

Caught in a new great game?

Report of an HRCP fact-finding mission to Gilgit-Baltistan

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Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan, known until 2009 as the Northern Areas, is located in the northernmost corner of Pakistan. The mountainous region spread over approximately 28,000 square miles borders China, Afghanistan and the Indian-administered Kashmir.

The area is essentially made up of a confederation of valleys. Until the mid-19th century, the areas now making up Gilgit-Baltistan were mostly independent territories which were then invaded by the Dogra rulers of Kashmir and annexed to the state of Kashmir. When the subcontinent gained independence, the British colonial rulers ceded the area to the Maharaja of Kashmir. This triggered a struggle against the Maharaja's rule, which resulted in the liberation on November 1, 1947 of what is today known as Gilgit-Baltistan. The ruling council of the people of the area decided to accede to Pakistan. The government of Pakistan subsequently sent a political agent to govern the area. It was initially governed under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR).

Gilgit-Baltistan has been treated as part of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir for 66 years even though the local population insists that through the history their region has had a status that has been completely distinct from Kashmir. The populace has demanded, constantly and vociferously, for inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan as a constitutionally acknowledged unit of the federation and for them to be given the same political and other rights that the citizens of Pakistan enjoy. Even as provincial status within Pakistan has remained the predominant demand, many from the region have questioned that if Gilgit-Baltistan is considered part of the Kashmir dispute, why has it not been given an autonomous status similar to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK).

The people of this region consider that the prolonged denial of a constitutional identity for Gilgit-Baltistan has been on account of the region being bracketed with the Kashmir dispute and insist that the lingering dispute should not be invoked as a reason to deny them equal rights as Pakistanis.

In 1994, the government of Pakistan introduced the Legal Framework Order, 1994, which served as the constitution of the Northern Areas and acknowledged fundamental rights of the people of this region. In mid-2009, the government of Pakistan introduced Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009.¹ The 2009 Order was flaunted as bestowing on Gilgit-Baltistan a self-governing status, akin somewhat to the provinces in Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan comprises seven districts; Gilgit and Skardu are the main political centres and the most populous towns. The two districts of Skardu and Ghanche form the Baltistan Division, and the Gilgit Division comprises Diamer, Ghizer, Gilgit, Astore and Hunza-Nagar districts. The population of the region is estimated to be around 1.8 million and is made up of a diversity of ethnic and lingual groups. The major ethnic groups are Sheen, Yashkun, Brusho and Balti, and the major religious sects are Shia, Sunni, Ismaili and Noor Bakhshi.

Gilgit-Baltistan stands out from the rest of Pakistan in many respects. It is the only Shia-majority region in the Sunni-majority country. In addition to the prolonged pursuit of a legal identity for this region and overwhelming demands for acknowledging it as part of Pakistan, much of Gilgit-Baltistan's recent woes emanate from sectarian violence. The most recent sectarian bloodshed has included execution of scores of Shia men and boys travelling in public transport buses on the road connecting the region to the rest of Pakistan.²

The region's remoteness from the rest of Pakistan is compounded by the fact that it is connected to the country only through the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the highest paved international road in the world, built with China's cooperation in the 1960s and '70s. The KKH passes through a high concentration of soaring peaks and huge glaciers. Because of the intractable nature of the terrain and the harsh weather, the road is susceptible to landslides and blockages. The other connection between Gilgit-Baltistan and the rest of Pakistan are the near-daily Rawalpindi-Skardu and Rawalpindi-Gilgit flights, which are highly weather-dependent. Only the more affluent can afford the return airfare which is nearly double the minimum monthly wage.

Some of the highest mountain ranges in the world, the Karakoram, Himalayas, Pamir and Hindukush, meet in Gilgit-Baltistan. The region is home to five of the world's 14 so-called eight-thousanders, peaks that rise more than 8,000 meters. These include K2 (Mount Godwin-Austen), the second highest peak in the world, and Nanga Parbat, the ninth highest which is acknowledged as a notoriously difficult climb. There are over 50 peaks above 7,000 meters in Gilgit-Baltistan.

This region's strategic value has been understood for centuries as the crossroads between east and west. Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan, lies on the ancient Silk Route. Gilgit-Baltistan provides the critical land route for the under-construction China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that plans to connect Gwadar Port in southern Pakistan to China's northwestern Xinjiang region. The corridor is expected to generate tremendous economic opportunities for Gilgit-Baltistan.

The economy relies largely on tourism and agriculture, besides trade through the KKH. A sizeable part of the population lives and works in various parts of Pakistan. The income from foreign tourists and trekking and mountaineering expeditions in Gilgit-Baltistan was dealt a severe blow in June 2013 when 10 foreign climbers were killed in an attack on a base camp of Nanga Parbat in Diamer district. A Taliban-affiliated group claimed responsibility for the attack. The flow of foreign tourists and mountaineering expeditions which was only just beginning to gather pace after sectarian killings in the previous years evaporated after the murder of the climbers.

The serious environmental challenges faced by Gilgit-Baltistan are epitomised by the creation of Attabad Lake, formed after a massive landslide at Attabad village in Gojal valley in Hunza on January 4, 2010. The landslide killed 20 people and created thousands of internally displaced persons. On April 7, 2012, an avalanche struck a Pakistan Army base, at

Gayari, near the Siachen glacier, burying alive 140 soldiers and civilian employees. Avalanches are uncommon in the area of Gayari. Climate change was cited as a possible cause for the disaster.

Gilgit-Baltistan is a land of many identity markers, if not divisions. There are the Sheen and Yashkun divisions, having roots in Baltistan and elsewhere in the region is another division, there are people from Gilgit-Baltistan and the so-called 'down area' and then there are divisions based on language. It has been argued that the heightened economic stress on the people has also created and accentuated divisions and other grievances.

Although Gilgit-Baltistan is a region rich in natural resources, it can do with greater commitment to economic development and tapping the potential of this resource-rich landscape of multiple ethno-linguistic heritages.

Najam U Din

Focus on Gilgit-Baltistan

Since it was founded in 1986, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has kept a close eye on the legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan and the rights and political representation of the people of this region as issues of utmost significance.

In 1988, HRCP sent a fact-finding mission to the Northern Areas, as Gilgit-Baltistan was called at the time, to probe violent sectarian clashes.

Another HRCP team, with a more extensive mandate,³ visited the Northern Areas in 1993 in order to assess the set-up of legislation, judiciary, the legal system, the reasons for sectarian violence and what was being proposed or done to address the problems. In 1997, HRCP sent another fact-finding team to the Northern Areas to gauge the changes made there after the reforms following the introduction of the Legal Framework Order, 1994 and its effect.

In 2005, an HRCP fact-finding mission visited the Northern Areas to assess the situation regarding the region's constitutional status and its impact on people's rights, the sectarian situation and the administrative set-up, and to elicit the views of various sections of society on these issues.⁴

After the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009 was introduced, HRCP sent a mission to the region to observe the November 2009 elections held under the new dispensation.⁵

In 2009, HRCP opened a permanent task force office for the region in Gilgit and also engaged and trained correspondents in all seven districts of Gilgit-Baltistan to be able to better monitor human rights issues there.

The 2013 fact-finding mission

One of the two main fact-finding missions in HRCP's programme for 2013, the visit to Gilgit-Baltistan was aimed at ascertaining the status of implementation and impact of the system introduced under the 2009 Order; to document major human rights issues; to record the views and concerns of various sections of the population and the measures that they considered necessary to improve the situation.

It also planned to elicit views on the performance of the government and on lack of representation for Gilgit-Baltistan in the federal parliament, its effect and steps needed to remedy the situation. The mission also endeavoured to determine the people's experience of the 2009 elections under the new law and their views regarding the elections when the legislative assembly completes its five-year term towards the end of 2014. Measuring the impact of natural disasters and recent instances of sectarian violence and terrorism on the population and the response to these challenges by the authorities were also part of the mission's mandate.⁶

The team

The fact-finding mission consisted of HRCP executive council members Ghazi Salahuddin and Roland D'Souza. They were accompanied by Hussain Naqi and Najam U Din from HRCP Secretariat. The HRCP task-force office, led by its coordinator Israruddin, and HRCP correspondents and volunteers in all seven districts of Gilgit-Baltistan helped arrange

meetings with a cross-section of society and facilitated a thorough understanding of the key issues in the region.

HRCP is grateful to all the individuals and organisations that took out the time to meet the mission members and particularly wishes to acknowledge the contribution of both council members who enthusiastically agreed to visit to the region despite their prior travel plans and, in the case of Mr. Salahuddin, despite being unwell at the time.

The fact-finding team arrived in Skardu on October 26, 2013 and after visiting various parts of the region left Gilgit for Islamabad on October 30, 2013. HRCP was cognizant of the fact that a five-day visit would not be enough to grasp the many issues affecting a region that comprises such diversity and complexities. However, an effort was made to hold as extensive deliberations as possible to get the various viewpoints and to understand the challenges and the ways that in the opinion of the people of this region could help overcome the challenges.

The meetings

The HRCP mission arrived in Skardu on October 26 where it met journalists, women's rights activists, Shia clerics and families of victims of sectarian violence, lawyers, representatives of Pakistan Peoples' Party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, nationalists, Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat Baltistan, Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees Baltistan, students of Karakorum International University's Skardu campus, transporters, representatives of All Pakistan Gems and Minerals Association Baltistan and police officers including the senior superintendent of police (SSP) in Skardu. The mission members later proceeded to Gilgit where after an overnight stop they traveled to Attabad in Gojal valley in Upper Hunza where a massive landslide in January 2010 had blocked the Hunza River, caused displacement of thousands of people and submerged a number of villages. The mission members met affectees of the natural disaster at Gulmit village before visiting a camp for displaced persons to document their concerns.

In Gilgit, the mission met Gilgit-Baltistan Governor Pir Syed Karam Ali Shah and several senior members of the Gilgit-Baltistan administration including Chief Secretary Muhammad Younus Dhaga and Home Secretary Dr Attaur Rehman. The mission could not meet the chief minister, Syed Mehdi Shah, as he was abroad at the time.

In Gilgit, the fact-finding mission also met women's rights activists, representatives of political parties, including Muttahida Qaumi Movement, Pakistan Peoples' Party and nationalists and progressive parties, Supreme Appellate Court Bar Association Gilgit-Baltistan, Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamat Gilgit-Baltistan and Kohistan, and Visually Impaired Persons Rehabilitation Association (VIPRA). It held meetings with poets and writers, members of the Masajid Board, Wahdatul Muslimeen, chairman of Pakistan Red Crescent Society Gilgit-Baltistan, manager of a Citizen's Voice project on power. The mission was also informed about the concerns of ad-hoc employees of Civil Secretariat Gilgit and their demands for making their services permanent. The mission also visited the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme office and Jamia Imamia Masjid in Gilgit.

The fact-finding mission's travel by road from Skardu to Gilgit, on to Hunza and then from Gilgit to Islamabad after cancellation of their flight due to inclement weather enabled them to better understand the condition of the road and also the many woes of the road users, including those travelling by public transport.

The report

This report is based on the views that senior members of the administration, representatives of religious and political parties and various other groups of citizens including sections of civil society shared with the fact-finding team during various meetings. HRCP volunteers and district coordinators provided valuable information about human rights issues in all seven districts of Gilgit-Baltistan and offered insight to understand the issues of concern for the populace.

The conversation and discussion largely took place in Urdu. Even when the views expressed have been paraphrased and summarised, for the sake of brevity and clarity, a deliberate attempt has been made to convey the ideas in the speakers' own words.

Several meetings that have been mentioned above do not find a detailed account in this report but were instrumental in helping the HRCP team understand the context of important issues.

In order to ensure that the individuals who talked to the HRCP mission are protected from any adverse consequences on account of expressing their views, the identity of the speakers has not been specifically mentioned in most instances. This was considered important to reassure the people that they need not be guarded and cautious in communicating with the mission and should candidly voice their thoughts on the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The accounts of meetings and discussions in Baltistan, Gilgit and Hunza have been given separately to enable the reader to discern any variance in the narratives.

Visit to Skardu

The HRCP mission arrived in Skardu on October 26, 2013 where it held meetings with a cross-section of society over two days.

Views from the political spectrum

Pakistan Peoples' Party (Skardu chapter)

Representatives of the Skardu chapter of Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-the ruling party in Gilgit-Baltistan at the time of the HRCP mission's visit-were rather frank about what they had been able to achieve under the Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009, what could not be done and what should have been done. They acknowledged that there might have been shortcomings in the reform and those needed to be highlighted. They said that they had faced difficulties in implementation of the 2009 Order because of lack of experience.

The party leaders and activists said that when the PPP was in power in both Islamabad and Gilgit-Baltistan (before the May 2013 general elections in Pakistan), getting funds released for the region was easier. They said that there would be no limit to the development of this region and Pakistan if the federation supported them. With Islamabad's support, Gilgit-Baltistan could blossom as a regional trade hub as, in addition to links with China and Afghanistan, Ghizer district was a short distance away from Tajikistan, across a sliver of Afghan territory known as the Wakhan Corridor.

Representatives from the ruling party rejected the charge that for the first time in the region's history jobs had been sold in Gilgit-Baltistan. They called it propaganda by the opposition. They said that since the chief minister's constituency was in Skardu and most voters were his supporters, many of the people who got jobs there included his supporters. Therefore, the opposition had assumed that jobs had been sold or given to favourites. That was mainly a charge without any proof, they said, adding that people had got jobs in the village of the candidate who ran in the election against the chief minister.

They said that Rs 100 million had been distributed among families whose breadwinners had been killed in sectarian violence. The PPP representatives stated:

The 2009 Order was preceded by a set-up under which a joint secretary of the government of Pakistan controlled the affairs of Gilgit-Baltistan. Now the chief minister was elected by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Discussion on all issues and decisions on development were made in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Elections earlier used to be contested on sectarian basis and political activities also followed sectarian lines. The role of political parties, including mainstream parties in Pakistan, had now come forward.

The government had created employment opportunities, hired 15,000 people in the public sector, and given service structure for doctors, teachers and paramedics. In the near future, Gilgit-Baltistan could contribute 50 percent to Pakistan's economy. As much as 100,000 megawatts of electricity could be generated in this region, which was considered a 'power corridor' because of the enormous potential for hydro-electric generation. The fruit preservation industry could also be developed.

Efforts were underway to develop mining. The government had created the Mineral Department with offices in every district of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Steps had been taken to address internal displacement and attention paid to disaster management.

Before 2009, there were people who talked about independence and some who even celebrated national days as black days but the secessionist sentiment had retreated after the election and government formation under the new order.

The government of Gilgit-Baltistan had taken up the issue of killing of Shias and of foreign climbers on Nanga Parbat with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government.

The road link with Pakistan was vital to the region's economy and for people working elsewhere in Pakistan and students who visited their homes in Gilgit-Baltistan during vacations at educational institutions. The planned Shigharthing Road from Skardu-Kachura-Astore-Kashmir and a further 10-hour journey to Rawalpindi would diversify the road connections with Pakistan.

The Kargil-Ladakh road across the Line of Control should be opened for tourists and trade and also for divided families who could go to India via Lahore but not from Gilgit-Baltistan.

Ismailis in Gilgit-Baltistan were the role models in terms of their pursuit of education.

Good intentions

“Through the 2009 Order we have done something which was not considered possible. There might have been things we did not manage as well as we could have, but we did not make any mistakes intentionally. They were caused by lack of experience. The reform package of which the 2009 Order is a part is not our destination; it is just the pathway to that destination. We strongly advocate representation in the National Assembly and Senate with provincial status as the next step in empowerment of this region. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan should also have the right to petition the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The next elections will give people a chance to judge us on our performance.

Bracketing us with Kashmir is a conspiracy against Pakistan. We are the most patriotic Pakistanis. We won freedom through our own efforts and joined Pakistan unconditionally.”

- A member of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly

Devastating blows

“The attacks on the Karakorum Highway and targetting of foreign mountaineers on Nanga Parbat have destroyed our area. Even toddlers in their parents' laps have been affected. Everyone depends on the road for travel; education has been affected and every household hit. It is now common for the people of Baltistan coming back from Rawalpindi to travel without informing their families in advance so they do not worry for the entire duration of the 36-hour journey.

In addition to fostering sectarian harmony and tolerance, steps have been taken to overcome security issues on the roads. Check-posts are being established and a separate force led by the army is being raised to ensure

safety on the road. We will also seek financial resources, including weapons and vehicles for security, from the federation.” - *A member of the PPP delegation*

Mischief, motives and dismay

“The people are frustrated and really disappointed that those involved in massacres on Karakoram Highway (KKH) have not been punished. They believe that they do not have the means to get justice for the killings. These sentiments appear set to grow. There are some problems with bringing perpetrators of violence and acts of terrorism to justice. For instance, the witnesses are scared to go to Chilas [in Diamer district] to appear in court or identify the killers because they fear that they will not come back alive. The case should be transferred to Gilgit.

We have learned that 100,000 rupees were given for killing each person in the massacres on the road. This crisis was created to disturb the KKH. When you consider that from Siachen to Karakorum the reliance is entirely on this solitary road then it makes sense why the enemies of Pakistan are creating mischief here.” - *A PPP representative*

The bouquet in Gilgit-Baltistan

“Skardu with its predominantly Shia population, Ghanche with Noor Bakhshis, Ghizer with Ismailis and Diamer with Ahl-e-Sunnat make the bouquet complete in Gilgit-Baltistan. The diversity of Gilgit-Baltistan is also reflected in the legislative assembly and the government, where there are representatives and ministers from the Shia, Ismaili, Ahl-e-Sunnat and Noor Bakhshi communities.” - *A member of the PPP delegation*

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz

The PML-N representatives claimed that there had been various failings of Gilgit-Baltistan’s administration led by the Pakistan Peoples’ Party. They flagged in particular alleged corruption, wastage of taxpayers’ money on ostentation and poor handling of law and order. They began by saying that the socio-political problems in the area had begun under the British colonial control. They said that the biggest ongoing violation was that the people of the region had been deprived of their fundamental rights and a constitutional status. They made the following observations:

As far as the region’s legal identity was concerned, Gilgit-Baltistan had not been defined in the constitution of Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan did not have a constitution of its own or an autonomous set-up like Azad Jammu and Kashmir. If there was a will, nothing stopped Islamabad from making Gilgit-Baltistan the fifth province of Pakistan. The lack of a constitutional status was a hurdle in the completion of an incomplete Pakistan. The 2009 Order was a step towards that destination but lack of competence had prevented progress.

If there was any complication due to Gilgit-Baltistan being considered part of the Kashmir dispute, the region could be given a provisional provincial status until the Kashmir issue was resolved. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had not done its work in this regard.

Gilgit-Baltistan should be given immediate representation in the National Assembly and Senate.

There were countless pertinent issues with regard to the region that had not got attention at the national level. Gilgit-Baltistan was not part of the media discourse in Pakistan. The local population had many grievances with the national media regarding the content and quality of the debate. When TV news channels could engage in ceaseless political discussion, why not talk about geographical issues at least some time? What happened to the glaciers affected all of Asia. That was just one pressing issue for Pakistan and the wider region. The media had failed to convey the aspirations and sentiments of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to the people of Pakistan. The local media depended on government advertisements and that seemed to determine which issues they covered.

There was a budget of 26 billion rupees in Gilgit-Baltistan for a populace that was less than the population of most districts in the Punjab. This was a generous allocation in terms of population but the resources had not reached the people. The administration was wasting federal grants on non-development expenses instead of developing Gilgit-Baltistan's own resources. There had been corruption in non-development expenditure. Previously, 20 percent resources were allocated for the development fund but now the allocation had plummeted.

Bad governance and corruption had peaked. There was a need to attend to the health and education sectors instead of "selling jobs to favourites". Appointments had been made in violation of merit and over-employment had meant that hirings were made when there was no budget to pay salaries to the employees.

The law and order issues had attained a dangerous dimension.

PML-N candidates had won the by-elections in one Ghanche and one Skardu constituency in October (2013), laying bare the claims of popularity by the ruling party.

Ministers and advisers were being appointed on the basis of party affiliation and not competence. The resources of Gilgit-Baltistan could be used to develop the region and enhance the capabilities of the people. But taxes had been levied on electricity and mining. "What would you say of someone who sits on a goldmine and sleeps hungry?" said a PML-N leader.

Nationalists

In a meeting with HRCP in Skardu, individuals and groups identifying themselves as nationalists complained about the people of Gilgit-Baltistan being second-class citizens of Pakistan. The big issue for them, as indeed for everyone that the mission met in Gilgit-Baltistan, was the question of the region's legal identity.

They wanted their region to be delinked from the Kashmir issue and given a system similar to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) for the time being. Some said that they considered independence as the final destination. They admitted that they did not have across-the board support but claimed growing support for their stance. They strongly advocated opening of the Kargil route for travel between Gilgit-Baltistan and Indian-administered Kashmir.

The participants in the meeting with the HRCP mission said that they had been unwillingly and unjustifiably made part of the Kashmir issue and

subsequently their rights had been denied because they were classified as part of the lingering dispute.

Corruption was certainly present in Gilgit-Baltistan prior to the incumbent government but instead of goats and ghee, after the 2009 elections money had started changing hands; the going rate for an elementary government job was Rs 300,000.

There was no sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan in the 1970s. In 1988, Afghan militants and their patrons not just from Pakistan but from many other countries gave the region that gift. The massacres in Chilas, Kohistan and Lulusar were militants' gifts too.

The students in Gilgit-Baltistan were not taught this region's geography but that of Pakistan.

Adding four rooms to the degree college and labeling it as the campus of Karakorum International University was an insult to the word international.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan did not even have the status that residents of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had in the federation of Pakistan. The economic quota of Gilgit-Baltistan was linked to FATA.

Second-class citizens

"If we are the citizens of Pakistan why can we not vote to elect the president and the prime minister? The National Database Registration Authority had informed us ahead of the May 2013 general elections that we could not vote in the national elections because we were residents of Gilgit-Baltistan. We are counted as citizens neither of Pakistan, nor of Kashmir or India. This region had shown the unmistakable desire to join Pakistan 66 years ago. What would you call not approving our merger with Pakistan? Is this not sedition? This is not a question of Islam or sect. It is a national issue." - *A participant in the meeting with the HRCP mission*

Religious leaders' point of view

Meeting with Shia clerics

The population of Baltistan subscribes to all sects, but the majority is Shia. The fact-finding team visited the Central Jamia Masjid in Skardu where it met Shia clerics and religious scholars, including family members of victims of sectarian violence.

The participants in the meeting began by underlining their belief that the violence in Gilgit-Baltistan was on account of interest of other countries there because of the region's geostrategic importance and the land access it offered to China.

What's in a name? Identity

"It was because of the efforts of our forefathers that a very large area got rid of Dogra Raj and they unconditionally acceded to Pakistan. We won freedom without Pakistan having to fire a single shot. And yet we do not have constitutional rights. Constant efforts for recognition as a part of the federation have not succeeded so far. What has changed with the 2009 Order is the title of this region, which is important because it acknowledges our identity. The old name, Northern Areas, only gave an indication of our geographical locations with reference to Pakistan." - *A Shia religious leader*

Mischief from outside

“There are outsiders behind the problems in this region. Due to Gilgit-Baltistan’s importance because of the land link with China, regional and international powers that do not want to see Pakistan prospering have their sights set on Gilgit-Baltistan. We have not asked the government for compensation for the killings in the KKH massacres. We only ask them to provide protection to the road users so that the enemies of Pakistan do not succeed. Sectarian hatred is being fanned in proxy wars here. The long delay in giving a legal identity to this region has complicated matters and has the potential to further aggravate the problem.” - *A cleric at Central Jamia Masjid Skardu*

Certain outside elements were trying to fan sectarian violence in Baltistan. Efforts had been made to poison the minds in Gilgit in order to destroy the peace in Baltistan. In Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Chilas in Diامر, citizens had been butchered in execution-style killings only because the victims were Shia. In the Lulusar massacre (August 16, 2012),⁷ 21 Shias were first identified and then executed. The faces of the killers in Chilas attack (April 3, 2012) were easily recognisable from a video made by a bus passenger’s cell phone and yet they had not been caught. Vengeful sentiments rose in all parts of the region where the victims’ bodies were brought for burial. A deliberate attempt had been made to pit people against each other on the basis of sectarian belief and on the basis of which area or district they came from.

There had always been and there still remained an environment of peace and harmony in Baltistan because of the positive role of religious scholars there and their understanding of Islam. Ties and marriages across sects had been commonplace.

Baltistan refused to divide along sectarian lines despite killings of Shia clerics in Gilgit and recent killings of Baltistani Shias. There had been no retaliation. The clerics and leaders urged the people to be patient because the killers were the enemies of Pakistan and of Islam. The clerics had declared retaliatory killing of innocent or punishing any person for another’s crime *haram* (prohibited by religion). The clerics had tried very hard to keep the area calm.

If the Shias were pushed to the wall and not provided justice for those killed they could react. The enemy seemed to be seeking that. The bodies that the families received after the massacres on the road were in such a condition that it was difficult to identify the deceased from their faces. There was a lot of tension under the surface. Young children talked about the killings. That worried the clerics. After Shias’ killings on the road, slogans had been raised that if the people could not be given safe access to Pakistan they were ready to go to Kargil. There were serious apprehensions that if those involved in Shias’ killings in 2012 and 2013 were not punished the vengeful sentiments might get out of control. The clerics feared that if there were more attacks and killings it might become difficult for them to hold back the youth in Baltistan.

The region faced very harsh weather for five months. Living in mountainous valleys, there were not too many income opportunities for the

people. The only overland access route was the KKH. Much of the infrastructure development in the region had been on account of the military, because of the Siachen conflict, and not because of civilian administration. Part of it was thanks to the KKH providing the land link to China. Some development had occurred on account of the tourists from Pakistan and abroad who came to witness the region's natural beauty. "Tourism had been affected by terrorism in the beloved homeland Pakistan." Lack of tourists had already started causing severe problems for the region's economy before the Nanga Parbat killing in June 2013 compounded the situation.

The people had been demanding discount in the cost of air travel but the fare for the state-run PIA flights had been raised by Rs 4,000 in 2012.

It had never been the policy of the clerics or the Shia community to contest elections on the basis of sectarian identity.

Despite getting so many dead bodies from 'down area' the people in Baltistan had never responded in the same manner. That was the biggest example of their tolerance.

Things had improved somewhat on KKH in terms of safety. There had not been killings on the road in some time and the people had started thinking that they were somewhat safer. But the killers had not been caught. Then foreign tourists (Diamer, June 22, 2013) and even a senior police officer and soldiers (Chilas, Diamer, August 5, 2013) had been murdered.⁸ There had been talk of an operation being launched against the killers but no killer had been sentenced. Punishing them would not bring back the dead but it would give victims' families the satisfaction that no one else's home would be destroyed. There had not been any concrete assurance from the government. The chief justice of Pakistan had not taken *suo motu* notice of the killings on the road even when he was taking notice of "anything and everything".

The government, both in Pakistan and in Gilgit-Baltistan, sprung into action only when its own officials got killed.

Military ruler Ziaul Haq had started a policy of altering this region's demographic. The state-subject rule in place in Kashmir was also present in Gilgit-Baltistan at the time but had been abolished.

When the border between the two Kashmirs could be opened, why not the Kargil-Ladakh border? The roads went right up to the frontier. Allowing access across the Line of Control via Kargil-Ladakh road would have no adverse impact on Pakistan's economy.

The burnt out carcasses of buses torched on the KKH during killing of Shias still lay by the roadside, stark reminders of the barbarism that had visited the region.

'Pakistan's human face'

"Gilgit-Baltistan is the face of Pakistan which has humanity and non-discrimination. Religious scholars have had a big role in making and preserving this face. What the people face in the region is terrorism and not sectarianism. If it were a sectarian issue, why would foreign tourists have been killed on Nanga Parbat?" - *A relative of a victim of violence on the road to*

Gilgit-Baltistan

Voices and institutions

“We are being made to feel like second-class Pakistanis. There is a real sense of deprivation. Afghan nationals buy national identity cards and get all the rights under the constitution overnight. Why don't we, who have not spared any sacrifice for Pakistan, get the same privilege? If talks can be offered to those who openly declare rebellion against Pakistan, torch the national flag and disrespect the Quaid-e-Azam, why can the people of Gilgit-Baltistan not be engaged in talks? The FATA residents have representation in parliament, but we do not. We believe that if we have representation there then our voice would also reach Pakistan. Voices are magnified by institutions.” - *A Shia cleric*

Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat

Representatives of Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat told the fact-finding mission that all sectarian riots in Gilgit-Baltistan were rooted in a desire among various sects to suppress or supersede other communities. Every community shared part of the blame. Gilgit-Baltistan was geographically divided along sectarian lines. Gilgit had perhaps the best mix of Shia, Ahl-e-Sunnat and Ismailis.

The reform package could not be rejected in its entirety as in terms of representation there had been some improvements. The system would prove to be beneficial if those who had to implement it were themselves capable and competent.

There had been discrimination against Sunnis in government jobs. They had faced excesses in the name of merit. No educated member of the Ahl-e-Sunnat community had got a government job in Skardu.

There had never been any clash in Baltistan only because of the positive role of Shia and Sunni clerics. The Shia religious scholars were very well intentioned.

Conspiracies, extremism and harmony

“There is extremism on both sides. We vehemently reject the Taliban thought. The use of force to reform someone is not something that the religion teaches us. When the Shia were massacred on the road the Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat condemned it unequivocally and called it a conspiracy against Islam and humanity. We believe the conspiracy was hatched by agents of a neighbouring country and a western power. Their henchmen were local. Immediately after news of the Chilas massacre reached us our *ulema* went to Chilas and condemned the killing of Shias. We condoled with the Shias and grieved for their loss. On April 3, religious scholars arranged cars and sent women and men who had survived the attack or were stranded in Chilas after transport stopped on the KKH following the Chilas attack. Good and bad clerics are everywhere. When the massacres occurred on the road, some impact and tension was visible in Skardu too. Some unreasonable persons started harassing people from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. I called up

[leading Shia religious leader] Sheikh Muhammad Hassan Jafari and drew his attention to the intimidation. Sheikh Jafari told me that he had already condemned the behaviour in his Friday sermon as *haram*. We have also condemned the killings of mountaineers on Nanga Parbat and government officials in acts of terrorism.” - *A representative of Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat*

Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees

In a meeting with the Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees in Skardu, the HRCP team was informed that the predominant majority in Baltistan did not approve of sectarian killings and riots. Asked if they saw improvement in the sectarian situation or whether they considered that the differences and grievances were growing, the Tanzeem said sectarianism had been brought to Gilgit-Baltistan by those who came from ‘down area’ in the last decade or so. They had been trying to influence people but Ahl-e-Hadees ulema had foiled these attempts in collaboration with Shia scholars.

1- Ulema of both sects met whenever there was some tension and resolved the issue. In 2005 after the murder of a Shia religious scholar, some miscreants torched the entire markaz of Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees in Skardu. If that had happened in Gilgit there would have been a strong reaction and retaliation but the Ahl-e-Hadees remained patient and urged tolerance and restraint.

2- Intelligence agencies should be aware of the culprits involved in the Chilas killings. Their inability to track down the killers had raised questions.

3- Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees opposed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi’s view that Shias were kafir (infidel).

4- Those who felt happy over the killing if the victims were Shia were sinners.

5- Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees used to get financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, but that had stopped after 9/11.

Stance on the Chilas killings

“We had condemned the killing of Shias in Chilas as a crime, and an illegitimate and haram act. Whoever did that was an enemy of Pakistan and of Islam. Why do the government and all the intelligence agencies not know who did it? If they do not know then what right do they have to govern and if they know then only they can explain why the killings were not prevented or the killers not proceeded against.” - The head of Tanzeem Ahl-e-Hadees in Skardu

Civil society and professional bodies

The journalists’ story

The journalists in Skardu, including representatives of the local media organisations and correspondents for Pakistan-based print and electronic media, stated that every time a new government took over it promptly pointed to the previous administration’s failure to resolve the perennial question of identity and a constitutional status for this region. But they did not do anything about it themselves.

A range of responses were giving regarding the significance, impact and implementation of the 2009 Order. Some called it “a better journey towards

a desirable destination” while others said the order “did nothing except rebranding designations” and “the change had not reached the common citizen”. Deficiencies were pointed out but the new system was said to be an improvement on what was there earlier. However, questions were raised about the ability and commitment of those who were supposed to implement the system. “National political parties have failed to give us good individuals that can run the system. There were instances where a well-educated person had applied for the party ticket to contest elections but he was overlooked and an illiterate person awarded the ticket,” a journalist stated.

Some media persons said that the Gilgit-Baltistan chief minister had much more authority now. Service structures had been developed for doctors, teachers, etc. There was now a commissioner in Baltistan. The common citizen had benefited.

Several journalists highlighted that the 2009 Order was not even an act of parliament, but a mere executive order. “When our court itself is not constitutional, how will it ensure that we have constitutional rights?” one journalist asked. Another referred to the system under the 2009 Order as glorified district government but insisted that that should be persisted with and improved.

As was the case with all the meetings the mission held in Gilgit-Baltistan, the journalists looked at the 2009 Order from a personal perspective. They said that earlier there were only a few newspapers in Gilgit-Baltistan, but the number had now grown to dozens. The nature of the region’s economy was such that there was not much private advertisement. It was claimed that the government often gave advertisements to dummy newspapers or to those among the functional ones that were in the government’s good books. There was no coherent policy on the media or advertisement by government departments.

Under a recent policy, government advertisements were only being given to newspapers that had their own printing press. Some journalists claimed that pro-government newspapers had been provided funds to buy printing press.

The gist of the Skardu journalists’ views was:

In 1970, the first printing press started operating in Gilgit-Baltistan and the first newspaper was launched in 1987. No wage board award had been announced for practicing journalists. Poor working conditions and exploitation of journalists by newspaper owners were commonplace and many got between Rs 3,000 and Rs 5,000 as monthly salary.

The local journalists’ voice did not go beyond the mountainous area and even the Pakistani media organisation that they worked for gave little coverage to Gilgit-Baltistan’s issues. That had resulted in the problems of the region being confined to the mountainous region.

The TV news channels in Pakistan were not even paying their Gilgit-Baltistan correspondents the meager amounts they paid to such staff in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Access to information was the basic right of journalists and other citizens. Elsewhere in Pakistan this right was acknowledged at least in letter

if not in spirit. That right had not been extended to the region. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a circular issued a couple of years ago had directed government officials not to share information with the media. Practicing journalists were not invited to official events. Instead of supporting and training journalists and taking steps for their welfare, journalists and newspaper offices were attacked and when they protested for their rights police were unleashed on them.

Because of their geographical location, both Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan were vitally important for numerous external powers. People in Gilgit-Baltistan apprehended that the fate of this region could not be decided without these powers' wishes. They insisted that it was only the will of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan that should matter.

The leaders of the political parties in Pakistan did not understand the Gilgit-Baltistan issues. The region was not counted in the constitution of Pakistan as a part of Pakistan and it also did not have a separate constitution of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Ninety-five percent of Gilgit-Baltistan's population supported the region's merger with Pakistan. If maintaining the status quo in Gilgit-Baltistan was in the national interest earlier, persisting with that now would not only be against national interest, it would also be dangerous. Denial of a legal status in the federation of Pakistan would fuel exasperation and alienation among the youth.

The integration problems of a province that isn't

“Like the other parts of Pakistan we too should get representation in parliament. If the region is not given representation even in vital national institutions such as the National Finance Commission what is the hope of us getting representation in the civil services, etc?”

Elsewhere in Pakistan you might hear about separatist movements. In Gilgit-Baltistan, almost to the last person we have been waging a movement for participation and inclusion in Pakistan. We have been locked out of representation in the high forums of decision making. They call the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) *illaqa ghayr* (meaning an alien territory), and even the people of *illaqa ghayr* have representation in the Senate and the National Assembly and we do not.

We had no link with India yesterday and have none today. But we have been waiting for a very long time for our rights in the federation of Pakistan. Those must not be denied any longer.

Bracketing Gilgit-Baltistan with the Kashmir issue and saying that the status of our region would be determined after the Kashmir issue is resolved is to disregard our sacrifice and our keen desire to join Pakistan. It also ignores the human problem that we face. If Gilgit-Baltistan is indeed considered a disputed territory in the same manner as Pakistani- and Indian-administered Kashmir are then why is there no consultation with and representation of the region in Pakistan's delegation to the United Nations? We are not Kashmiris. Perhaps it was thought that because we overwhelmingly support merger with Pakistan, clubbing our region with Kashmir would mean that our vote for Pakistan would cancel out any

rigging in Indian-controlled Kashmir whenever a plebiscite took place. We are a part of Pakistan and must be acknowledged as such.” A journalist working with an English language newspaper

Women’s views on rights and empowerment

The mission met a group of women students and working women and asked them if the situation had improved for women and if their voices were being heard more under the new system.

The ‘empowerment order’ was welcome as it brought some change. In Skardu, women had growing realization that they had the right to have control over their lives and things had changed for the better in that respect.

In the Karakorum University campus in Skardu there were more girl students than boys.

Girls should be awarded scholarships to enable them to realise their potential by getting more education.

Girls’ education had been supported by clerics in Baltistan. There was minimal sectarian tension in Baltistan because of the progressive role of clerics and religious scholars.

Girls were consulted regarding the decision about their marriage. However, some participants in the discussion said that daughters were reluctant to turn down the prospective spouses suggested by their parents.

Practices like karo kari were absent.

There was some disagreement on whether a fatwa (religious edict) had been issued in Baltistan against girls using cell phones. However, there was some mention of references in Friday sermons to the use of cell phones by girls for “improper conversation”.

The lawyers’ argument

The Skardu Bar has 52 members. The lawyers in Skardu who met the fact-finding mission stated that under the new system there had been some positive impact in terms of dispensation of justice.

There used to be two judicial magistrates in Baltistan and dispensation of justice meant nothing more than adjournments on most dates of hearing. With the judges appointed now there was better access and entertainment of cases. However, there was a lack of coordination among the judiciary and other institutions and enforcement was lacking.

The incidence of crime was not too high in Baltistan. There was also under-reporting, but there was little heinous crime. There had been one murder in Skardu in the whole of 2013. In one police station in Skardu, there had been a total of 137 cases in all year.

There was one women’s police station in Skardu. The only female lawyer in Skardu had left in 2008 because she did not have any briefs.

As far as Baltistan was concerned police had had a positive role. There was emphasis on informal community policing. The local culture enabled intervention by elders in resolution of disputes in a manner that did not breed enmity for the future. Generally, only the more serious crimes were reported to the police.

A chief court circuit bench had been established in Skardu but there was only a touring judge for the bench. There had been complaints that the

judges got perks and benefits twice. They got pension from chief court when they got inducted to Supreme Appellate Court.

The 2009 Order was a step forward but full provincial status was still not granted and no representation had been given in the National Assembly and Senate.

Students of an 'international university'

Students of Skardu campus of Karakoram International University complained about non-existence of a proper campus. They highlighted lack of university transport as most of the 450 students had to travel long distances to attend classes. A quarter of the students had left or stopped attending classes because of the difficulties. The problems were greater for women students. There was lack of a science faculty and there was no library. The prime minister had promised that fee would be waived for two semesters but the university administration had asked the students to pay the supposedly waived-off fee.

Transporters

The mission met representatives of the Baltistan Transporters' Association. The buses, vans and coasters of the association's members were the principle means of travel for the common citizen from Baltistan to Rawalpindi as well as to and from Gilgit and Siachen. They said their occupation was no longer profitable because of the law and order issue. They traced the beginning of their problems to the sectarian attacks in 2005.

The transporters complained about the convoy system started after the Chilas massacre on April 3, 2012 and that it had increased the travel time to 36 hours (twice the normal travel time) between Skardu and Rawalpindi as well as forced them to hike the fare for the passengers. After the killings on the road to Gilgit-Baltistan, it had been made mandatory for buses to travel in convoys. Buses from Skardu bound for Rawalpindi took four hours to reach a place called Sassi. If they reached Sassi at 10 pm. They had to wait there until 6 in the morning when they were allowed to proceed in a convoy escorted by police vehicles.

It was very difficult for the buses in the convoy to stop. There were severe difficulties for any bus developed a mechanical fault or had a flat tyre on the way or if a passenger had to stop for medical reasons or to respond to nature's call. Even when the vehicles had to stay back in a town, they had to wait until they could join the next convoy.

The KKH was one of the key routes in the world. Seven buses were burnt in the Chilas attack but no compensation had been paid. The transportation business had plummeted to 25 percent of what it was before the Chilas attack. From buses running eight different times a day to Rawalpindi they now ran only twice a day, when the convoys departed.

Rent-a-car service charged Rs 25,000 from Skardu to Rawalpindi for four passengers. The journey was completed in 19 hours because cars were not obliged to travel as parts of convoys. It took a bus 36 hours to make the same journey.

The transporters proposed patrolling by police and other law enforcement agencies along with check-posts at sensitive spots to provide security for road-users with normal running of public transport vehicles. The new force

for securing the KKH could be useful but the transporters apprehended that it was being created only to treat the symptoms.

The killings on Nanga Parbat were not religiously motivated. That had been done to ruin the economy for which the local people had also been used. The money to cause bloodshed was coming from abroad.

‘An international game’

“The transporters consider the area from Chilas to Jaglot as the most dangerous. The security escorts are clearly not enough. What is the point in the security agencies waiting for an attack before they act? Intelligence should be used to track down those who plan and launch these attacks and the puppet-masters exposed. This is not a local crime; it is an international game and demands an appropriate response and preventive action. They create a spark in the hope that that would cause an inferno.” - *A transporter*

The miners’ story

Gilgit is the centre of Pakistan Gemstone Association. The representatives and members of All Pakistan Gems and Minerals Association Baltistan in Skardu said that few other places in the world were more richly endowed by nature’s treasures than Gilgit-Baltistan, but lack of an official policy hindered investment.

There was a lack of finances / loans for those who wanted to engage in mining.

In the absence of any official policy, people engaged in mining on their land and fields in the same manner as they would engage in agriculture on their land. There was strong demand for developing and implementing a proper mineral policy.

Private village committees oversaw mining. Leases of land for mining were not awarded by the government and some speakers stressed that such leases should not be awarded by the government and village committees should retain control.

Minerals and forests were among the legislative subjects for the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, which had not become functional because the members that the centre was supposed to nominate to the council had not been named. This had delayed policy making and hindered development.

Meetings with police officers

The fact-finding mission met police officers, including a senior superintendent of police (SSP), in Skardu. The mission members shared their pleasant surprise over the positive perception of the police in Baltistan. They learned that there were few serious crimes in Skardu. In the whole year, there had only been 190 first information reports of all manners of crime in all police stations of Skardu. These included the only murder case in Skardu during the year. The region had a culture of non-violence and influence of Buddhism too. The police officers said that Taliban had no influence in Baltistan. However, the police officials said that over time things seemed to be changing for the worse in many respects. Earlier, it was impossible to find hashish in Baltistan but now that and other narcotics were not that difficult to obtain. They called reform of the police service structure up to Grade 20 following the 2009 Order a positive development.

There was no terrorism in Gilgit-Baltistan before the Kargil war. Baltistan had always been the abode of law-abiding people and even the killings and violence elsewhere in Gilgit-Baltistan had been done by outsiders.

People had demonstrated great patience even when dead bodies from the Chilas massacre reached Baltistan. Ulema were respected and they said that those who did not commit the crime must not be targeted in revenge. Masjid committees had played a very positive role.

The 1988 lashkarkashi (attack by lashkar) was the catalyst for extremism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Clerics were involved as were weapons smugglers who wanted the weapons' sales to increase. In the 1950s and '60s households that kept guns were looked down upon with contempt.

The clerics persuaded the citizens that they had to defend themselves because they said that in the regime of Gen Ziaul Haq in 1988 the lashkar had crossed so many districts to reach several Shia-populated villages of Gilgit district including Jalalabad and Minawar and massacred Shias and burned their houses. They said that that was impossible without the connivance of the rulers and asked the Shias of Gilgit to prepare to defend themselves.

Some people had been exploited because they respected clerics without realizing if they were well-read or not.

The rot could be stopped. The road would be secured with a 400-strong force of police, Rangers and Gilgit-Baltistan Scouts.

It was disappointing that the transporters had refused to pay miniscule sums for passenger insurance. Each passenger could be insured for a mere 22 rupees but the transporters had declined to pay that sum.

There were some nationalists in Ghizer but people had not gone along with them.

Some clerics had been using religious crutches with an eye to the next elections. Clerics who promoted tolerance and harmony in their Friday sermon had been taunted for being cowards. The next elections will be contested by religious scholars of all sects in Gilgit-Baltistan.

One hundred families had been displaced after the Kargil war. Water had been blocked to the bordering village by the Indians and crops had withered away. Part of the compensation had been paid to the displaced families to rebuild their houses.

Visit to Attabad in Hunza

From Skardu the fact-finding team travelled to Gilgit. After an overnight stay there it proceeded to Gojal valley in Hunza-Nagar district where a massive landslide in January 2010 at Attabad village had killed 20 people. The landslide annihilated three villages, Attabad, Sarat and Ayinabad. It also blocked the Hunza River and created a huge lake which submerged three other villages- Shishkat, Gulmit, Ghulkin- and created nearly 3,000 internally displaced persons. The water body had come to be called the Attabad lake.

The affected villages had a combined population of over 7,400 people. Around 3,000 IDPs continued to live in three temporary camps established for them since January 2010. The water level had decreased somewhat after a spillway was built, allowing discharge of water but it appeared that the lake was there to stay, at least in the near future.

Floating over submerged villages

The rising water had also submerged the KKH and nearly three and a half years after the landslide the road link had not been restored when the fact-finding team went there. The mission members saw work to rebuild the destroyed section of the KKH by burrowing tunnels through the mountain to protect the road from landslides in the future. The team also saw huge amounts of sand that the receding emerald green lake water had deposited on agriculture land.

Part of the displaced population had been housed in a camp in Aliabad in Hunza. The villagers that had stayed behind could only be accessed through boats across the 24-kilometer-long lake.

Proceeding from Attabad, the edge of the lake seemed like a tiny primitive harbour and boats of all sizes ferried people, vehicles and other machinery. The team met members of a body of affected citizens. In a reflection of their priorities, the first concern that the affected people expressed was that they had become unable to pay their children's tuition fees and education expenses on account of the Attabad disaster. They were part of the Ismaili community with a lot of focus on education, so children went to school and college and some studied as far away as Karachi. Some of the main observations of the affected community were:

Damage from the disaster could have been minimised if the authorities had given accurate information about the extent to which the water could rise after the blockage and the villages that could be affected. More urgent efforts to clear the debris and create a spillway could also have prevented the losses in the summer when the glacial melt swelled the Hunza River.

Despite very harsh weather, arrangements for evacuation and provision of shelter for the affected communities had been unduly delayed.

In summer, people paid for the boat rides to cross the lake. The boats stopped operating before nightfall and were also suspended when it got too windy. The lake froze in the winter and helicopters were needed in case of emergency.

The landslide and the flooding of villages caused by the rising water had affected houses and agriculture land. During a visit to Gilgit-Baltistan, the

prime minister had announced a compensation package of Rs 0.63 million per family as far as the houses were concerned. The compensation had been much less than the losses. No compensation had been given for some of the region's finest apricot trees as well as eucalyptus worth billions of rupees. The flow of tourists to the villages had stopped.

Nearly 30 percent affected people had rebuilt their houses in Gulmit but they were now under debt.

The media initially covered the Attabad disaster, leading to some interest elsewhere in Pakistan but later even the local media had lost interest.

There was a 10-bed hospital building in Gulmit but it neither had machines, nor medicine and doctors.

The spillway needed to be widened at a fast pace so that the water in Attabad lake could be drained and the owners could reclaim their land, which was the source of their livelihood.

No amount from Benazir Income Support Programme had been distributed among the victims of Attabad disaster.

IDPs in Aliabad

On the way back from Gojal, the HRCP team visited a settlement of the displaced persons from Shishkat in Aliabad locality of Hunza. They did not know how much longer they would remain in the camp or what they could do to end their predicament.

Although the displaced persons were thankful for the shelter at the camp, the weather got so harsh in the summer that they could not stay indoors and it got so cold in the winter that they needed to keep a fire going all night to stay warm.

The federal government had announced around 0.6 million rupees as compensation for each family but camp residents were not sure who had got the compensation. On August 11, 2011, a few dozen displaced persons had protested on the main road in Aliabad against non-payment of compensation. The protesters were beaten and two displaced persons, a young boy and his father, were shot and killed in police firing. The killing of the two IDPs had scared the displaced persons from raising their voice and they were not sure when they would get the compensation.

Several citizens, including political activists, were subsequently arrested. Five persons from Shishkat were in jail in Gilgit because of the 2011 protest case. They had been charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act and the families did not have the money to pursue the cases.

There was no facility for medical treatment of the displaced. If they died there was no land to bury them.

They were given flour, cooking oil, salt, lentils, and some money through Watan Card.

Visit to Gilgit

The mission members returned from Hunza to Gilgit, where they held meetings with religious and political leaders, representatives of civil society and senior administration officials.

Musings of the civil society

Accounts of writers and artists

The HRCP mission met writers and artists, which included several academics. The lack of constitutional status was the first concern they flagged. They appeared convinced that the geostrategic situation of Gilgit-Baltistan and the interest of several nuclear powers there was behind the bloodshed in the region. They said that a western power did not want Pakistan to give land access to China and was therefore promoting sectarianism and intolerance. They said that “one or two Muslim nations” also had influence in Gilgit-Baltistan. Some also believed that elements of the state had a role in promoting sectarian violence.

Sarzameen-e-bay-aayeen

“Ours is a well known region for many reasons. But the biggest distinction of this region now is that it is a sarzameen-e-bay-aayeen (land without a constitution).” - A poet

Missing expressions

“Our poetry does not talk about romance. My romance is the hungry child. All our literary tools, all our metaphors, and expressions of love and devotion are for Pak sarzameen and Gilgit-Baltistan. We have unconditional love for Pakistan. We have placed in Pakistan’s lap this land of untold treasures. We are simple people. We are Pakistanis and are in love with Pakistan. It is in our blood. Why are we still hanging in the balance between India and Pakistan? Why are we not in a tighter clasp with the rest of Pakistan? If there is a hindrance that should be explained to us.” - A lecturer at an educational institution in Gilgit

The 2009 Order did not meet the demands of the people for a provincial status and representation in the National Assembly and Senate. Students, journalists and businessmen demanded that Gilgit-Baltistan should be clearly mentioned in the constitution as a province and should get all the fundamental rights mentioned in the constitution and not merely those listed in the 2009 Order. They also wanted to be able to move the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The Gilgit-Baltistan higher courts were inferior in status to the high courts in the province of Pakistan.

The right to live and move freely was restricted and the right to (Pakistani) nationality was not available. There were people who said that it was a mere matter of interpretation of the 2009 Order. The fear was that the ambiguity in words should not become the people’s destiny.

There were no-go areas in Gilgit where people from various sects could not go.

There was severe dearth of libraries in the whole of Gilgit-Baltistan. The only functioning public library was situated in a no-go area in Gilgit. There

was no auditorium for literary and cultural activities. People were isolated in their own shells on account of lack of exchange of views and social interaction and that had given rise to suffocation and frustration.

The region was facing a deficit of many sorts in the present situation. In some areas the literacy rate was better but in others it was abysmal.

Sectarianism and terrorism were alien plants which had come to Gilgit-Baltistan from elsewhere and efforts had been made to ensure that they took root here. Communities were being pitted against each other in a planned manner.

Despite much bloodshed, there was little animosity or hatred among the people. Those had been created. People had married across sects. The tragedy was that whenever people grew closer together a massacre occurred.

A big Silk Route festival was held in late October in Gilgit-Baltistan, and ambassadors from many countries were there. But the local people were kept away from the event. There was no public participation.

Many people believed that sectarian conflict or “bloodshed tournaments” were state-sponsored. The calendar of events was predetermined. After a short stretch of peace people apprehended that the sectarian bloodletting would resume.

The 2009 Order gave a protocol, but it had had little impact on people’s lives. From Shandur to Kargil no new school had been built since the 2009 elections. Lack of legislation reflected poorly on the legislative assembly.

The people were pro-democracy but in their experience only the dictators had done any work that benefited them.

The people would vote in the coming elections but not for the lot in the government. The incumbency factor would also go against them.

There was no reason why the Kargil-Ladakh border should not be opened.

Selling the future

“Jobs are being sold. The going rate for a schoolteacher position in Gilgit-Baltistan is Rs 300,000 per job. They could at least have a merit list even if they have to sell the jobs. How can we expect a healthy new generation when the teachers they get are not the best human material?” - *A teacher*

Women’s rights activists

In a meeting with women’s rights activists in Gilgit, the fact-finding team members learned of the difficulties for women in the region. The activists recounted the advantages of places like Hunza where NGOs working on women’s rights and health and education for women were not taboos. In narrating extremes, they highlighted that there was no gynecologist in Diamer district, because such a prospect apparently disturbed the clerics in the area. Women in Nagar were being kept backward because of male resistance to their education, but women organisations were working to improve the situation by persuading the parents to ensure education for their daughters too.

Gilgit-Baltistan was composed of so many communities confined until recently to their respective valleys. There were distances among closed

communities, including cultural distances. The two major constituents of the region, Gilgit and Baltistan, were mutually different. Gilgit-Baltistan had a tribal culture and every tribe had its own jirga for conflict resolution. Gilgit was a mix of all those cultures and tribal norms.

While the extent of women's awakening in Gilgit-Baltistan could not be compared to the same for women from 'down areas', things had improved a great deal over the last few decades because of women's participation in different fields. Women were socially in a weaker position but were getting more aware of their rights because of education.

Women activism had developed in Gilgit-Baltistan in recent years, with the launch of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) activities, particularly due to the emphasis on education and establishment of women's development organisations. The tribal stranglehold over women had relaxed somewhat.

There was a need for community mobilisation to get a fair deal for women. Reservation of seats for women in the legislature had contributed to women's empowerment. Women must have more political participation including seats reserved for them in the legislative assembly and representation in other positions of decision-making.

Violence against women, the so-called honour killing and child abuse were the main concerns of women's rights organisations. There were incidents of honour killing, which were in reality sectarian issues. Marriage of minor girls was also often because of sectarian reasons in areas with a cross-sect presence, as there were fears that the girls might get involved with someone from a different sect.

It was a shortcoming of the civil society in Gilgit-Baltistan that it had failed to appropriately investigate whether the deaths of many women were 'honour killings', accidental drowning or suicide.

Women could not use a bus in Gilgit without being harassed.

There had been reports of honour killings in Diamer and denial of medical treatment to women because of fears among men that that would compromise women's pardah.

Challenges for the physically challenged

Representatives of the Visually-impaired Persons' Rehabilitation Association (VIPRA) met the mission to explain the peculiar problems of individuals with impaired vision in Gilgit-Baltistan. President of VIPRA who also had impaired vision said that since he used a white can and sometimes fell while walking on the road, people often mistook him for a beggar and tried to give him money. "How many people can I explain it to that just because I cannot see as well as they can does not make me a beggar," he said.

The excluded ones

"The citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan are treated as third-degree citizens but special persons are not even considered human beings. Animals too should be treated well but we are treated worse than animals." - The president of VIPRA

Only in Gilgit was there a primary educational institution for special children and that too had no hostel. That meant that in a vast area of great distances like Gilgit-Baltistan anyone living outside Gilgit had no opportunity to benefit from even that primary educational institution.

There was one percent job quota for the physically challenged during the rule of Gen Ziaul Haq and it had been raised to two percent during the rule of Gen Pervez Musharraf. However, the quota was exhausted in lower grades. A visually-impaired young man with a masters degree in business administration had been hired as a naib qasid (in grade 2) at the accountant general's office.

Besides access to education, rehabilitation was a big problem for the physically challenged.

The government should conduct a survey of the number and needs of the physically challenged persons in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The visually impaired, mentally retarded, hearing impaired and physically handicapped individuals needed different specialised care that was lacking in Gilgit-Baltistan. There was a need for more institutions for physically challenged persons, particularly for visually impaired persons, throughout Gilgit-Baltistan and these institutions should have hostels, transport and other necessary facilities.

This vulnerable section of society also faced social problems. The parents and families of physically challenged children tried to hide them, considered them a burden, did not attach as much importance to their education and gave them little attention.

The media was also not sensitive to the issues of the physically challenged.

Millions of rupees had been spent on the polo team in Gilgit and yet they had never managed to beat the team from Chitral. If only a fraction of that money could be used to send the physically challenged residents of Gilgit-Baltistan to Special Olympics and other international events they could gain confidence and win laurels for the region and the country.

Supreme Appellate Court Bar Association

The lawyers began the argument for a constitutional status for the region with the historical background from the days of 13 kingdoms, followed by the conquest of the region by the ruler of Kashmir, the struggle that led to the establishment of 'Islami Jamhooria-e-Gilgit' in 1947 and the subsequent agreement with Pakistan, which converted it into an agency and appointed a political agent who ruled after imposing Frontier Crimes Regulation here, which were withdrawn only in the 1970s during the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. They made the following observations:

The constitutional dilemma for Gilgit-Baltistan had continued for over 66 years. In Al-Jihad Trust versus the Federation of Pakistan the Supreme Court of Pakistan had observed that the federal government must take appropriate administrative/legislative measures within six months to make necessary amendments in the Constitution and the relevant statutes to

ensure that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan enjoyed their fundamental rights. The 2009 executive order of a ministry was in clear violation of the 1999 Supreme Court order. The Ministry of Kashmir Affairs did not have the authority to make laws and the 2009 Order was an executive order by that ministry.

The biggest drawback and contradiction of the notion of empowerment was the fact that Gilgit-Baltistan had not been granted the authority to amend the 2009 Order.

Gilgit-Baltistan faced serious issues regarding dispensation of justice. The chief court was not equal in status to a high court. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan were second-class citizens and the courts given to them were also second class. Unlike the courts in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), the Gilgit-Baltistan courts were not empowered except for limited matters. The very edifice of the judicial system was flawed; the courts were not constitutional forums of justice but executive courts.

The lawyers wondered what the label Supreme Appellate Court meant. They suggested that Gilgit-Baltistan should either have a system like AJK or one with ingress into the mainstream Pakistani judicial system.

There was a big difference between the citizens of Pakistan and of Gilgit-Baltistan. The former could become the prime minister of Pakistan while the latter could not even vote to elect that prime minister.

In numerous instances, either important laws or appropriate forums were missing in the region. Many laws in Pakistan needed to be extended to Gilgit-Baltistan. There was no codified family law and it took a decade to decide the cases.

A judge brought from outside had been made in-charge of three courts. The civil judge served both as a family court judge and a judicial magistrate.

Provision of free legal aid was necessary in the region as the common people lacked financial resources.

The people and the region of Gilgit-Baltistan were not part of India. They certainly were a part of the Kashmir dispute. The Indian-administered Kashmir had protection under two sets of provisions. It had its own constitution that gave it authority over all except four subjects and it also had a special status and rights under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The AJK legislative assembly had framed its constitution in 1956, which provided a bicameral parliament.

Kashmir was liberated by the tribesmen from FATA and the army, but Gilgit-Baltistan was liberated by the local people without any help from anyone.

The region should at least be given those rights that had been granted to AJK. Opening the border crossing at Kargil was an economic issue, an issue of tourism and of meeting of divided families. AJK had such a link across the Line of Control but Gilgit-Baltistan did not.

When there was unrest in Balochistan the chief justice and the prime minister had gone there. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan also wanted to be called Pakistan's citizens now. When India could do it in the part of

Kashmir it controlled then how could Pakistan doing the same weaken the case for Kashmir? If one wanted to be extra cautious a provisional arrangement could be made and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan given vote as Pakistani citizens.

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme

Members of the mission visited the office of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and learned how the organisation had contributed to improving the lives of the people in Gilgit-Baltistan through thousands of link roads and hundreds of micro hydro-electric projects. The programme had always been considered as non-communal and above sectarian biases. Since the beginning of the programme, however, the orthodox point of view in Diamer had kept that district from benefitting from the AKRSP projects. They had stated that they did not want the organisation's staff in Diamer and had created hurdles in development activity. After the floods in 2010, for the first time, some of the Diamer residents had said that they needed help from the organisation.

Political parties' brief

Pakistan Peoples' Party

The HRCP team shared with the PPP representatives in Gilgit the various observations it had recorded during the mission. They responded in the following manner:

The PPP had the credit of abolishing both the Rajgi and FCR systems from Gilgit-Baltistan.

The 2009 Order had given an identity to Gilgit-Baltistan. It had also facilitated representation for women. In a poor region with no industry and little by way of employment opportunities, the government had given 15,000 jobs. There could be a case of some favouritism somewhere, but the jobs had certainly not been sold.

New districts had also been established by the party's government

Reforms had been carried out in judiciary and a chief court had been established.

When the PPP came to power the people in Gilgit-Baltistan were so desperate that there had been some rise in support for nationalist elements amid frustration among the youth. The 2009 Order was a timely measure that addressed people's aspirations. More should be done to give the region full provincial status. When the PPP came to power in Islamabad again the remaining reform agenda would also be fulfilled.

Muttahida Qaumi Movement

The 2009 Order was an executive order and not an act of parliament. It had empowered the bureaucracy instead of the Gilgit-Baltistan people.

If Gilgit-Baltistan was a province then it should have been invested with the power to resolve the issues it faced.

The people needed to be informed whether they were Pakistanis or not. In all important events or on national occasions the four provincial chief ministers were seen but the Gilgit-Baltistan chief minister was not seen there.

The main demand of the people was that Gilgit-Baltistan should be made a province constitutionally and given representation in the National Assembly and Senate. The people did not want an Azad Kashmir-like system.

Most bureaucrats and other officers posted in Gilgit-Baltistan invariably started acting as rulers.

Corruption was rampant. Jobs in all departments, including police, education and excise and taxation, had been given either against money or on political basis.

Customs officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were involved in malpractices and checked Chinese goods when they entered the province, although the goods had already checked at the border customs post. The province also charged a levy on the value of goods passing through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was a completely arbitrary levy and akin to extortion.

The government could do much more and much more promptly to alleviate the problems of the people affected by the Attabad disaster.

The quota reserved for students from Gilgit-Baltistan in educational institutions of the country should be enhanced.

Progressive and nationalist parties

In its meeting with representatives of progressive and nationalist parties the fact-finding team strived to determine how much consumption there was of progressive thinking, how much recognition and support there was for the same in the next elections and whether that played any role in stopping sectarianism and terrorism. Some participants in the meeting called the 2009 Order ceremonial and said that it was not a constitutional order and lacked legal status. The revenue-generating sources had been kept with the federation in the name of Gilgit-Baltistan Council⁹ and the policy for the region was made by non-local bureaucracy. One participant in the meeting claimed that large-scale arrests had taken place on the eve of the 2009 election and those protesting for their rights had been jailed on charges under Anti-Terrorism Act. A representative of a nationalist party said that progressive parties demanded provincial status for Gilgit-Baltistan and nationalists sought elections under UN auspices. The participants said that when people were deprived of something it was only natural that they would raise their voice. The representatives of these parties expressed concern over politics in the name of religion in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Divisions were being promoted and an environment of fear created which made the work of those pushing the agenda of a market economy easier.

There were perpetual curbs on public gathering and strong-arm tactics were used against protesters.

Only some clerics, local elite and contractors had benefited from the 2009 Order. They had won the elections. The common citizen's situation was indescribably precarious.

The protocol and security escorts for elected representatives were an unjustified burden on the economy. The legislative assembly did not have much more power than a municipal committee.

In terms of the energy corridor being promoted by the prime minister, the people did not oppose development but they should be informed what exactly was being developed.

There was no sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Parties from outside and from 'down area' were responsible for fanning sectarianism.

Over 100 cases had been registered against nationalist leaders. How could a case of sedition against Pakistan be registered when Gilgit-Baltistan was not counted as a part of Pakistan by Islamabad?

The law barring non-locals from buying land and properties, which was in force in Azad Kashmir had not been extended to Gilgit-Baltistan. That was discriminatory and allowed outsiders to grab Gilgit-Baltistan land.

Merit was not the criteria for hiring for government job, which had been sold for Rs 300,000 or more per job.

Human rights and civil society organisations in Pakistan, particularly HRCP, should focus more on Gilgit-Baltistan. An independent and unbiased commission should hold the assembly elections.

Yearning for a level-playing field

“When the administration made the mosque strong and promotions and transfers took place on clerics’ phone calls, the Gilgit-Baltistan youth went under that umbrella. Sectarian groups are stronger in Gilgit-Baltistan because of the administration’s support. The progressive elements could demonstrate their impact and role if the government did not interfere.” - *A political activist*

Considering matters of faith

Meeting with Masajid Board

In 2012, the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly passed a law, called the Regulation of Masajid Act.¹⁰ The law was aimed at promoting communal harmony and streamlining the functioning of mosques. A Masajid Board comprising respected members of Shia and Sunni sects was notified under the law and the members volunteered to strive for peace through social engagement and promotion of tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

The HRCP mission met members of the Masajid Board to learn about their role in confronting sectarian tensions and hatred. Members of the board said that such hatred was never visible before 1970. By 2005 on account of big attacks the sectarian division had peaked. In the same year, a Grand Aman (peace) Jirga comprising an equal number of Shias and Sunnis (18 each) was formed, which prepared a compromise document that was instrumental in bringing peace to a Gilgit scarred by sectarian bloodletting. Then a Masajid Board and a Parliamentary Aman Committee comprising 10 persons each from the Shia and Sunni communities was formed which contributed to combatting communal animosity and hatred. Members of the committee said they were volunteers even though the government had recognised their role.

In the form of Regulation of Masajid Act, the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly had made the first ever law in the history of Pakistan on sectarian harmony.

That had been in response to efforts to weaken the nation and strengthen notions of sectarian identity. In the form of this law, there was now a practical arrangement in Gilgit-Baltistan to deal with sectarian unrest and discord and this arrangement was better than in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and in fact better than any place in Pakistan.

The people in Gilgit-Baltistan had always been moderate and wanted peace and prosperity. The word sectarian was used only after the construction of the KKH when all sorts of people came to the region from 'down area' and indulged in creating sectarian hatred. Those who engaged in violence and hate mongering were mainly illiterate and extremist fanatics. The sectarian war had claimed the lives of around 1,000 people. Both the Shia and Sunni communities thought that they must put an end to it and managed to gather good people from both sects. They had managed to control 99 percent of the situation.

Taliban had reached Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in some form and had been stopped in Diamer district.

It was not the people of the region fighting on their own. Someone orchestrated these fights. The government said that it was the work of foreign intelligence agencies. But it was Pakistani intelligence agencies' job to stop them. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan were sincere, to Pakistan and among themselves, even after so many had been killed. It was this sincerity that had prevented suicide bombings in the region. That was the reason that mosques and imambargahs had not been targeted.

Members of the Aman Committee and Masajid Board went from door to door to motivate people from both sects not to react if any incident happened.

"Unlike Pakistan, the judiciary was not independent in Gilgit-Baltistan." The judges in Gilgit-Baltistan were honest and competent but they were under pressure. The judiciary was subservient to the bureaucracy when it should have been answerable only to the Supreme Court.

In the same manner as there were efforts to foil the seaport from becoming functional in Gwadar, and terrorists from all over the world had been brought to sabotage that project, so too was the case with Gilgit-Baltistan where a western power and a neighbouring country were involved and engineering trouble because of the route to China.

The factories of *takfeer*¹¹ had been closed and hatred in sermons stopped through constant efforts of members of the Masajid Board. In October 2013 it had been nine months since the last murder motivated by sectarian hatred had taken place.

Gilgit-Baltistan was a poor region and a remote one. It lacked electricity and infrastructure. Things that cost 100 rupees elsewhere in Pakistan cost 150 rupees in Gilgit-Baltistan. For one vacancy there were 500 applications. Yet the people tried to get education even if they had to travel to other parts of Pakistan.

There were no industries in Gilgit-Baltistan and unemployment was acute despite abundance of marble, precious stones, potential for hydro-electricity generation and fruit. The mineral-rich Gilgit-Baltistan should

have an advanced mineral industry for providing jobs and multiplying earnings. Dams could be built to capitalise on the abundant water resources.

Gilgit-Baltistan should at least have an observer in the National Assembly and Senate until the people were granted representation.

The people felt that they had been left at the mercy of bureaucracy. The performance of the administration in Gilgit-Baltistan depended on the quality of officers, the system improved when sincere officers were appointed.

The trouble-makers in Gilgit-Baltistan were not even one percent of the population. It was a riddle why they could not be nabbed in an area that was smaller than Shah Aalmi locality of Lahore. If their names were given to the Masajid Board, its members would go to their homes.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had taken root in Diamer because those responsible for the Lulusar and Chilas massacres had not been arrested. That encouraged the killers and led to killing of foreign mountaineers on Nanga Parbat, dealing a severe blow to Pakistan's reputation.

The area where the Nanga Parbat killings took place was difficult to access and if helicopters had been deployed then the attackers who had walked for hours to reach the base camp and then walked the long way back could have been apprehended or killed. The TTP Diamer had threatened that if the killers were apprehended they would strike again. This madness would end within a month if all government agencies acted with sincerity.

Members of the Shia and Sunni communities were trying to form a jirga in each of the seven Gilgit-Baltistan districts and a jirga comprising representatives from all seven districts to promote peace.

Priorities

“Until this region gets constitutional rights, until the people of this region also have the right to elect the prime minister, president and parliament in Pakistan, all the other measures do not matter. The people do not need anything else more urgently. This region has everything. We need a place in the constitution of Pakistan. We are true Pakistanis of great conviction. How long should we put up with this exclusion? How long must our status be kept disputed?”

“We should at least be given a timeframe for when we would be formally recognised as Pakistanis. The people in this region do not fight among themselves; efforts are invested in making us fight. Our region is stuck in the middle of four nuclear powers.” - *A leader of the Shia community in Gilgit*

When an ant gets upset

“Our forefather won this area for Pakistan and then travelled a great distance on foot to ask the government to come and take control of it.

Our sin is that we live in this region in peace. How many areas are there in Pakistan where they live off Pakistan and still curse the motherland? We can tolerate someone calling our mothers and sisters names but we cannot stand anyone being disrespectful towards Pakistan.

When an ant gets upset, it bites itself. Why should anyone wait for a time when intense loves turns into intense resentment. The so-called

nationalists have no influence here. They are an exceptionally tiny fringe group.

If things do not change fast this could become like some parts of Balochistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is the head of Pakistan. If it is crushed what would happen to Pakistan's integrity? Pakistan's border would then recede to Balakot. In Gilgit-Baltistan there is resentment. If something positive is done it would be highlighted and send a message. Have mercy on this area and focus on it." - *A Sunni member of the Masajid Board*

'The best of Pakistanis'

"Our grievance is that we have been kept deprived of our fundamental rights. Gilgit-Baltistan desperately wants to be formally made a part of Pakistan but that has not been done to-date. If the Kashmir issue remains unresolved for a thousand years are we supposed to remain in this limbo for that long? Are we not the best of Pakistanis? They say we are a part of Kashmir, if we are then give us at least those rights that are there in AJK. But we do not want that, we are a part of Pakistan and should be formally recognised as such." - *A Masajid Board member*

Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat

Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat Gilgit-Baltistan and Kohistan said that it was wrong to call Gilgit-Baltistan a disputed territory as the people of this region had liberated it after rebelling against the occupation of the Dogra rule.

The sectarian bloodshed violated Gilgit-Baltistan's tolerant tradition and non-sectarian identity.

Until 1971, no Pakistani political party was operating in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Resort to violence for enforcement of Shariah was not permissible. Taliban who indulged in terrorism were unacceptable, as were bomb blasts and suicide bombings.

The failure to nab the culprits involved in sectarian killings had raised questions about the capacity, role and commitment of intelligence agencies. If the culprits were not arrested it was only natural that suspicion of acquiescence and worse would arise.

Measure of desperation

"Gilgit-Baltistan is in desperate need of identity. Unless the government of Pakistan wants to divorce Gilgit-Baltistan they should perform a formal *nikah* with this region." *A representative of Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat*

Wahdatul Muslimeen

The mission met representatives of Wahdatul Muslimeen, an organisation that had been raising its voice against faith-based violence targeting the Shia community. The main points that they made were:

This region had been under 700 years of Shia rule with complete harmony. There was no other place in Pakistan where Shia were in majority. There had been efforts to change the demography. Shias were not being allowed to be economically established and they faced discrimination. Out of 24 judges, six were Shia and none Ismaili. Big contracts were not given to Shia contractors. Leases had been given to Pashtuns but not to Shias.

The younger generation of Shias was angry about sectarian violence and harboured sentiments of revenge. Shia clerics might not be able to restrain them indefinitely if more incidents took place.

As soon as the Muslim Gilgit Scouts personnel had heard the name of Pakistan, they had decided to join Pakistan and took a secret oath among themselves. They arrested the Dogra representative and handed him over to Pakistan. From November 1 to 16, 1947 Gilgit-Baltistan remained independent. After that it had not had any identity, neither as an autonomous region, nor Pakistani or Kashmiri.

Voting could be held now on our preference and the percentage noted for whenever the plebiscite was held.

The liberators of Gilgit-Baltistan and heroes of the people had not been accorded the recognition they deserved. Even their names had not been highlighted nor any parks or hospitals named after them. Their names were being forgotten.

If half a dozen people did their job properly the no-go areas in Gilgit would end. Many representatives on the Gilgit-Baltistan Council were local residents. If things were given in the local people's hands the security situation would be rectified. Given the chance, the people could confront and stop the Tehrik-e-Taliban in Diamer.

Gilgit-Baltistan faced the same natural disasters as Pakistan. In addition, there were the man-made disasters. The impact of projects like the Diamer-Bhasha dam on the environment had not been properly assessed. Glaciers formed in dry cold. The lake of the hydroelectric dam would lead to greater humidity, causing more rain and melting of glaciers at a faster rate. With Diamer-Bhasha dam, there was a feeling among the people of the region that they were the ones who were being drowned but the royalty for the Diamer-Bhasha dam was being given to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Attention was not being paid to the Bunji power project, which could be completed at a much lower cost and in a much shorter time.

The forest cover that was 25 percent 40 years ago had fallen to 9 percent.

According to a WAPDA assessment there was 0.15 million megawatt hydroelectricity generation potential in Gilgit-Baltistan. The issue was how that would be transferred to Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan lacked museums to preserve the region's rich heritage.

Some institutions considered civilians suspect and only considered themselves loyal and patriotic.

Not appreciating what they have

“In the form of Bangladesh Pakistan has accepted a severed arm but does not acknowledge what is very much its arm.” - A leader of Wahdatul Muslimeen

Even though there was tremendous scope, no law except the law of preemption had been made here.

Even though Gilgit-Baltistan was not given the status of a province, whenever martial law was declared in the Pakistan it also extended to Gilgit-

Baltistan. Martial law had not been imposed in AJK even when Pakistan was under military rule.

The people of AJK were allowed to meet relatives in Indian-administered Kashmir across the Line of Control, but the people of Gilgit-Baltistan were not allowed to do the same. The Kargil-Ladakh point on the Line of Control (LoC) should also be opened for trade and families' meetings.

There had been hypocrisy and duality in the administration's policies. Whenever criminal cases were lodged they were lodged only against Shias. The takfiris of Diamer were free and their weapons were free.

There was great love in Gilgit-Baltistan for Pakistan. That must not be allowed to turn into hatred.

The people remembered that in 1988 militants from Kohistan and Diamer districts and from FATA had not been prevented from attacking Shia citizens in their hamlets in Gilgit.

Tourism had not been established as an industry and whatever little tourism had been developed was on the brink of destruction because of acts of violence upon tourists and travellers.

Something that is better than nothing

"The 2009 Order has no constitutional protection. A section officer can abolish it. Something is better than nothing. This assembly does not have a constitutional status. It is in reality nothing more than local government." A young man representing the Shia community

Administration's side of the story

Governor's views

Gilgit-Baltistan Governor Pir Syed Karam Ali Shah, who is also the vice-chairperson of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, lamented that while the world was venturing ever further in space exploration, the argument in Gilgit-Baltistan revolved around trivial matters such as how high should the faithful tie the string of their shalwar.

Only one meeting of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council had been held, in March 2011. Nature had given all the resources to make Gilgit-Baltistan prosperous. The prime minister, who headed the council, should convene a meeting of the council every month or two months. He should consider delegating the power to act as the chairperson to someone else if it was difficult for him to attend meetings that frequently.

The four provinces of Pakistan and Bengal, which later became Bangladesh, were inherited from the partition of the subcontinent. But sons of the soil had liberated Gilgit-Baltistan in November 1947, without any external help. Their leaders had travelled several hundred miles on foot to invite Pakistan to govern this region. They unconditionally joined Pakistan even though China was closer.

As with all new things, some shortcomings were there in the 2009 Order. There was also lack of understanding about how best to use the system. However, the name, Gilgit-Baltistan, had given the region identity. Even

babies were given a name at birth but this region had been denied that for over 60 years.

As a representative of the federation, the governor had conveyed to the federal government all accounts, claims and allegations he received, including claims of jobs being sold.

Gilgit-Baltistan lauded the agreements between Pakistan and China. They were also in the interest of the region.

The finance secretary of Gilgit-Baltistan should look into how approved budgeted funds were being utilised.

Gilgit-Baltistan had sacrificed much for the Kashmir cause.

Five brothers and an epidemic

“We are part of Pakistan and Pakistan alone. Bracketing the region with the Kashmir issue should not be a justification to deny the people their rights. No other part of Pakistan would put up with this kind of treatment even for a day. It is true that we ask for our rights, we complain too but we always say Pakistan zindabad (long live Pakistan). We say that in this federation there are not four brothers but five.

The epidemic of sectarian divisions in the world has affected Pakistan too. Gilgit-Baltistan has not been immune to it. In the old days, the region was accessible only in the summer. The KKH provided all-weather access to Gilgit-Baltistan.

The intelligence agencies should identify those responsible for creating sectarian trouble. Gilgit-Baltistan has a non-sectarian tradition. The instigators are from outside the region. Enemies of Pakistan do not want our connection with China and try to find different ways to hurt us.” - *The governor*

Administration and police officials

The HRCP mission met a number of senior bureaucrats, including Chief Secretary Muhammad Younas Dhaga and Home Secretary Dr Attaur Rehman, and other officials of the region’s administration in Gilgit. HRCP requested the officials to share their views about the region in a candid manner and communicated to them that although the mission report would include their views those would not be specifically attributed to them. HRCP is also obliged to not include the information the officials shared with the mission off-the-record.

The area was very fragmented geographically and fragmentation in some respects was part of the psyche of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. There was a history of various communities living exclusively in their own valleys. The more closely one looked the more fragmentation one found. The population had been fragmented along ethnic lines, but before 1988 the division was never along sectarian lines. Gilgit versus Baltistan was one division; differences were rooted in the Sheen, Yashkun and Soniwal ethnicities; and then there were divisions based on language.

The Soniwals were involved in killing of Shias from both the Sheen and Yashkun communities. A Yashkun Deobandi would not kill a Yashkun Shia and vice versa. Similarly, a Sheen Shia would not kill a Sheen Deobandi.

Deobandis had established a well-funded madrassa in Ghanche and were converting Noor Bakhshis to their creed. Deobandis were providing money to the locals for dairy farming, developing orchards as well as offering jobs in Saudi Arabia.

The mullahs in Diامر had refused Aga Khan Rural Support Programme assistance for education and leadership training.

Some militant groups who were once supported by the intelligence agencies were seen to have gotten out of their control. Taliban, a new monster, had developed their own funding sources. Money was the Taliban ideology now and they were not a monolith but mercenaries who had even killed their own religious leaders, including muftis. There might have been disagreements earlier on among intelligence agencies on how exactly the people engaged in violence were to be tackled. There had been speculation that the intelligence agencies at least looked the other way some time. The killing of the climbers on Nanga Parbat and the assassination of a senior police officer and an army colonel and a captain had changed things even for people who had been in two minds. There had been a security paradigm shift that the culprits must be nabbed. The state apparatus had been fighting them since. All actions of the civilian administration were now being supported by all federal agencies. All of them, including the intelligence agencies, were on the same page.

It had been concluded that the local community or jirga did not have the capacity to persuade the killers to surrender. There was an agreement that there was no point in risking the lives of jirga members in pursuit of that ambition.

Seven out of eight killers of the army colonel and captain had been nabbed. Of the 11 terrorists involved in Nanga Parbat, several had been held. Three accused in the Lulusar killings had been arrested. The rest had conveyed several times that they wanted to surrender. With the winter approaching most of the wanted men on the run would have to come down from the mountains.

It had initially been believed that the people involved in the Nanga Parbat killings were from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but later on the authorities had learned that all of them were residents of Gilgit-Baltistan. Around 40 individuals had enlisted as Taliban in the area with one ameer (chief), who had been held. They were mercenaries and did not include religious elements nor had any religious motivation. As far as could be ascertained, being part of the Taliban in Diامر had been about money and power and did not have anything to do with ideology. The Yashkun in the local society lacked power and some of them believed that the marginalized could be empowered by associating with the Taliban. The motivation was for the powerless to be empowered.

The investigators had found that the original plan for the Nanga Parbat attack on foreign climbers had been to take hostage in order to seek ransom and release of detained militants. The Taliban had asked the local militants to do something big, although they had not specifically suggested abduction. Once the mountaineers were abducted, differences emerged among the abductors over killing them. The local people generally were considerate

towards the Chinese and once a Chinese mountaineer was killed by one of the abductors then the rest who had opposed the Chinese man's killing shot and killed all the climbers. The mobile phones of the deceased had been recovered from the arrested.

Their doings and ours

“There are speculations about American and Indian involvement because of their perceived dislike for China's influence in Gilgit-Baltistan. Saudi Arabia and Iran also have a lot of influence. But it is also true that there are several problems that we have created for ourselves and which we would have to fix ourselves.” - An administration official in Gilgit

Gilgit-Baltistan was a vast area, but one with a limited budget. The region was more than twice the size of Belgium but its budget barely matched that of Gujranwala district in Punjab. Even FATA, which was three times smaller than Gilgit-Baltistan in terms of area, had more facilities and resources than Gilgit-Baltistan.

Although the first word in the name of the 2009 Order was empowerment, there had not been much empowerment. There had been little worthwhile legislation in the last four years. The previous dispensation was hardly landmark either. However, the political dispensation had to be shown some concession. There had been representation of the people under the 2009 Order. But the cake had remained the same while the number of those consuming it had increased.

Giving the region a name was a big step and one that should have been taken earlier. It had been argued that the dispensation provided under the 2009 Order was not ideal. But it was not something that could not be tinkered with. The order might not have been perfect because it was passed in a hurry. There might have been some things that were done intentionally and others unintentionally. Corrections could be made subsequently. But not a comma had been changed in the 2009 Order.

The most trivial and insignificant of matters requiring the attention of the Gilgit-Baltistan chief minister wasted time and bigger things where decision making was usually the domain of the chief ministers in the provinces were with the bureaucracy in Gilgit-Baltistan. Despite being a remote area with difficult terrain, there was no helicopter or plane for the chief minister.

The 2009 scheme of things was contradictory; it gave the people representation at the district level and ignored them at the federal level.

There were no-go areas in Gilgit. After Shia killings by a lashkar in 1988, people had started considering themselves unsafe and for the sake of safety started living in communities comprising their sectarian group. Once people had been discriminated against they became defensive. At a time of unrest no one wanted to be at a place where there was a risk that they would be killed and their houses burnt in supposed revenge simply because of their sectarian identity. This atmosphere of fear and the no-go areas were limited to Gilgit.

Looking at the sectarian unrest situation, members of one sect had stated that if there was another incident they would retaliate. This was negative

and problematic at two levels: why should there be an incident and why would they act instead of letting the authorities deal with the situation?

Police were weak and had remained divided on sectarian basis. The last two police chiefs had done a lot of work to repair that. An officer of DSP rank had been made in-charge of training.

Gilgit-Baltistan still had the lowest crime ratio in the country. There was less crime and more sectarian frictions and violence. Even at the level of jails and hospitals there were divisions along sectarian lines. Elders of both Shia and Sunni communities had been actively engaged for a year and that had led to addressing hatred at the street and local community level.

In the recent prominent terrorist attacks and acts of violence elsewhere in Pakistan, the culprits had not been arrested. That was not the case in Gilgit-Baltistan. All the accused in the Chilas massacre had been arrested. In Chilas, a superintendent of police (SP) was killed; in Diamer a colonel and a captain were killed. Those involved had been traced and all except one had been arrested. Of the 11 terrorists involved in the Nanga Parbat killings, several had been held. They were also involved in the Lulusar incident.

The state of prosecution was dismal all over the country. It was even worse in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The perks and the structure of the judiciary needed to be looked at to see if the number of cases and the disposal rate justified the degree of resources being allocated.

Under the 2009 Order, there was no role of the national judiciary in the selection of chief judge. If such an arrangement was drawn up today it might be considered scandalous.

The Kohistan and Lulusar incidents had taken place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but some of the people involved were from Gilgit-Baltistan. They had returned to Gilgit-Baltistan after studying at madrassas in the 'down area'. The intolerant militant tendency had grown over time and it would take time to overcome it.

There was not much by way of employment opportunities in Gilgit-Baltistan. There was work as a contractor or labourer or there were government jobs. Some people engaged in agriculture and self-employment. There was over-employment in terms of percentage in the Gilgit-Baltistan government; government employees were 9 percent instead of the normal ratio of 3% to 4% of the employees. Notifications to make many employees' services permanent and ghost employees were also problem areas.

The quality and quantity of fruit, especially apricot, in Gilgit-Baltistan was exceptional. Despite the glut of fruit, there was no food processing unit. Suggesting this might not directly be the job of police but that was where the lack of employment and other social problems ended up.

The region's potential was not being fulfilled partly because new schemes were launched even before old scheme had neared completion or even before the implementation stage began. The amount of effort that needed to be put in was not put in. In new projects, there were also benefits for contractors and those who awarded the contracts.

The mineral department was a neglected and meek department.

Not all the issues could be tackled simultaneously. There could be resentment for various reasons. The real issue was governance. There were 34,000 electricity connections and only 4,000 consumers paid electricity dues. Gilgit-Baltistan's potential was such that it could illuminate the whole country. A regional grid should be set up in Gilgit-Baltistan.

There was corruption and it appeared from various accounts that jobs had been sold.

Diabler was a city of people of a peculiar bent of mind and they were on the KKH. Several times buses had been stopped and pelted with stones there following some rumours.

Through the history, this region had not had sectarian issues and many believed that these issues had been intentionally spread on account of the region's special importance. The local people believed there was international involvement in Gilgit-Baltistan because of the Line of Control and the international border. "There is no smoke without a fire."

Madrassas got money from abroad and in the same manner as in Swat, the practice had been ignored. The pattern in Diabler was not quite as visible as it was in Swat. That was because there were issues of distance. No one could hide among a sparse population and the community had not allowed the killers to penetrate them. There were also geographical advantages because of the natural factor. The international border was mainly snow-bound and sealed.

In Quetta and Karachi, truckloads of explosive made news. In Gilgit-Baltistan, someone hitting another person could lead to a Shia-Sunni fight.

Shias had a grievance about non-action against non-Shias. There was great potential for unrest in case of another sectarian attack and the anger of the youth might be difficult to contain. Elders, religious scholars and political leaders would have to push for that. The Friday sermon was being used for that.

There was a perception of intelligence agencies' role in the sectarian bloodshed. That was because of lack of progress in bringing the killers to justice.

Non-government organisations were required to have a no-objection certificate to operate in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Various markers of identity had reared their head amid the vacuum in the absence of governance, empowerment and active political parties.

Army, intelligence agencies and civil administration had the closest liaison in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The region had a youth bulge, which, depending on how it was handled, could be an asset or a liability.

Findings and conclusions

From the philosophical to the emotional, members of the fact-finding team came across a wide range of perspectives in Gilgit-Baltistan.

It appeared manifestly clear that nothing short of a constitutional provincial status, even a provisional one, would adequately reciprocate the people's devotion and strong feelings for Pakistan.

They were worried about what they called conspiracies against the region because of the land link it offered to China and about alienation and frustration among the youth. They believed that they were part of a great game. The running theme in almost all the discussions in Gilgit-Baltistan was the need for a constitutional status for Gilgit-Baltistan.

Not a single group or individual that the fact-finding mission met was completely satisfied with the Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009. These also included representatives of the ruling political party that had introduced the measure. The most generous praise of the order that the mission heard called it one good step towards an eventual destination, while critics called it "ceremonial", "glorified district government" and "a municipal committee system". However, the 2009 order was roundly applauded for giving the region a name and identity. Lack of experience of those tasked with implementation was highlighted as a possible reason for the order not achieving all that it could. The biggest drawback and contradiction of the notion of empowerment was the fact that Gilgit-Baltistan had not been granted the authority to amend the 2009 Order. Four years after the elections, no effort had been made to amend the order or to otherwise move forward with reform agenda to empower the region. However, generally it was suggested that the order should be persisted with and improved.

The overwhelming majority of the people that the HRCP mission met expressed frustration at the region not being merged with Pakistan formally as a constitutionally recognised fifth province of Pakistan. Many said that if that was not immediately possible because of the region being bracketed with the Kashmir dispute, they would settle for a provisional provincial status until the Kashmir issue was resolved. As a last resort, some suggested a governance system similar to Azad Kashmir's.

The 2009 Order was criticised for not even being an act of parliament, but a mere executive order and therefore lacking due legal status.

There was near complete agreement that the dispensation introduced in 2009 did not give Gilgit-Baltistan the status of a province, although some of the designations had been rebranded and the Gilgit-Baltistan government now had more say than its predecessor under the previous dispensation. The chief minister was now an elected person and a resident of Gilgit-Baltistan. However, the region still did not have representation in the National Assembly or Senate and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan could not vote in Pakistan's general elections. Residents of the region could not move the Supreme Court of Pakistan to challenge a verdict by the Gilgit-Baltistan courts. They could also not benefit from the fundamental rights provided under the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, which were much more extensive than those provided under the 2009 Order.

Lack of a legal or constitutional status did not have a direct bearing on the day-to-day life of the people but made for a collective sense of deprivation, neglect and alienation. The Gilgit-Baltistan people felt that they should be respected for their forefathers' effort to liberate the region but felt disappointed that they did not have a proper Pakistan identity card while Afghan nationals could buy national identity cards in Pakistan and get all the rights under the constitution overnight.

Lack of proper governance and widespread corruption were common complaints and it was alleged that government jobs had been sold. It was difficult for HRCP to ascertain the claim without proof. However, it was noted that all those alleging corruption in hiring had mentioned the same figure, Rs 300,000, as the cost for getting a job.

The people of the region believed that their issues did not get attention at the national level and that the national media had failed to convey their sentiments to the people of Pakistan. They said that the political parties in Pakistan also did not have a clear understanding of issues in Gilgit-Baltistan. Human rights and civil society organisations in Pakistan had also not appropriately focused on Gilgit-Baltistan.

The working environment was not easy for the journalists, who had to contend with exploitation from media house owners and often systematic denial of access to information and harsh treatment by the police when they demanded their rights.

Local newspapers depended on government advertisements which the journalists believed were not given on merit.

Only one meeting of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council had been held in four years, making important decision-making tricky.

For a region rich in natural resources, Gilgit-Baltistan had not done very well in realizing its economic potential. The economy had not been established on sound footing. The government was only beginning to focus on the extractive industry and had a marginal role in regulation. Efforts were underway to develop mining. The government had created the Mineral Department but it was yet to find its feet. The region continued to remain dependent on federal grants instead of developing its own resources.

Lack of finances and bank loans hamstrung private initiatives in mining, etc.

In the absence of industry, unemployment rates were high. Poverty and deprivation had heightened a sense of exploitation among many, possibly contributing to sectarian and other tensions.

Tourism had not been established as an industry and whatever little tourism had been developed was on the brink of destruction because of acts of violence upon tourists and travellers.

Although major incidents of sectarian killings had not occurred in Gilgit-Baltistan for a year the people remained apprehensive that the killings could begin again any time. Shia and Sunni clerics jointly working to minimise tensions and promote communal harmony had had some impact.

The Shia religious leadership appeared to be responsible, more structured and had a progressive touch. If the Shia community was overtaken by the

sort of radical and intolerant thought on the fringes it would make the situation much more explosive.

A new force being raised for securing the Karakoram Highway could be useful but the local people feared that rather than going after the cause the step was aimed at treating the symptom alone.

Some police officers had concluded that clerics had been using religious crutches with an eye to the next elections. It was likely that religious scholars from all sects would contest the next elections in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Many stakeholders criticised lack of effective action against those involved in sectarian killings and said that the problem could end within a month if all government agencies acted with sincerity. Many interpreted failure of the security and intelligence agencies to root out sectarian militant elements as a proof of their acquiescence, if not complicity.

The violence by extremist militant groups in Gilgit-Baltistan did not appear to be rooted in a religious ideology or motivation. A few dozen Gilgit-Baltistan residents had joined the Taliban in Diامر, mainly to gain money and power. The Yashkun lacked power in the local society and they saw in extremism an opportunity to be empowered.

The state of prosecution was dismal all over the country. It was worse in Gilgit-Baltistan. There was no witness protection arrangement and witnesses chose not to appear in court against the killers.

There was a general perception that if security and intelligence agencies were committed to fix the situation they had the ability to do that. That gave rise to suspicions that since they were not acting against the killers there was some degree of acquiescence.

Although in almost all meetings HRCP heard that the menace of sectarian violence had not influenced the Gilgit-Baltistan population, police stated that all the main incidents of violence in the region had been perpetrated by residents of Gilgit-Baltistan who had studied at madrassas in the 'down area'. The intolerant militant tendency had grown over time and it would take time to overcome it.

There was a need for community mobilisation to get a fair deal for women. Reservation of seats for women in the legislature had contributed to their empowerment. There were many areas still in Gilgit-Baltistan where women faced gender-based discrimination, including denial of access to healthcare and education.

Physically challenged individuals and children with special needs only had one primary-level educational institution in Gilgit. Even that institution lacked a hostel and transport facilities. The government did not have the data to know for sure the number of physically challenged individuals in Gilgit-Baltistan. The quota reserved in jobs for them was exhausted in lower pay grades.

Under the new dispensation there had been some positive impact in terms of dispensation of justice with the rise in the number of judges. However, the circuit court was not equivalent in status to the high courts and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan did not have access to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Several important laws, including family laws, and other appropriate forums were missing in the region.

It had been almost four years since the Attabad disaster and many of the affectees had not been rehabilitated yet. The agriculture land that had reemerged out of the water needed a lot of work before it could become productive again. Some displaced persons in camps had not received the compensation promised by the government.

Access to Gilgit-Baltistan remained as uncertain as ever. Travel in security convoys made bus journeys a needless suffering. Work was being done to diversify the road links. Airports had not been upgraded to facilitate all-weather traffic and flights were expensive and highly weather-dependent.

1- There was an acute dearth of libraries in Gilgit-Baltistan. The only functioning public library was situated in Gilgit in a no-go area because of sectarian tensions. Museums to chronicle and preserve the region's rich culture and history were also lacking.

2- Education and skill development programmes seeking to capitalise on the region's natural resources have not been planned. There are few institutions of higher learning. Students of Skardu campus of Karakoram International University complained about non-existence of a proper campus.

Through the history, this region had not had sectarian issues and many believed that these issues had been intentionally spread on account of the region's special importance. The local people believed there was international involvement in Gilgit-Baltistan because of its strategic location.

Recommendations

The HRCF fact-finding mission noted that many of the recommendations made by an earlier HRCF mission to Gilgit-Baltistan (See Annex-II) remained largely unimplemented. It, therefore, reiterated all those recommendations. Additionally, the mission made the following recommendations at the conclusion of its visit to Gilgit-Baltistan:

1. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan must be taken into confidence regarding the reasons why their region has not been integrated into Pakistan for over 66 years despite their keen desire. In consultation with the people, all options, including an AJK-like system and a provisional or permanent provincial status should be considered. Being linked to the Kashmir dispute should no longer lead to denial of their rights.

2. The supposed reform process that began in 2009 must not remain a solitary measure and must continue at a brisk pace. Gilgit-Baltistan should be empowered to take decisions to improve the lot of its people. Rather than rooting the reform in an executive order, an act of parliament should be made and steps taken towards extending to this region all human rights guaranteed by the constitution.

3. If properly educated, the youth bulge of Gilgit-Baltistan could be an asset. The quota reserved for students from Gilgit-Baltistan in the educational institutions of Pakistan must be enhanced. Gilgit-Baltistan is in urgent need of new educational institutions and improvements in old ones. Besides schools, institutions of learning are needed to offer education in disciplines that can be beneficial to or are in synch with the local economy and natural resources. Libraries and avenues for literary and cultural activities should be established in all cities and educational institutions of Gilgit-Baltistan.

4. Proper facilities, including transport, should be provided at the Skardu campus of Karakoram International University. They highlighted lack of university transport as most of the 450 students had to travel long distances to attend classes.

5. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan should be given representation in the National Assembly and the Senate at the earliest. The region should at least have one observer each in the National Assembly and Senate until the mechanism for the representation is formalised.

6. Barring the few legislative subjects that federations usually retain, Gilgit-Baltistan should be authorised to make amendments to the 2009 Order or any other subsequent framework.

7. Transparency, particularly in hiring for government jobs, will go a long way in restoring people's confidence in inclusive and good governance.

8. Greater political participation for women must be guaranteed. This should not mean only reserving seats for them in the legislative assembly but also representation in other positions of decision-making. Mechanisms to end sexual harassment of women during travel and at the workplace, and to lodge complaints about the same, should be put in place on priority. Girl students should be awarded scholarships to enable them to realise their potential by gaining greater access to education.

9. The authorities should conduct a survey to assess the number and needs of the physically challenged persons in Gilgit-Baltistan and make a plan to provide adequate facilities for their education and healthcare across Gilgit-Baltistan.

10. The government should make prompt efforts to adequately compensate and rehabilitate the families affected by the Attabad disaster and prepare a framework to prevent internal displacement and also to ensure the rights of the displaced in case they are forced to leave their homes.

11. A clear policy on media advertisements for government departments should be adopted to end any suspicion of favouritism. Journalists' right to information should be honoured and any orders by government officials to keep information from them must be withdrawn.

12. The fact that none of the culprits arrested for sectarian killings had been sentenced so far was causing anxiety and suspicion. The killers should be punished and victim families given adequate compensation. Full protection should be available to all those travelling to and from Gilgit-Baltistan.

13. A new force being raised to secure the Karakoram Highway (KKH) would not work in isolation. Besides preventing attack on the road, madrassas poisoning minds and promoting communal hatred must be closed and those involved in murders in the name of faith arrested and brought to justice to restore the faith of victims' families in the writ of the state. In the same spirit, no-go areas in Gilgit where people from various sects could not go should be done away with. Weapons in the hands of private actors must be confiscated and security of all citizens ensured by the state security apparatus.

14. There is strong demand for developing and implementing an effective mineral policy in order to establish an advanced mineral industry that can provide jobs and multiply earnings the region. Dams can be built to capitalise on the abundant water resources and provide electricity to the region as well as other parts of Pakistan.

15. Failure to convene meetings of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council should no longer be allowed to hold up important decision making. The prime minister, who heads the council, must convene a meeting of the council every two months. He should also consider delegating the power as the chairperson to someone else if it is difficult for him to attend meetings.

16. A network of roads should be established and worn out roads repaired to diversify the road links to Pakistan. Efforts should be made to bring the cost of travel down through road and by air. Opening the Kargil-Ladakh road across the Line of Control could boost trade and allow a chance for divided families to meet.

Notes

- 1 Annex-X for text of Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, 2009.
- 2 See Annex-V for key incidents of violence affecting Gilgit-Baltistan.
- 3 The report of the 1993 HRCP mission is annexed as Annex-VII.
- 4 Northern Areas of Pakistan: a strong yearning for autonomy, report of an HRCP mission, 2005, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).
- 5 Gilgit-Baltistan Elections 2009: report of the HRCP Observers' mission, 2010, HRCP.
- 6 See Annex-I, TORs of HRCP's 2013 mission to Gilgit-Baltistan.
- 7 See Annex-V for key incidents of violence affecting Gilgit-Baltistan.
- 8 See Annex-V.
- 9 See Annex-IV for the scope of Gilgit-Baltistan Council's authority.
- 10 See Annex-XI for text of the Gilgit-Baltistan Regulation of Masajid Act, 2012.
- 11 The practice of excommunication; one Muslim declaring another an unbeliever or kafir.

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