

SANSAD Educational Forum:

Crisis in Balochistan: Implications of Military Action Between the Baloch and the Pakistan Army

Since March 17 the town of Dera Bugti has been in a state of siege, cut off from the world. After four days of clashes that left dozens of people dead thousands of Bugti tribesmen armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades have surrounded the Pakistani military base, with some 300 troops in it. The Baloch tribesmen have put up roadblocks, dug trenches, and occupied the surrounding mountains, completely cutting off the base and the town of Dera Bugti. Most of the civilian population of Dera Bugti has fled. The Chief of the Bugti tribe, Nawab Akbar Bugti, has accused the government of massacring innocent civilians, including women and children and robbing the area of its natural resources.

Nationalists in Balochistan have been fighting pitched battles with Pakistani security forces for more than a year. During 2004 this struggle became more intense, causing the death of more than 30 soldiers and paramilitary personnel in attacks on troops and government installations, including the Sui Gas Complex. In January, 2005, 8 people were killed in fighting near strategic gas fields after a local doctor was raped, allegedly by an officer of the security forces. Since then there have been daily attacks on security forces, railways, and the power and communications infrastructure.

A new political formation calling itself Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged and gathered wide support. It is held responsible for the current rise in Baloch militancy. The BLA claims to be fighting “Punjabi domination”, the sense that the natural resources of abysmally poor Balochistan are being exploited by a state apparatus dominated by people from the Punjab province. Baloch people also feel marginalized by mega-developments such as the city of Gwadar on the Makran coastline, which is being developed as a major international route for sea-traffic to Central Asia, particularly as an outlet for Central Asian oil. They also oppose the plan of the Punjabi-dominated Pakistan Army to establish new garrisons in the province. The nationalists want greater autonomy and greater share of their natural resources.

In the mid-70s there was a major armed uprising in Balochistan that was ruthlessly suppressed by the Pakistan Army with the help of the Iranian Army. The current situation seems to be leading toward a major conflict between the Baloch, who retain memories of the 70s, and the Pakistan Army, which is already engaged in Waziristan. The Baloch resistance to Pakistan’s development plans also counters the US interest in securing a route for Central Asian oil.

South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy (SANSAD) is holding a free educational forum on this issue on April 16, at the Bonsor Recreational Complex, Burnaby, from 2 to 5 pm. Mr. Zahid Macdoom and Dr. Haider Nizamani will provide background and point out the implications of the situation to generate discussion.