. There is no presence of the High Court and Supreme Court. There are two "Kangaroo Courts": the Chief Court and Appellant Court, whose members are appointed on contract basis by the Pakistani Authorities. The appointment of judges are not made on the basis of merit but solely on political and religious considerations and on money matters under the direction from the Pakistani regime and bureaucrats who hold administrative, financial and judicial powers in the area.

It is a profound and sad irony that the 2 million indigenous people of this disputed land have no right to seek Justice anywhere. This is because we do not fall within the constitutional Jurisdiction of Pakistan and its courts. Pakistan fully disregards the Universal Declaration of Human Rights charter and the fundamental human rights of 2 million indigenous people of Gilgit Baltistan under its occupation.

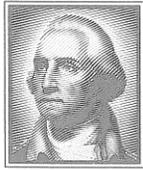
Freedom of Expression and Religious Freedom

The fundamental right to freedom of expression occupies centrality in the domain of human rights, inseparably linked with each other without any room for selectivity. These may only be secured when there is an independent judiciary, free media, and transparent political process guaranteed by the constitution of the land. Freedom for all good faith religious practices must not be infringed. Freedom of expression and religion does not currently exist in Gilgit Baltistan.

Democracy, Political Repression and Absence of a Criminal Justice System for Terrorists and other Mass Killings

Gilgit Baltistan remains void of political representation since the establishment of Pakistan's control on 16th Nov 1947. There is no Democracy. Legitimate political leaders are persecuted, prosecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed. More than 100 local politicians including myself (Abdul Hamid Khan Chairman BNF) are facing sedition charges (in Gilgit, Gahkuch and Skardu Kangaroo Courts since 1997 till today). The number of sedition charges registered in Gilgit Baltistan outnumbers that of the rest of the world combined.

Two million people of this UN disputed region are firmly ruled by the elected representative of Pakistan, but without the right to vote. The only elected body in this region is the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly. It is run directly by the government of Pakistan like a local body without constitutional power of legislation. The function of this Assembly is to present resolutions to Pakistani Authorities, who are not accountable to the GB Assembly. This so-called Assembly and its voters have no right to elect their representative to the parliament of Pakistan.



The extent of oppression was illustrated when Pakistani Authorities declared schools and public buildings as jails after the actual jails became insufficient to accommodate the indigenous people. Their only crime was to stand for their own fundamental human rights.

Thousands of people have been killed, but nobody has been brought to justice so far. These killings fulfill the designs of the Pakistani occupation regime whose motive has been to try to divide the people in order to prolong the occupation.

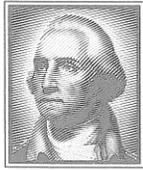
Last year more than 100 indigenous people were murdered on their way back travelling by bus from Pakistani cities towards Gilgit Baltistan, by Pakistan based terrorists. This is one of the bleeding examples of justice denied. Nobody has been detained by the secular and “democratic” government of Pakistan People’s Party in spite of many witnesses to these brutal killings.

Natural Resources

I would now like to draw your attention to the rich and abundant natural resources of this region. The land lies amid world’s first eight highest mountains, all covered in year-long snow, with the only exception of the Mount Everest. Mighty glaciers second only to the North Pole (such as the Baltoro in Karakoram Baltistan) and narrow, lush green valleys, with elevations varying between 8000 feet to 28,750 feet above the sea level, cover much of the 28000 square miles of the region. We have huge fresh water resources, large variety of best quality fruit trees, forests, beautiful lakes, rivers, springs, and rich deposits of minerals.

According to a joint report of the Australian Agency for International development (AUAID) and Pakistan Mineral Development Corporation (PMDC) published in 1995, there are over 1400 gold mines alone in the area, Over 120 of these contain deposits many times purer than the world-famous mines of South Africa. The quality of South African gold mines is 20 to 31 parts per million (ppm) while around 123 gold mines of Balawaristan (Pakistan and China occupied Gilgit Baltistan) have purity levels of 112 to 238 ppm. The report estimates the net worth of only a 70 of these mines to be 500 trillion dollars. The net worth of the remaining over 1400 gold mines is still to be done. If the net wealth of just these 70 gold mines is distributed among the 2 million people of Balawaristan, the share of each person would be 2.5 million dollars per year, for a span of 100 years.

Pakistan is also strengthening its occupation by illegally awarding more than 2000 leases of these mighty mountains which are full of precious and industrial mines including Gold, Uranium and Molybdenum (which is used in space technology) to China and for its own national use by entirely violating State Subject Rule and UNCIP Resolutions.



Water Resources

The Indus River, which irrigates less of Balawaristan but most of Pakistan, erodes thousands of acres of the land of Balawaristan downstream yearly. Pakistan pays 7 Billion Rupees to its NWFP (New name Khyber Pukhtoonkhowa) province in the form of royalty to Tarbela dam, but nothing is paid to the actual resource owners: the indigenous people of Balawaristan.

Instead, we bear brunt of the river erosion and environmental impacts on our lands, without any benefits from the use of these resources by Pakistan. The most critical blow to the ecosystem of this disputed region is in the process of materializing with the plan of Government of Pakistan to construct 6 mega dams without assigning any rights to the indigenous.

Bhasha Diamar Mega Dam's reservoir, located in Diamar (disputed Territory), which is supposed to generate 4,500 Megawatts of electricity, would submerge 70 miles stretch of the Karakoram Highway and around 80,000 people would be displaced initially. After subsequent extension of this dam about 300,000 local indigenous people will be displaced and about 120 miles stretch of area, up to Gilgit town, will be submerged. Apart from the catastrophic effects on the local population, these dams will permanently destroy the traces of oldest Buddha civilization, as well as remains of other invaluable ancient civilizations.

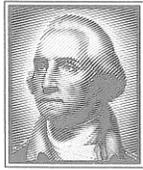
Pakistan also has planned to build a Mega dam in Skardu which will not only submerge the beautiful Skardu city along with its historical, sacred religious palaces and forts but also the ancient homes, natural river ecosystem, rich minerals of the whole Baltistan including Kharmang, Shigar, Khapulo, and many other places of Rundo will vanish from the scene forever.

Pakistan is also building the 3rd Dam on river Indus in Bonji (disputed Territory) which has the capacity of 7000 MW of electricity. The people of Gilgit Baltistan will be subjected to such colossal scales of disaster emanating from the Bhasha-Diamar dam and the other Mega Dam networks without even ensuring that the royalty from the dams would accrue to them.

As the world witnessed in 2010, higher mountains in the Karakorum Range slid down and blocked Hunza River and created about 21 mile long Lake which inundated a dozen villages and took the lives of more than 30 people. Subsequently after this mountain slide, due to unusually heavy rains and rapid melting glaciers, rivers in the region flooded downstream, destroying thousands and thousands of homes across the whole of Pakistan.

In real sense this was not natural. It was the consequence of human error which could have been avoided if the activities were stopped earlier. Best practices for environmental management and sustainable development must be deployed from the beginning of the decision making processes, with input from indigenous people, consistent with international norms and standards of environmental law.

We believe that the huge mountain slide was the direct consequence of China and Pakistani mining companies' continuous usage of chemicals and hundreds and thousands of powerful



explosions to blow up chunks of the beautiful mountains in order to obtain Copper, Gold, Uranium and Molybdenum from mines deep inside the high mountain peaks throughout Karakorum, Hindukush and Himalaya.

The presence of Chinese, Pakistani and Indian companies on these highest mountains and their clandestine activities in Gilgit Baltistan has severely upset the balance of nature and triggered a serious phenomenon disturbing the environmental equilibrium in the region. The inevitable threat to an already deteriorating peace in the region arising from the presence of huge paramilitary forces deployments to protect 6 mega dams, Railway lines and mines in the near future is beyond our worst imagination.

Severe environmental impacts, including on neighboring countries of the entire Central Asia region in near future cannot be discounted, if ongoing human activities are not checked. Thus, the cause of this live environmental threat demands serious scrutiny by the international community, and intervention in a cooperative manner by those with interests in these resources.

It is crucial that international environmental laws and standards for best practices be adopted and implemented, especially in disputed regions, and regions in conflict. Parties to conflicts, other governments, and global corporations must adhere to these standards and implement best practices in the void of the rule of law and effective institutions for governance.

Especially in times of conflict, all parties should agree to preserve shared natural resources and hold harmless habitats and cultural heritage sites. These resources are necessary for their mutual survival, and may be sacred to their diverse cultures.

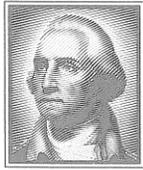
This Workshop is immensely helpful in highlighting, protecting and promoting the environmental and demographical safety of the region. Only real democratic reforms, respect for human rights, and rule of law, will we have a chance to find an eventual re-birth of this region.

Finally, I want to remind you of the historical day of DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF AMERICA from its colonial era. I believe in the same golden tenets on the foundations of which the freedom of this mighty nation was once guaranteed by the Congress. I quote from the charters of this declaration as signed by the Congress on the day of July 4th 1776:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ,that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

We, the people of Gilgit Baltistan today, although from another corner of the world, are still seeking the same rights to equality and liberty as the last remaining colony of the 21st Century.

We solemnly appeal to the United States to encourage Pakistan, with reference to this august workshop, to return our due rights to access justice, democracy and control over our resources.



We also appeal to the United States to help stop the construction of the mega Dams across many locations in this disputed region, including, Diamar Basha Dam, Bonji and Skardu and other proposed dams. We urge that all development projects proceed only with best practices for environmental management, sustainable development, with informed consent and input from those impacted, especially the indigenous people of the region. Compliance with these requirements must be monitored by objective third parties to assure actual implementation.

Unless the rights of the people are fully guaranteed and established in the form of LOCAL AUTHORITY as per UNCIP, no dams should be constructed which adversely affect the natural habitat of the region. This is the only way forward to decide the future fate of this disputed territory peacefully and in a democratic manner. This alone shall prevent the likelihood of eventual destruction of this land and can ensure granting of rights to the indigenous people.

Thank you very much,

Abdul Hamid Khan
George Washington University, April 25th, 2013

End Note

The *Foundation for Democracy and Rule of Law for Regions in Conflict* (DLRC) organized this *Workshop on Water Resource Management, Human Rights and Environmental Security in Central/South Asia: Gilgit-Baltistan; A Case Study*, with the Elliott School of International Affairs of the George Washington University (GWU) in Washington D.C. Leading subject matter experts addressed the unique environmental and security concerns of this beautiful part of the world, considered the unusual value of its natural resources and the impacts of natural disasters and development on its fragile eco-systems.

This was the start of a dialogue to consider options for implementing more effective environmental governance in disputed territories and border areas, especially for shared natural resources. We seek to advance the rights of indigenous people to the sustainable development of their homeland, and enhance local, democratic institutions and the rule of law to protect human rights and the environment.

We seek to inform evolving and multifaceted policy and aid considerations for the region with practical, consensus recommendations for governments, NGOs, and private citizens to protect the rights of indigenous and minority populations in sustainable development of natural resources. Recognition is critical to securing fundamental human rights in the 21st century.

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