

Bucks To Blunders

The debt problem in Pakistan is severe, often quantified in economic terms because of the debt-to-GDP ratio of 80%. However, the reality is harsher and critical as the reckless handling of the country's finances leaves its masses vulnerable, their lives held hostage to the failures of economic czars.

Though there is good news about the deal with the IMF as premier Shehbaz Sharif himself is said to have worked on it, economists are still worried. According to a report, the federal government added a net of Rs7.2 trillion to the debt pile in just the first seven months of this fiscal year, averaging billions per day. Shockingly, this seems to be only the tip of the iceberg.

As of Jan 31, 2023, the federal government's debt reached almost Rs58 trillion, increasing by Rs7.2 trillion from July 2022 to January 2023. The previous governments were no exception.

During the 'decade of democracy' from 2008 to 2018, opposition parties remained apathetic, failing to take a stand against blatant violations of the Fiscal Responsibility and Public Debt Limitation Act of 2005. The tragic irony of Pakistan's plight lies in the fact that those responsible for driving the country into debt hold the reins of power.

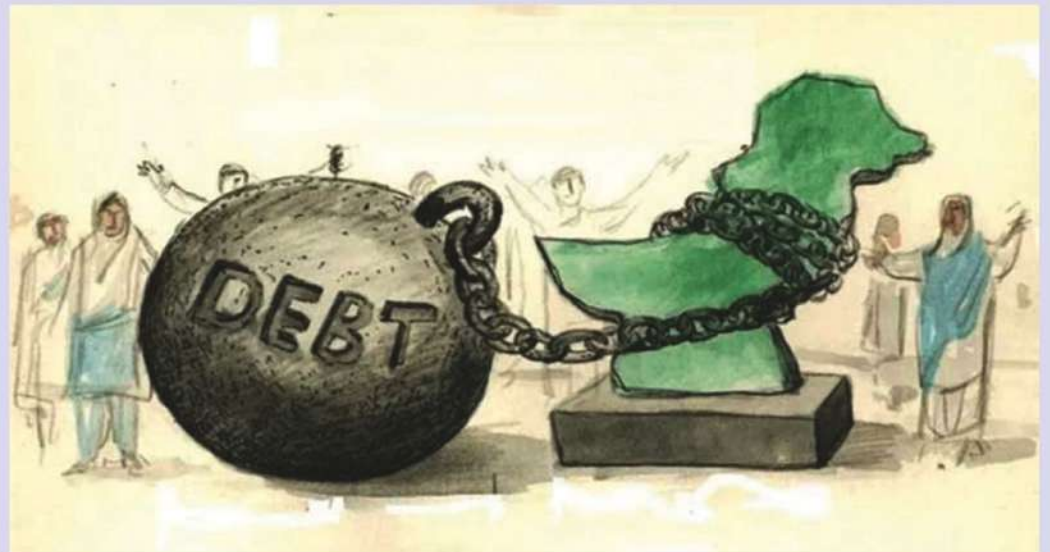
When Dr Shahida Wizarat, the economic expert, questioned finmin Ishaq Dar about Pakistan securing additional loans from the IMF despite its struggles with repayment, Dar had a fiery response. He likened the IMF to a global financial health doctor, emphasising Pakistan's significant assets amounting to a staggering \$3,000 billion. In Dar's eyes, the current foreign loan of \$100 billion was a mere drop in the ocean of Pakistan's wealth. It seems the underlying message was crystal clear –

Pakistan's borrowing is inconsequential when compared to its boundless potential.

Also, Senator Dr Sania Nishtar recently unveiled some alarming facts in the Senate. The

the brink of being handed over to the UAE and Islamabad airport has already been outsourced. And if that wasn't enough, the iconic Roosevelt Hotel, Pakistan's glory in New

further fear and uncertainty. Pakistan's future hangs in the balance as its debt crisis reaches alarming levels. The severity of the situation cannot be ignored and it is crucial for the



federal deficit stands at a staggering Rs6.5 trillion, while untargeted tax exemptions of Rs2.5 trillion favour the elite. She boldly described the budget as a "populist political appeasement budget," catering to the desires of parliamentarians and bureaucrats while neglecting the needs of the people.

Dr Sania proposed reducing public sector expenses by Rs2 trillion and implementing targeted subsidies. She also called for taxing all previously untaxed sectors, a sensible approach. Moreover, she questioned the rationale behind granting amnesty to real estate businesses as it is counterproductive.

Muhammad Shahid, an economics teacher, said: In a stunning turn of events, finmin Ishaq Dar confidently declares that Pakistan has no reason to worry about defaulting on its loans, citing billions of dollars' worth of assets. However, questions arise as the Karachi Port Terminal finds itself on

York, has already been leased out.

These developments leave us pondering: if Pakistan is truly brimming with riches, why are such valuable national assets slipping away? The plot thickens as we delve into the intricacies of these perplexing moves, searching for the hidden truths behind this intriguing twist in the financial landscape.

Mr Shahid said under the EFF's 9th review, concluded earlier this year, Pakistan has been promised \$1.1 billion of the delayed \$6.5 billion funding since November. Ironically, the coalition government in Pakistan had been striving to achieve this milestone for the loan installment. On the other hand, Pakistan has requested the IMF to consider relaxing conditions regarding \$6 billion in external financing for the next fiscal year's budget.

Financial experts warn of the impending \$24 billion returns in the coming year, creating

people to understand the impact on their lives. However, there is hope and it lies in building a transparent, accountable and sustainable financial system. The government must take bold steps to improve the country's fiscal trajectory and prevent it from falling into the debt trap again. This is a ticking time bomb that demands immediate action.

Greece serves as a cautionary tale of how reliance on international assistance can lead to further distress.

Pakistan must realise that external conflicts for financial gain will not solve the underlying problem. Instead, the focus should be on implementing transparent measures that prioritise the welfare of the people. It is time to break free from the shackles of debt and corruption and pave the way for a prosperous future, where the citizens' well-being takes precedence over all else. This is the time for action. Now or it would be too late.

Bangladesh: Spiraling Violence Against Rohingya Refugees

Protect Community From Killings, Abductions, Torture

Bangladesh authorities are taking inadequate measures to protect Rohingya refugees in camps from surging violence by armed groups and criminal gangs, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should assist refugees by establishing accessible systems to report crimes and promptly investigate complaints.

Human Rights Watch documented 26 cases of violence against Rohingya, including murder, kidnapping, torture, rape and sexual assault, and forced marriage, drawing on interviews with 45 Rohingya refugees between January and April 2023 and supporting evidence including police and medical reports. Victims report facing layers of barriers to police, legal, and medical assistance, with the authorities failing to provide protection, improve security, or prosecute those responsible.

“Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s past pledges to protect Rohingya refugees are now threatened by violent groups and an indifferent justice system,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The Bangladesh authorities’ increasingly evident intention to repatriate the Rohingya does not absolve the government of its responsibility to ensure their protection.”

Bangladesh authorities have reported that armed groups killed over 40 Rohingya refugees in the camps in 2022, while at least 48 refugees were killed in the first half of 2023. Rohingya say the totals are much higher. Seven refugees were reportedly killed in three incidents on July 6 and 7, including a sub-majhi (camp community leader) and alleged members of militant groups.



Many of those killed have been Rohingya community leaders or their family members. Scores of refugees have been abducted for ransom and threatened or tortured. Several Rohingya reported the involvement of armed groups in sexual assault, forced marriage, and child recruitment. Refugees describe an environment of escalating brutality and fear, with growing concerns of being targeted by criminal gangs and claimed affiliates of Islamist armed groups. “Every night we hear gunshots,” a Rohingya refugee told Human Rights Watch. “When the shooting starts, we hug each other tightly and wait, fearing it is our turn next.”

Victims of attacks named members of various groups as being responsible, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Munna gang, Islami Mahaz, and several others. The Bangladesh Ministry of Defence reported that at least 11 armed groups

are operating in the camps. Several criminal gangs involved in drug smuggling and human trafficking have been vying for greater control in the camps, with the refugees caught in the middle. Activists, educated people, and majhis are common targets, which has had a chilling effect on Rohingya civil society. At least 16 majhis were killed in the first half of 2023.

No criminal justice system is available to the refugees; they cannot go to the police to file a complaint. Instead, they must approach Bangladesh administrative authorities or security forces in the camps. Several families said they could not get the required approval from the camp-in-charge (CiC), a Bangladesh official, to file a report with the police. Others said they obtained permission to bring a complaint to the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) but could go no further, as the force has no civilian investigative function. Refugees who did manage to register their case at a local police station said there was no

follow-up, often because they could not cover the bribes and legal fees demanded.

Several majhis who were killed or attacked over the past year were targeted by alleged ARSA members who considered them informants for Bangladesh authorities. Majhis said that authorities forced them to take part in nighttime watches, to join police raids, and to identify members of armed groups, at times in front of the suspects. Family members of killed majhis said they had previously requested help from the camp-in-charge and APBn, some even providing lists of those who were threatening them, but were ignored. Of the 26 cases Human Rights Watch documented, only 3 led to arrests. Most victims interviewed said that gangs or armed groups threatened and harassed them after the initial assault, intimidating them into staying silent.

Many victims alleged collusion between security force officers and criminals. The APBn, which has overseen security in the camps since

July 2020, is itself responsible for widespread abuses against refugees, including extortion, arbitrary arrests, and harassment.

The police response to the growing violence has been marked by abuse, with indiscriminate raids and violent crackdowns. Refugees allege that APBn corruption has allowed criminal activity to proliferate, while Rohingya not responsible for crimes have ended up under arrest.

"There were so many killings that happened in broad daylight, near the APBn police camp," said an international aid agency volunteer. "Even after hearing the gunshots, they took no action. When there are killings or violence, the police arrest innocent people, not the real perpetrators. The real ones are given license to do the same thing again."

Rohingya who sought protection were told to move to other shelters or camps, without any support. Some parents said they sent their children to Malaysia, risking dangerous boat journeys, to protect them from attack. Victims and their family members described ongoing fear and injuries following the attacks, without access to adequate physical and mental health care.

Bangladesh authorities contend that repatriation of Rohingya to Myanmar is the only solution for the dangerous situation in the refugee settlements. However, conditions for the safe, sustainable, and dignified return of Rohingya do not currently exist. The Bangladesh government should develop and carry out a rights-respecting security policy to protect the camp population, in consultation with the refugees and United Nations agencies, including the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, and the UN Population Fund.

UN agencies should task and train personnel to receive complaints filed by refugees, with streamlined, confidential reporting and referral procedures for legal, medical, and protection services, including survivor-centered care. Resources such as safe houses

and UNHCR's protection hotline should be expanded.

Donor governments and UN agencies should press Bangladesh to lift the bureaucratic barriers to accessing local police and courts, as well as all restrictions on access to education and livelihoods to reduce illegal and dangerous economic activity in the camps. The authorities should also end APBn's use of refugees for compulsory night patrols.

"The Bangladesh government needs to protect Rohingya refugees, rather than let criminal elements drive them out," Ganguly said. "Donor governments should be helping to meet the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh while pressing for

closing community schools and markets.

In September 2021, the community leader and rights advocate Mohib Ullah was shot and killed in Kutupalong camp after receiving death threats that the authorities failed to address. "The armed groups target activists because of power," an activist said. "They want the camps under their control. If activists and educated people become stronger leaders, common Rohingya won't fear the armed groups anymore, and they'll lose their control and their profits."

Refugees said that armed groups recruit boys age 13 and older with bribes. "Whenever armed group members see youth wandering around, they'll approach them and say,

which a woman was stabbed, her family said that the police freed the suspect after he paid a bribe. In another, the police detained three people who were not involved in the killing, the victim's family said. In the third, the police detained several men implicated in the murder, but the family has been threatened by others they say were involved but not arrested.

By mid-year, the 2023 UN Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis had received only a quarter of the required US\$876 million in donor contributions. The funding shortfall has led the World Food Programme to cut Rohingya food rations by a third since February, down from \$12 to only \$8 a month,



the establishment of rights-respecting civilian rule in Myanmar so they can one day go home."

Violence and Denial of Justice, Protection for Rohingya Refugees

About one million ethnic Rohingya refugees are in Bangladesh, living in the sprawling, overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar or the isolated silt island of Bhasan Char. Most of them fled Myanmar military atrocities in 2017. The violence in the camps has escalated amid Bangladesh's increasingly coercive restrictions on livelihoods, movement, and education in the camps, including harassment at checkpoints and

"Look, I can give you something that'll make you powerful," an activist said. "And they give them guns and sometimes money too."

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh lack recognized legal status, which puts them on a precarious footing under domestic law and makes them vulnerable to rights violations. The Bangladesh government has an obligation under international human rights law to ensure that the rights of everyone in its jurisdiction, including refugees, are protected, and to investigate allegations of abuses and hold those responsible to account.

In one of the three documented cases that led to arrests, in

increasing desperation and the spread of illicit activities like drug smuggling, extortion, and human trafficking in the camps. Donors, including the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and Australia, should act to meet the massive protection needs of the Rohingya refugee population.

Names and other details have been withheld to protect the refugees' identities.

Killings

Human Rights Watch documented nine killings of majhis, who have been major targets of armed groups and criminal gangs.

"These armed groups decided to increase violence in the

camps, killing people, targeting majhis and activists, to create an environment of fear so that they can operate in the camps without interruption by Bangladesh authorities,” an activist said. “They are recruiting a lot of children and teenagers, forcing them to join or offering money.”

Several family members said that their majhi relatives were killed after the authorities insisted that they identify members of armed groups. The brother of a head majhi who was killed in February said his brother had tried to resign after being previously abducted and tortured, but authorities refused to let him step down: He became a target after the government used him against ARSA. He had to comply with orders of the CiCs and the law enforcers in the camp. ARSA also wanted to control him because he was a head majhi and they wanted him to allow their free movement and inform them about raids. He wanted to resign from his position as head majhi since it was risky, but Bangladesh authorities wouldn't let him.

Family members said that the majhis are caught between the authorities and the armed groups. The widow of a majhi who was killed in March said: The authorities forced the majhis to give all sorts of information, warning that they would otherwise be sent to jail as ARSA collaborators. My husband told me he was so confused about what to do. If the majhis didn't help the authorities, they became ARSA's collaborator, but when they went against ARSA, they became a collaborator of the authorities.

Not one of the eight family members who said that they had reported threats to Bangladesh authorities were granted protection. The brother of a slain majhi said that authorities had insisted on his help in cracking down on ARSA, then denied his pleas for protection:

The authorities always try to show that they have a zero-tolerance policy against ARSA. But with ARSA committing crimes and killings in the camps, it shows that in reality, the authorities are putting the

majhis in danger, while the criminals remain untouched. [My brother] was tasked by APBn to mobilize the majhis under him to inform police about ARSA whereabouts. Just one week later, he was killed. The widow of a slain sub-majhi said:

Before he was killed, [my husband] submitted a list of people who threatened him to the CiC and APBn, but they didn't do anything. If they had, he could have been saved. The APBn didn't take any measures to help, they just asked him to put more effort into guarding the camp at night.

Several majhis attempted to go into hiding but were required to continue assisting camp authorities in monitoring duties. Another widow said:

[My husband] was facing



threats, so he didn't come to the shelter that much. But at that time, it was mandatory for the majhis to guard the camps at night, as instructed by APBn. That night after he was on duty, he went back to our shelter at around 4 a.m. Around 20 to 30 armed men surrounded the shelter and opened fire. He tried to flee but was caught. He was shouting and begging for his life. I heard two gunshots, then he tried to flee, then they shot again.

Armed groups have also killed family members of people considered informants as retribution. One refugee said that ARSA members killed his younger brother in March due to the interviewee's work with police:

When ARSA started killing respected people in the community and demanding ransom, I began working with law

enforcement to identify ARSA members. I became a target, but I never thought they would kill my brother. The day he was abducted, I told the police and military. I know I am responsible for my brother's death. But I will keep helping the police whenever I can because ARSA is criminal. They kill people, and they should be arrested.

Others have been targeted because of gang rivalries. An alleged ARSA supporter was reportedly shot and stabbed in April by members of the militant group Islami Mahaz. He died the next day. A family member said that Islami Mahaz has been allowed to operate freely in their camp because it helps security forces identify ARSA members. “The police never came to help me

to drop the case.”

Many families who have been threatened have been forced to relocate, particularly those who tried to pursue justice. Some have been unable to move to another camp because they lack the resources or support they need.

“My husband used to work for the CiC and the authorities,” a widow said. “If they wanted, they could have provided protection to him. They never did, so he was killed. Now I can't live in my shelter. If I ask the CiC for help, they say there's nothing they can do.”

She left the camp after her husband's death, but still lives in fear:

I feel afraid that the killers could come again. I have five children. They also live in fear. Every night I used to hear gunshots. I never realized they would target my husband. My husband used to maintain relationships with everyone because he feared for his life.

One woman said she has been unable to return home due to constant death threats. As a community leader, she had faced years of threats and violence from gangs, culminating in a recent attack that left her sister dead and her and her daughter seriously injured. She said they have ongoing medical issues from the shooting: “My daughter and I aren't getting proper treatment, but we can't afford a private hospital. We are refugees, but we are human. The police don't even treat us like humans. They think of us as garbage, so even if our people are killed, they don't care.”

Abduction, Torture, Extortion
Armed groups in the camps have been increasingly kidnapping Rohingya refugees for ransom, forced recruitment, or human trafficking. Human Rights Watch documented 10 cases of abduction.

Six victims described being tortured during their abductions. “I was fed only bread and water,” said a teenage boy who was kidnapped in February and held for a week, until his family paid ransom. “They beat me with thick electric wire. They tried to kill me and threatened they were going to. I was so scared. One of them tried to rape me. I still feel so worried when I think

about that.”

“I was confined for four days,” another refugee said of his March abduction. “I was blindfolded and my hands and legs were tied with a rope. I was given very little food and water. I was beaten and asked how much money my mother could pay. I felt so helpless.” He said he was tortured so badly he could not walk.

Family members said they received little to no help after reporting missing relatives to the authorities. “We didn’t get much cooperation from the police,” a victim’s brother said. “They only said they were trying to find the mobile phone number the ransom call had been made on, which we also had. They charged us two bribes for the mobile number. They didn’t conduct any operation on their own to rescue my brother.”

Two families said that APBn took credit for rescuing their family members after providing little to no support. “After my brother was rescued, APBn interviewed him and took photos with him to claim credit for rescuing him,” a victim’s brother said. “We were so shocked seeing their circus. We had been continually asking for help from the police to rescue our brother, but they didn’t do anything. We had to pay a huge ransom and rescue him ourselves.”

The mother of a victim who had been abducted and tortured said:

The APBn had done nothing, but they came to take credit for rescuing my son. We took him to a hospital nearby where he was treated for three days. I tried to contact the police and UNHCR protection team to get justice. But they both said that if I didn’t recognize the kidnapper, there was nothing to do. I gave them the kidnapper’s phone number. No case was filed. The police didn’t care about filing a case. Maybe they expected that he would come back as a body, not alive. If they wanted to, they could have rescued him.

Majhis and community leaders have also been targeted for abduction by ARSA. A teacher said alleged ARSA members had abducted and severely beaten him three times because

he opposed their criminal activities, most recently in March:

I was blindfolded, and they put a cloth in my mouth so I couldn’t talk or shout. They accused me of helping the police against ARSA. They started beating me with rods and logs on my back, my legs. They asked me for my last wish, like they were going to kill me. I heard them talking about how they would disappear my body after killing me. They said they would hide my body in the latrine like they did to others. The teacher said they kept torturing him and interrogating him about why he did not leave the camp when they told him to. He stayed, he said, because of his family and students.

“The problem is Bangladesh authorities can’t ensure our protection,” said a majhi who was abducted in 2022 and



threatened with death if he continued to provide information to security forces. “Authorities take all this information from us but then watch us being killed by ARSA for helping them. We are being targeted by the militant groups and the authorities. So many of my colleagues are being killed.”

A gang abducted a former majhi in March and beat him with rods until his family paid 100,000 taka (US\$925) for his release. His family never reported the attack out of fear of the attackers’ ties to the police. “The group is based in our camp,” one of his sons said. “They move around freely and have a good relationship with the authorities, so we never dared to complain

to the police about the abduction.”

Several family members said that the accused roam freely in the camp, while the police ignore the families’ reports. Others said they did not attempt to file complaints due to threats or because they did not expect a fair investigation. Refugees who were tortured said they feel constant fear, with no access to mental health services in the camps.

“I still have scars from the torture on my back, legs, everywhere,” said one man who had to leave his home due to ongoing harassment. “Since the kidnapping, I don’t live in my shelter. I refused to file a case because I was worried about my family’s safety, and I didn’t have money to fight the case anyway. ARSA members keep threatening my family even though I didn’t file a case.

authorities to do so, since I’m Rohingya. It’s not like I can just go to the police station like Bangladeshi people can. But unfortunately, the CiC didn’t give me permission or even meet me again for another five days.

When she was eventually able to meet with the local police, the officers accused her of falsifying medical documents to file the case. She began receiving threats from the man that her daughter had identified as the attacker and had to move her family to another camp, without any support to build a new shelter. “I haven’t been able to take any legal action against those people because the authorities don’t want to ensure our justice,” she said. “They have little sympathy for what happened to my daughter.”

She spent 400,000 taka (\$3,700) to send two of her older daughters to Malaysia for their safety. “My [6-year-old] daughter is living in constant fear,” she said.

Several women or their family members described armed group members sexually assaulting married women and girls whose husbands had gone to Malaysia for work. One woman whose husband had left the camps was reportedly raped by a member of a militant group, who filmed the attack and posted it on social media.

Several Rohingya refugees reported cases of forced marriage to Human Rights Watch. “It is really dangerous to live in the camps, especially with girls in your house,” one mother said.

Alleged militants have threatened to kill family members who resisted forced marriage of their young daughters. One 16-year-old said that she was forced to marry an ARSA member when she was only 14. Alleged ARSA members had abducted her father and brother, threatening to kill them unless they agreed to her marrying a 28-year-old man who already had another wife. The two men were only released after they consented to the marriage. The girl reported that the man she was forced to marry subjected her to physical violence.

Nicaragua: Rights Abuses Need Stronger International Efforts

Prominent Voices Call for Concerted Approach

Governments from the Americas and Europe should prioritize the human rights situation in Nicaragua during the upcoming European Union – Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (EUCELAC) summit, 160 Nicaraguan victims said today in a letter co-signed with 29 national, regional, and interna-

ing Carlos Fernando Chamorro; former political prisoners, such as Felix Maradiaga, Medardo Mairena, Dora Maria Tellez, and Juan Sebastian Chamorro; and human rights defenders, like Bianca Jagger and Tamara Davila.

“The escalating human rights crisis in Nicaragua requires a

President Daniel Ortega has targeted anyone perceived as a government critic. Signatories include dozens of Nicaraguans who have suffered for years from government abuses. Many have been arbitrarily detained, prosecuted, expelled, and deprived of their nationality and assets.

A report released in early

space, including by applying repressive legislation to cancel the legal status of over 3,500 nongovernmental organizations. No international monitors have been allowed to enter the country since the government expelled the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in late 2018.

Several governments in Latin America, as well as the European External Action Service (EEAS), have publicly condemned the Nicaraguan government abuses. However, the international response has so far lacked the necessary coordination and sustained effort to effectively push for the release of the remaining political prisoners, accountability, and steps toward recovering democracy, the groups and individuals said in the letter.

Latin America governments should lead efforts to create a Group of Friends for the Nicaraguan People that contributes to a transition toward democracy. The Group of Friends should conduct high-level meetings to design, in consultation with Nicaraguan civil society groups and other relevant stakeholders, a strategy to exert concerted pressure, privately and publicly, to curb abuses, provide pathways to accountability, and push for free and fair elections.

“Latin American and European governments need to come together to agree on a united approach on the crisis in Nicaragua,” said Goebertus. “The people of Nicaragua have no time to lose.”



tional human rights organizations. Governments should establish a Group of Friends of the Nicaraguan People to ensure cross-regional, high-level efforts to restore democracy in the country. Signatories to the letter include Nicaraguans in exile and former political detainees from diverse sectors, as well as 20 Nicaraguan human rights organizations and 9 international and regional rights groups. Among them are prestigious writers, such as Sergio Ramirez and Gioconda Belli; renowned journalists, includ-

strong and meaningful response from democratic governments in Latin America and Europe,” said Juanita Goebertus, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. “Leaders from the Americas, together with the EU and its member states, should establish a Group of Friends of the Nicaraguan People that effectively coordinates the international response toward Nicaragua and pushes for a democratic transition in the country.”

Since a brutal crackdown on protesters in April 2018,

March by the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua found reasonable grounds to conclude that the authorities have committed crimes against humanity, including murder, imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, forced deportation, and persecution on political grounds.

Sixty-four people remain arbitrarily detained, according to local rights groups, including Bishop Rolando Alvarez, an outspoken government critic. The government has also dramatically restricted civic

Sudan: Darfur Town Destroyed

ICC Should Investigate Killings, Looting by Rapid Support Forces, Arab Militias

Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied Arab militias summarily executed at least 28 ethnic Massalit and killed and injured dozens of civilians on May 28, 2023, in Sudan's West Darfur state, Human Rights Watch said today. Many of these abuses committed in the context of the armed conflict in Sudan amount to war crimes.

Several thousand fighters of the RSF, the independent military force that has been in armed conflict with the Sudan military since April 15, and Arab militias attacked the town of Misterei, home to tens of thousands of mainly ethnic Massalit residents. The assailants killed men in their homes, on the streets, or in hiding, and fired on fleeing residents, killing, and injuring women and injuring children. These forces then pillaged and burned most of the town, forcing thousands of residents to flee across the border to Chad. "Since the conflict in Sudan broke out in April, some of the worst atrocities have been in West Darfur," said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, senior crisis and conflict researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The mass killings of civilians and total destruction of the town of



Misterei demonstrates the need for a stronger international response to the widening conflict."

Sudan's warring parties should stop attacking civilians and allow safe aid access. The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) should investigate these attacks as part of its Darfur investigation.

During a research trip in June, Human Rights Watch interviewed 29 survivors of the Misterei attack who had fled

into neighboring Chad. An analysis of satellite imagery and fire detection data shows that six other towns and villages besides Misterei in West Darfur, including Molle, Murnei, and Gokor, were also burned down. Names of people interviewed are withheld for fear of reprisals.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed 37 refugees from other parts of West Darfur, including El Geneina and the villages of Tendelti, Adikong, and Molle, who described similar abuses. Widespread and apparently deliberate fire damage was visible in El Geneina, primarily affecting places where thousands of people displaced during previous attacks were living. Human Rights Watch shared its preliminary findings with an advisor to the commander of the Rapid Support Forces, asking questions regarding RSF deployments and steps taken to hold perpetrators to account, but had received no response at time of writing.

West Darfur has been the epicenter of cycles of violence

and displacement against non-Arab communities since 2019. In mid-April, as fighting raged elsewhere in Sudan, the Sudan Armed Forces and the local police force stationed in Misterei left the town. In mid-May, the RSF and Arab militias clashed with the town's Massalit self-defense group.

On May 28, the RSF and Arab militias, many on motorcycles, horses, or pickup trucks, surrounded the town and clashed with the Massalit fighters. The assailants, armed with assault rifles, recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and vehicle-mounted machine guns fired on town residents who tried to flee.

"The Rapid Support Forces and Arabs shot at us from behind," said a 76-year-old man. "I saw three people running, being shot at, and fall to the ground near a grocery store."

The attackers pursued people who sought safety in schools and the mosque. Many women and children, and some members of the self-defense group wounded earlier, fled to a



school complex, on the northern edge of the town, where the assailants repeatedly entered classrooms looking for men and summarily executed

The attacking forces withdrew that evening and residents began the search for survivors and bodies on the streets and inside houses and schools. The

arriving in Chad have come from the Massalit community. About 17,000 refugees from Misterei remain in Gongour, Chad, near the border. The

African Union (AU) should urgently adopt and enforce targeted sanctions against those responsible for serious abuses regardless of their position or rank.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC should investigate the attack on Misterei and other villages and towns in West Darfur as part of its Darfur investigation. The Prosecutor should highlight investigation plans during his scheduled briefing to the Security Council on July 13.

"The accounts of those who survived recent attacks in West Darfur echo the horror, devastation, and despair of Darfur 20 years ago," said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin. "The ICC Prosecutor should investigate these heinous abuses, while Sudan's international and regional partners should sanction RSF and Arab militia leaders responsible for these attacks."

For details of the abuses in Misterei on May 28, 2023, please see below. The names of those interviewed have been withheld for their protection.

Abuses in West Darfur

The magnitude of the violence since April in Darfur is significant even in a region that has witnessed countless atrocities against civilians for two decades. Over 400,000 Darfuris were already refugees in Chad as a result of earlier violence.

West Darfur experienced

large-scale abuses in the 2000s including ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Since 2019, Massalit and other non-Arab communities, many displaced since the conflict of the early 2000s, have borne the brunt of renewed attacks by Arab militias, supported by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Sudanese government security forces, responsible for protecting civilians

since UN/AU peacekeeping forces pulled out of Darfur following the termination of its mandate in late 2020, have



those they found.

Two women who had sheltered in a school said that the attackers summarily executed three men and sprayed a classroom with bullets, severely injuring three women and two children. "They were asking about the youth ... protecting the village," one woman said. "Where are the men? Where are the boys? We want all of them! We want to kill them! Why didn't you just flee and leave the country? Why are you still here? What are you waiting for?"

Throughout the day, the attackers looted residents' property, stealing livestock, seeds, money, gold, mobile phones, and furniture.

After pillaging homes, the assailants set them ablaze. "The whole town was covered in smoke," said a 35-year-old nurse. Satellite imagery analysis confirmed the near total burning of the town, particularly the residential areas.

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Map of the area displaying the burned towns and villages since April 2023 in West Darfur, Sudan. Data © OpenStreetMap contributors. Analysis and graphics © 2023 Human Rights Watch

remains of at least 59 people were buried in mass graves. Local officials said 97 people were later confirmed to have been killed, including self-defense force members. Human Rights Watch recorded the killing of at least 40 civilians, including a woman, and injuries to 14 civilians, including 5 women and 4 children. Since the outbreak of the conflict in April, over 300,000 people have been displaced

humanitarian response in Chad remains significantly underfunded.

Relief operations largely stopped in late April in West Darfur following attacks on humanitarian aid and property, as well as widespread insecurity in the region. An aid worker said that Darfur has been "largely cut off from new assistance."

The UN Security Council should call for immediate safe



within West Darfur alone, according to the United Nations, and about 217,000 have fled to Chad. About 98 percent of those registered

and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Darfur. Security Council member countries, other governments, the European Union, and the



repeatedly failed to protect targeted communities. Self-defense groups have emerged in some Massalit communities. The town of Misterei, 42 kilometers south of El Genaina, West Darfur's capital, and 7 kilometers from the border with Chad, is home to about 46,000 people. Its residents are from largely farming communities, primarily Massalit, but also ethnic Zaghawa and Bargo, and nomadic Arab communities. The town has at least six schools, a hospital, a police station, a courthouse, a stadium, and a market that serves as the commercial hub for area villages.

In 2020, tensions between the Massalit population and Arab neighbors resulted in an earlier attack on Misterei. Local sources said Arab militias attacked three neighboring villages in May and Misterei in July, in retaliation for the alleged killings of Arab civilians by armed Massalit. In July 2020, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the West Darfur Doctors Committee reported that hundreds of Arab militiamen attacked Misterei, resulting in the death of at least 60 Massalit civilians. The attack followed the formation of an armed Massalit self-defense group in the town months earlier.

In late April 2023, following the outbreak of the conflict in Khartoum between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF, some local police and the army garrison withdrew from Misterei without informing local leaders or residents.

Residents said their departure left the town vulnerable. Previously, "attackers would often not progress further in[to] town," said one resident. In an attack, the "local community [would] find safe refuge inside the army garrison."

On May 26 and 27, RSF and the Arab militias began to mobilize on the outskirts of the town. Residents said they harassed people who ventured out of the town and clashed with a Massalit armed group positioned on the Dorondi

the town, flanking it to the north and the south.

Residents said that the attacks appeared to be coordinated. Those on foot entered houses, followed by those on motorbikes, who chased residents on the streets. RSF pickup trucks reportedly secured neighborhood entrances and exits and shot at civilians fleeing, even from a distance.

The assault started at the Shorrong mountain where self-defense group fighters had deployed. A fighter, 30, who was there, said:



mountain, 8 kilometers west of Misterei. Another self-defense group was mobilized on the Shorrong mountain, about 450 meters southeast, to protect the town. Residents said they began to fear that the town itself could come under attack. May 28 Attack

The attack began shortly after sunrise on May 28. The assailants came in several waves from the western side of

Around 5:30 a.m., the fighting started at our position, from the southwest. We only had Kalashnikovs [assault rifles]. Arabs and the RSF came in large numbers, first on foot [and] then on motorbikes: the first wave [was] around 400 men on foot; the second wave, 150 to 200 motorbikes; the third wave, six RSF vehicles which I recognized by their emblem; and [in] the last wave

[there] were a lot of horses. The Massalit fighters had split into groups of 7 or 15 fighters, across several locations in town, people interviewed said. At least three vehicles with fighters from the Sudanese Alliance, a predominantly Massalit armed group headed by the late West Darfur governor Khamis Abbakar, were positioned near the market.

Witness accounts suggest that the RSF and Arab militias quickly overran the Massalit fighters, forcing their retreat. Many were killed. Attacks continued through the morning, with a lull around early afternoon, and resumed briefly mid-afternoon.

Human Rights Watch was unable to verify the number of fighters in the town itself that day and how many were killed during the fighting.

Unlawful Killings and Injuries Residents described scenes of panic and horror as the attackers spread across the town while fleeing civilians filled the streets. The assailants shot people on the streets, including women and children, and stormed houses.

A man, 40, said that at about 7 a.m. he opened the door of his house after hearing gunshots in his neighborhood of El Shati and saw Arab men armed with assault rifles, machine guns, and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), going door-to-door and shooting wantonly: "Two RSF vehicles [stopped] near my house and shot at those fleeing," he said. As an RSF fighter assumed a shooting position, "someone cheered him...: 'Kill the slave! Kill the slave!'"

He said Arab militiamen then entered his house and shot his cousin "many times, in the chest," killing him. He said he then jumped over the wall and ran for safety.

Another man, 60, said that he opened the door to his house that morning and "saw Arabs on motorbikes shoot two young men on [his] doorstep who were running for their lives." One of the victims died instantly, he said, and he tried to help the other, whose arm was injured. But "Arabs on foot appeared ... entering houses and shooting inside," so he also had to flee. "The Arabs shouted at me to stop

but I didn't. They shot at me, and one bullet went through my right shoulder." Women, children, and some men – including injured men – began to flee to the town's main school complex. School buildings in Darfur are often seen as a safe place during attacks.

[The assailants] were running and we were running, too. There were more of them, some who were running behind us, and some we came across, who were in front of us. So, they were surrounding us ... They were shooting ... When we ... reached the Adwa neighborhood ... they shot my

ordered [us] both to step down. As we were doing so, he shot the ... man in the chest and [the man] fell to the ground. He shot [at] me too. His bullet passed over my ear ... then he left. The other man bled to death there and I then covered him with a rug.

Summary Executions,

Two women said that while they were hiding in a classroom of the secondary school for girls with about 50 people, most of them women and children, RSF fighters and Arab militia men broke into the room and shot dead three men who had sought protection there. The assailants also fired at children and women, severely wounding several.

A 35-year-old teacher said:

"When we went into the classroom, we locked it from inside. So, they just kept knocking on the door aggressively. When we didn't open it, they just shot at the door. They pushed it [open] and just started to shoot randomly everywhere."

The men killed were 20-year-old Hussam Abdu Ahmed; Al-Tahir Ali, a policeman; and an older man known as Al-Haj, an imam at a local mosque. Three women were severely wounded, among them a teacher in her 40s who was shot in the chest, and a woman, also in her 40s, who was shot in the hip. The teacher's 5-year-old son was shot in the face and chest.

A 15-year-old boy was shot in the hip and a 16-year-old girl in the forearm. All were later treated at a hospital in Chad.

A woman, 19, said that in another classroom, about 50 people, mostly women, were hiding. Some were hiding boys under their traditional long dresses. Two men, one in his 30s and the other one older, were also hiding in their midst. Fighters arrived at the school in an RSF car. "[They] entered the classroom," the woman said. "[They] shot these two men and ... put the gun to my head and [to the heads of] other women, asking us to give them money, gold, phones." The two men died instantly, she said.

In the primary school for boys next door, a 35-year-old teacher who was then nine-months pregnant, said eight RSF fighters entered the classroom where she had sought protection with about 20 people. When the assailants entered, one of the men in hiding had been trying to provide first aid to two men who had suffered gunshot wounds on their way to the school. The teacher said:

I told Hussam [one of the



"The number of attackers around us was so high," said a 20-year-old woman who ran with family members toward a school with "a huge number" of people. The attackers shot and killed three people running around her. She said:

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Khadija [had] a horse and was holding the horse to take it with her to the school. They stopped her and told her: "You leave that horse!" but she refused, and they shot her. And when they looked to that man [an imam], they ... shot him and they shot my brother.

She said the assailants shot both her brother and Khadija in the head.

A woman in her thirties said that when she opened the door to her house, she saw "so many Arabs. A group of them looked at me and shot in the air: 'Get out!' Another one asked: 'Where are the men? Where are the weapons? We don't want anyone here!'" After she fled with 10 children of her family, the assailants shot and wounded her daughter and grandson:

daughter and my grandson.

A bullet hit her 18-year-old daughter in the hip from behind, she said, while her 3-year-old grandson was shot in the thigh.

Another man, 76, said he saw Arab attackers shoot three men from behind while they were running on the street in the Al-Emtidad neighborhood. Separated from his family in the ensuing stampede, he hid inside the Atik mosque, near the school complex:

I met an old man there. We both hid [on the pulpit] ... An armed Arab man came in and

Shootings in Schools

RSF and Arab militias pursued scores of civilians who sought to hide in schools. At least eight times that day, assailants entered classrooms and summarily executed the men they found there, witnesses said. They also shot at children and women and robbed them. Eleven survivors, including one local self-defense group fighter who hid in a school after being injured, provided accounts of 26 killings. Witnesses said there was no fighting in the schools complex.



men], "I can put on the Dettol [antiseptic]. Go, they will kill you!" ... Before [Hussam] tried to move out they ... entered the ... classroom and shot all of them, the two who had been injured and the three who had carried them ... [Hussam] they shot in the head.

She said one fighter shot other people in the room. "One attacker looked at me and shot me ... in my [abdomen]." She experienced a stillbirth five days later.

A 20-year-old woman said that about 11 a.m. at the primary school for girls, which is part of the same complex, she was hiding in a classroom full of women along with five men in their 30s and 40s covered in the women's garments. She said that when a group of militiamen came in, "they were asking about money and phones. They started to search our items, so they found these men." The assailants took the men outside and shot them, killing three and wounding two.

Human Rights Watch also spoke with two men who hid in the schools and survived. One, 35, said he had been shot in the right shoulder while fleeing from his house in the Al-Emtidad neighborhood. With the help of others, he arrived at the secondary school for girls and concealed himself among women and children. He said that in the afternoon, Arab militia men entered the school:

I heard and saw armed Arab men entering the school, shouting, "Where are your men?" Immediately, they found six men and shot them at close range. I don't know if they [the victims] [had been] wounded before or [if they were] fighters. I saw that from where I was hiding. They spared the children and women. They then left. When they left, I moved to see what happened [and] saw the six men lying there dead. There was so much blood on the floor ... [W]omen and children [were] crying.

A self-defense fighter said that,

after being injured in the shoulder during fighting, he hid in a large room of the high school for boys, where he survived an attack:

The school was full of women and children mostly ... There was a wounded man next to me ... The Arabs came saying they are looking for men and to finish the job ... The armed men approached us and immediately shot us. They shot the man in the head, then shot me in the leg and, when I flipped, in my buttocks. I lay motionless and was bleeding. My wife started shouting and crying ... They thought I was dead, so they left. The other man died instantly.

Two men who were hiding near the schools overheard the

home, where neighbors had gathered when the attack started: "Arabs ... took everything we have. I saw them taking bags of seeds, beans, bread, and wheat, and [then they] left." In other homes, the assailants stole solar panels, doors, and windows, "food items such as peanuts ... blankets, beds, mattresses," jerrycans, and chairs, and dishes, and cooking utensils.

A 25-year-old man said he was driving into the Al-Shati neighborhood when the attack started, and that men in RSF uniforms fired at him, apparently to stop the car. "A bullet went through the windshield and hit me in my left shoulder," he said. "I immediately fell out. They pushed my body



assailants cheering and uttering racial slurs. One said: "Some Arabs were cheering and shooting in the air, saying, 'We burned the Massalit, we burned the zorga [Black people].'"

Pillage, Arson

The attackers throughout the day looted at gunpoint farm animals, vehicles, furniture, money, gold, food, and personal items, loading the property into vehicles and on motorbikes, while setting on fire many buildings in the town. A health worker in Misterei said the assailants also "ransacked and looted" Misterei's public hospital, taking essential and life-saving medicines.

A 63-year-old man living in the Al-Shati neighborhood said that attackers broke into his

[out of the way] and drove the car."

A 60-year-old man with a bullet wound hid in the house of an acquaintance, where two women tended to his wounds. He said that at one point, 10 RSF fighters entered the house, though they did not see him. "The [women] were begging the soldiers not to kill them. The soldier said: 'We are only here for men or money.'" The women gave the soldiers some money, and the soldiers left, the man said.

A 20-year-old student said:

They kept looting, going, and coming back ... So around 10, 11 a.m. they went out of the village, near the valley, then returned at 12:30 p.m. They went out again at 3 p.m. and came back again.

Around 4 p.m., assailants returned after briefly leaving the town, a 36-year-old man said. He watched in hiding from the roof of his house in Al-Emtidad:

Arabs [were] roaming around our street looting everything: television screens, furniture, window frames, and bags of seeds [and] loading these onto motorbikes and vehicles, including RSF [vehicles].

At the schools, attackers plundered the valuables that civilians had taken with them. "They took blankets, mattresses, beds, money, phones ... donkeys ... and they burned the remaining stuff," said a 20-year-old woman farmer who was robbed. A teacher, 35, estimated that in addition to the gold and phones that the assailants took from people hiding in classrooms, they also stole more than 50 farm animals, including horses, donkeys, and goats, from around the schools.

The attackers set houses and the market on fire as they progressed through town. Eight residents interviewed said their houses were burned. A 29-year-old living in Al-Adwa neighborhood said that he saw militiamen burn his house using a lighter on the thatch roof while he ran away amid intense shooting by the assailants.

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May 24, 2023: Image © Copernicus Sentinel Data June 3, 2023: Image © Copernicus Sentinel Data

Infrared satellite image comparison between May 24, 2023 and June 3, 2023, shows the extent of the burning in the town of Misterei, West Darfur, Sudan. On infrared images, the vegetation appears in red and the burned areas more clearly in dark. Image © Copernicus Sentinel Data

Satellite imagery of June 2, 2023 shows several active fires and smoke plumes over the town of Misterei, West Darfur, Sudan. Click to expand Image Satellite imagery of June 2, 2023 shows several active fires and smoke plumes over the town of Misterei, West Darfur, Sudan. Image © 2023 Planet

Labs PBC

Satellite imagery of June 2, 2023 shows residential areas destroyed by fire in the town of Misterei, West Darfur, Sudan. Click to expand Image

Satellite imagery of June 2, 2023 shows residential areas destroyed by fire in the town of Misterei, West Darfur, Sudan. Image © 2023 Planet Labs PBC

Many residents described finding the ruins of their homes when they emerged from their hiding places at sunset, after the attackers left Misterei. They found only remnants of items the assailants had not looted, such as clothes or blankets.

Fire detection data provided by NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System showed active fires over Misterei every day from May 29 to June 2. Several smoke plumes and active fires were visible on satellite imagery from May 29 and June 2. Images from June 3 showed extensive burn marks throughout the town's residential areas.

The Aftermath

"Everything was lost in couple of hours," said one resident. "There were houses, huts, and shops. When we left our hiding [places] by sunset, there was nothing really left, and many people were looking for the missing ones."

On the evening of May 28, men began gathering the bodies of those killed for burial. Some residents used folding beds and others a pickup truck to collect the bodies. A front-end loader was also used to transport the bodies and dig mass graves.

A local leader who participated in the burial process said the front loader was used to dig two long trenches and two smaller ones in the yard of the school complex, and that at least 59 bodies, most of them of men, were buried there that evening. The fear of renewed attacks meant that not everyone could be buried that night. A local official said that some people returned in subsequent days and buried more victims, bringing the total number of residents confirmed killed to 97.

Survivors estimated that between 50 and 60 residents

were injured. Many of them could only find medical treatment after crossing the border to Chad.

Throughout the day and evening, many residents fled Misterei toward the border with Chad, seven kilometers away. The way out of Misterei was strewn with bodies, two residents said.

A 36-year-old woman described crossing the seasonal riverbed that separates Sudan from Chad:

[W]e saw several dead bodies, clearly people who had been trying to flee before us ... maybe three or four dead men, all with gunshot wounds, just horrific. My daughter was pregnant ... she couldn't ... deal with what she saw. She miscarried and lost consciousness.

A 35-year-old farmer said his



relative, a 45-year-old farmer, was shot in the shoulder while walking towards the border.

By May 31, nearly 17,000 people had arrived in Gongour, a Chadian village across the border and the main point of arrival for refugees from Misterei. Most of these people currently remain in Gongour.

Recommendations

All parties to the conflict in Sudan should:

Abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law, particularly to protect civilians and facilitate aid delivery; and

Recognize that commanders responsible for abuses, including as a matter of command responsibility, could be subject to future prosecution before the ICC or another court.

The UN Security Council and AU Peace and Security Council should take meaning-

ful action to address serious violations in Sudan, including: Press the warring parties to ensure that all aid and health staff, and humanitarian and medical facilities and supplies are protected from attacks and looting, and that health and aid staff and agencies are able to carry out their work free of harassment or other interference;

Use existing authority or authorize new targeted sanctions on leaders of Rapid Support Forces, the Sudan Armed Forces and armed groups responsible for serious abuses against civilians;

Call on all countries to respect the Security Council's Darfur arms embargo and stop transferring weapons, ammunition, and material to the warring parties;

Publicly call on Sudan's war-

stantial independent monitoring and investigations into the crisis in Sudan, including events in Darfur, with the aim of collecting and preserving evidence of crimes under international law by warring parties and other armed groups there. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the High Commissioner's Designated Expert should:

Convene an urgent briefing on the situation for UN member countries, in line with the high commissioner's independent mandate, to advise them on urgent steps to prevent further abuses in Sudan, including Darfur;

Allocate adequate resources to significantly ramp up monitoring and regular public reporting on the rights situation in Sudan including in Darfur and take measures to address impunity for serious abuses.

To the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court:

Investigate recent events in West Darfur as part of its overall investigation into crimes committed in Darfur; and

Indicate investigation plans with respect to recent crimes in Darfur in the prosecutor's July Security Council Darfur briefing.

International and Regional donors should:

Significantly increase humanitarian support both in Sudan and in Chad, and in other neighboring countries to help ensure civilians fleeing from the conflict and communities receiving them can receive assistance.

The European Union, and other concerned governments including the United States and the United Kingdom should:

Use existing authority or authorize new regimes to impose targeted sanctions on leaders of Rapid Support Forces, the Sudan Armed Forces, and armed groups responsible for serious abuses against civilians; and

Strengthen existing mediation capacities, such as the appointment of the US presidential envoy, to engage directly with regional actors and Sudanese civil society groups to develop a strategy focused on protecting civilians.

Pakistan, Palestine and the World Court

Pakistan has an important opportunity to support Palestinian rights at the World Court and in doing so to advance key principles of international law that protect human rights globally.

In December 2022, the United Nations General Assembly requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal consequences of Israel's prolonged occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Though this is the second time the General Assembly has asked the ICJ for an advisory opinion related to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the December request is wider in scope. In 2004, the ICJ in an advisory opinion found that the route of Israel's separation barrier violated international law and that it should be dismantled. Pakistan should help shape the court's opinion through an official submission on the questions the ICJ has been asked to address.

Pakistan has long expressed concerns about the Israeli government's systematic repression of Palestinians and recognized the reality of Israel's abusive, long occupation. In March, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto recognized Israel's apartheid at a UN news conference.

Originally coined in relation to South Africa, apartheid today is a universal legal term. The prohibition against particularly severe institutional discrimination and oppression or apartheid constitutes a core principle of international law. International criminal law, including the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and the 1998 Rome Statute, the founding document for the International Criminal Court, define apartheid as a crime against humanity consisting of three primary elements: (1) an intent by one racial group to domi-

nate another; (2) systematic oppression by the dominant group over the marginalized group; and (3) particularly grave abuses known as inhumane acts.

Applying the law to its many years of research on Israel's treatment of Palestinians, Human Rights Watch in an April 2021 report, 'A Threshold Crossed', found that Israeli authorities were committing the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against Palestinians. This conclusion, based on documentation of an overarching government policy to maintain

significant implications, including for any findings of violations of international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. Even if the court does not reach substantive findings on violations of international law, its opinion can set out guidance to interpret these key international laws, in particular laws that have not yet been litigated, like the crime against humanity of apartheid. Even if the court, operating by consensus, does not issue a clear finding on some issues, strong separate opinions by judges can prove powerful.



the domination of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians and coupled with grave abuses against Palestinians living in the occupied territory, including East Jerusalem, is shared by Palestinian, Israeli and other international human rights groups.

In recent months, Israel's discrimination and repression have intensified. In 2022, the number of killings in the West Bank and of people held in administrative detention without trial or charge based on secret evidence was the highest in years. Israel's current government has identified as a guiding principle that all the territory between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea belongs "exclusive[ly]" to the Jewish people.

In this situation, the ICJ advisory opinion could have signif-

icant implications, including for any findings of violations of international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. Even if the court does not reach substantive findings on violations of international law, its opinion can set out guidance to interpret these key international laws, in particular laws that have not yet been litigated, like the crime against humanity of apartheid. Even if the court, operating by consensus, does not issue a clear finding on some issues, strong separate opinions by judges can prove powerful.

Submissions by individual countries form part of the court record and, as previous advisory opinions have shown, can help to shape the court's approach. A Pakistan submission should urge the court to broadly assess the legal consequences of the 56-year-old occupation, including violations of core principles of international law, discriminatory laws, policies and practices of successive Israeli governments, and the consequences of these for international human rights, humanitarian and criminal law. It should make clear that, so long as Israeli authorities continue to occupy Palestinian territory, they are required to ensure that Palestinians living under occupation have full protection of the rights guaranteed to everyone under interna-

tional human rights law, using as a benchmark the rights they grant Israeli citizens, as well as protections they are owed under international humanitarian law.

It should also encourage the court to take stock of the increasingly transparent reality that Israeli authorities methodologically privilege Jewish Israelis, who are governed under the same body of laws with the same rights and privileges wherever they live, while systematically discriminating against Palestinians wherever they live. It should also urge the court to consider the consequences of Israeli authorities' failure to regard the occupation as temporary. They have made clear their intent to maintain overriding control over the West Bank in perpetuity.

It should ask the court to make clear that Israeli authorities' treatment of Palestinians is racial discrimination and indicate that Israeli authorities are committing the crimes of apartheid and persecution as defined under international law.

UN member countries have an obligation to take action against the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution, to end complicity in such crimes, and to press for accountability. Silence, inaction, and denial in the face of Israeli authorities' crimes against humanity poses a grave challenge to the rules-based international order.

Continuing to hide behind the empty platitudes of a moribund peace process allows Israel to continue the daily, escalating oppression, humiliation, and anguish of Palestinians. That needs to end. Pakistan has an opportunity to display leadership on this crucial issue before one of the most important international legal forums: the World Court. It should seize that opportunity.

Europe's "Let Them Die" Policy, One Month after Mass Drowning

It's been one month since the horrific mass drowning off the coast of Greece in which some 650 people lost their lives. The world has learned much about the disaster in the meantime.

The last four weeks have brought at least three investigations damning the Greek coastguard's botched response to the overcrowded vessel, highlighting their earlier failure to respond, and suggesting a possible cover-up of evidence afterwards.

There are still many questions to answer, of course, and HRW will publish our own investigation in time.

But one thing is clear: this horror was avoidable. Like thousands of other drownings on Europe's frontiers – individually, in their dozens, and in their hundreds – last month's was the predictable result of policy choices the European Union and member states have made.

The EU and its members decided to cut proactive search and rescue at sea. They obstruct search-and-rescue operations of private groups. And they even criminalize rescue workers and persecute those who dare to remind people that migrants and asylum seekers are human beings with rights like the rest of us.

The policy of EU and member state "leaders" can be summed

up in three words: let them die.

An awful part of this moral bankruptcy is crocodile tears from European politicians every time there's a major disaster like the one last month. (Politicians simply ignore lower death counts, of course.)

They make a show of railing against the human traffickers – i.e., people the politicians themselves have

enriched by not offering safe channels for asylum and legal migration. And EU politicians insincerely lament what an awful thing has happened, pretending they aren't fully aware their policies were integral to the mass drowning.

Because make no mistake: they are fully aware. These are not stupid people; everyone knows full well if you cut, obstruct, and criminalize search-and-rescue operations at sea, more people are going to drown.

They know they could save those lives they make an act of crying over. They simply choose not to.

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Mali's Emergency Deepens

The news from Mali is grim. Security in the country has deteriorated sharply amid clashes between two armed Islamist groups competing for influence. A new report details how they have carried out widespread killings, rapes, and lootings of villages in north-east Mali since January.

HRW has also documented atrocities by the Malian security forces and apparent Wagner mercenary forces during counterinsurgency operations in central Mali.

To top it all off, Mali's transitional military government has convinced the UN Security Council to approve the departure of the UN peacekeeping force. This will not only impact security and civilian protection directly but also end the mission's important work of documenting human rights abuses.

The fighting and instability have sparked a massive humanitarian emergency in Mali. The UN reports the conflict has forced more than 375,000 people from their homes.

It's difficult to see how the situation might improve in the immediate future. But at the very least, the Malian authori-

ties need to ramp up efforts to protect civilians, and international partners should increase support humanitarian assistance.

Egypt's New Entry Rules Leave Sudanese in Peril (written by Lisa Maier)

The Egyptian government has decided that all people from Sudan, including those fleeing the ongoing armed conflict, are now required to obtain visas to enter Egypt. It's a devastating move.

The new rules have left thousands of civilians, including children, stranded in extreme heat at Egypt-Sudan border crossings.

The government claimed the change would prevent visa forgery. However, this cannot justify denying or delaying entry to people fleeing Sudan's devastating conflict.

The UN Refugee Agency has urged all countries to keep borders open to Sudanese needing to escape the rising calamity. Refusing entry to asylum seekers at the border violates the right to seek asylum under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Egyptian government should reverse their decision that's put thousands at risk.



Uganda: Oil Pipeline Project Impoverishes Thousands

Land, Livelihoods Lost for Fossil Fuel Project Disastrous for Climate



The French fossil-fuel giant TotalEnergies' planned oil pipeline in East Africa has devastated thousands of people's livelihoods in Uganda and will exacerbate the global climate crisis, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. If completed, the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project will have dozens of well pads, hundreds of kilometers of roads, camps and other infrastructure, and a 1,443-kilometer pipeline connecting oilfields in western Uganda with the port of Tanga in eastern Tanzania.

The 47-page report, "Our Trust is Broken: Loss of Land and Livelihoods for Oil Development in Uganda," documents the land acquisition process for one of the largest

fossil fuel infrastructure projects under construction anywhere in the world. The development in the oilfield, which will ultimately displace over 100,000 people, is well underway. Although 90 percent of people who will lose land to the project have received compensation from TotalEnergies EP Uganda, the project has suffered from multiyear delays in paying compensation and inadequate compensation.

"EACOP has been a disaster for the tens of thousands who have lost the land that provided food for their families and an income to send their children to school, and who received too little compensation from TotalEnergies," said Felix Horne, senior environment researcher at Human

Rights Watch. "EACOP is also a disaster for the planet and the project should not be completed."

The report is based primarily on over 90 interviews that Human Rights Watch conducted in early 2023, including with 75 displaced families in 5 districts of Uganda.

Human Rights Watch found that the impact of multiyear delays has been compounded by unclear communications as to whether farmers can continue to use the land to harvest coffee, bananas, and other cash crops in the interim. Consequently, the land acquisition project has caused severe financial hardships for thousands of Ugandan farmers, including heavy household debt, food insecurity, and an

inability to pay school fees, causing many children to drop out of school.

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Farmers said they felt pressured to sign compensation agreements in English, a language many of them cannot read, and many described being offered cash instead of the option of replacement land in line with international standards. Unkept promises about grave relocation and an improvement in the quality of life that was promised in the many early meetings extolling the virtues of EACOP have eroded trust between communities and TotalEnergies.

"They come here promising us



everything,” a resident said. “We believed them. Now we are landless, the compensation money is gone, what fields we have left are flooded, and dust fills the air.”

TotalEnergies is the principal company involved through its Ugandan subsidiary TotalEnergies EP Uganda, alongside the China National Offshore Oil Company and the state-owned oil companies of Uganda and Tanzania. Atacama Consulting and Newplan Group managed the land acquisition process on behalf of TotalEnergies EP Uganda.

TotalEnergies has promised to respect various international standards including International Finance Corporation (IFC) Performance Standards, which require TotalEnergies and its subsidiaries to restore or enhance livelihoods to pre-disturbance levels. The pipeline has still to secure 60 percent of the project cost. While the project still searches for the necessary financing, TotalEnergies and its subsidiaries should increase the amount of compensation and livelihood restoration efforts to be consistent with human rights standards.

In a June 15 letter to Human Rights Watch, TotalEnergies stated they “continue to pay close attention to respecting the rights of the communities

concerned” and provided detailed responses underscoring their view that compensation offered was in accordance with IFC standards. Atacama Consulting, the environmental consulting firm facilitating land acquisition for TotalEnergies EP Uganda in the Tilenga oilfields, responded on June 22. They rejected allegations that pressure was applied to people to sign and outlined why in their view that compensation provided met

the requirement of “full replacement cost.”

Studies show that the construction and operation of EACOP poses grave environmental risks. The pipeline route traverses sensitive ecosystems, including protected areas and internationally significant wetlands, posing threats to biodiversity and ecosystems that local communities depend on for their sustenance.

EACOP is being developed at a time when the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world’s leading authority on climate science; the International Energy Agency; and others warn that no new fossil fuel projects can be built if the world is to reach Paris Agreement goals and limit the worst impacts of climate change. In March, the IPCC confirmed that global temperatures are increasing at record levels, and urged governments to cut emissions by phasing out fossil fuels and scaling up renewable energy.

Because of the opposition to EACOP from civil society organizations and climate activists in Uganda and around the world, many financial institutions and insurance companies have made a public commitment to not support the pipeline. Financial institutions should avoid supporting EACOP due to the devastating impacts of fossil fuels on climate change as well as future risks of serious human rights impacts, Human Rights Watch said.

“The burning of fossil fuels is driving the climate crisis,” Horne said. “Financial institutions considering funding EACOP should steer clear of this project and instead help Uganda embrace its significant clean energy potential.”



Interview: Victory for People with Disabilities and Older Persons in Mexico

*When People Come Together
Good Things Happen*
In a landmark victory for peo-

this work, the impact of the reform bill, and the road ahead for disability rights in Mexico.

woman unable to move her hands because of guardianship laws in front of the Mexican

empowering people with disabilities and older persons to make decisions by themselves, with support if they so choose. Until now, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities were deemed incapable of deciding the most basic things, like where to live or with whom. So, many of them were put under legal guardianship, meaning that a third party could decide everything for them, even around health treatment.

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In the past, people with disabilities and older people whose rights were violated and who were exploited because of legal guardianship could not even participate in the legal proceeding that declared them legally incapable. And their children or relatives would sometimes take advantage of this, abusively using their assets and constraining their decisions.

This bill eliminates guardianship altogether and instead orders the creation of a model of supported decision-making, by which someone could appoint a third person to facilitate the exercise their legal capacity by providing support for communicating, understanding legal acts and their consequences, and expressing their will. Now, hopefully, people can truly be masters of their own lives.

Why is legal capacity so important?

Legal capacity is a threshold right that enables the exercise of many other rights, such as the right to health. Of course, there is also the impact on institutionalization. Until now, shelter directors would often act as guardians for people who were institutionalized and



ple with disabilities and older people, Mexican President Manuel López Obrador signed into law the National Civil and Family Procedure Code this summer, establishing full legal capacity and the right to supported decision making for everyone 18 years and older. This is an essential win for people with disabilities and older people in Mexico, who are often stripped of their legal capacity. At the forefront of this success was Deciding Is My Right, a coalition of organizations of people with disabilities, organizations of older persons, other human rights organizations, and academia. Human Rights Watch's Disability Rights Associate Director Carlos Ríos Espinosa speaks with one of the coalition's leaders, whom he considers a top authority on Mexico's legal capacity reform movement, a source of personal inspiration, and a friend, María Teresa Fernández (affectionately known as Marite), about her passion for

What was it like watching Congress pass the legal capacity reform?

The entire Deciding Is My Right coalition was watching the Mexican Congress channel on TV to see what was happening. We didn't want to miss a second of the discussions. And when the unanimous decision was reached, we were moved to tears and could hardly believe it. It was all very moving, a very emotional moment. Marite Fernández represents a

Senate, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007. Click to expand Image Marite Fernández represents a woman unable to move her hands because of guardianship laws in front of the Mexican Senate, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007. © 2007 Carlos Ríos-Espinosa

How will this reform change the lives of people with disabilities and older persons in Mexico?

We hope and expect it will change lives for the better, by



decide what treatment they should receive, locking them up and imposing coercive treatments on them. Now, everything requires the informed consent of the person concerned.

Finally, in terms of political rights, legal capacity is essential for people with disabilities to represent themselves within political parties, participate in such parties, vote, and be elected as representatives.

What is next for implementing the legal capacity reform?

The next steps involve important actions by all civil society actors and the three branches of government.

Firstly, federal and state congresses should pass amendments and recognize the legal capacity of everyone 18 years or over, aligning these amendments with the National Civil and Family Procedure Code. We already have an initiative before Mexico City's Congress.

Judges need to familiarize themselves with the reform, including through training.

And the executive branch should adopt public policies, in particular concerning support systems and their regulations. It should also create a public entity that provides guidelines to establish supported decision-making services for people who do not have the financial means to avail themselves of such supports.

: Members of the deaf theatre group "Seña y verbo" (Sign and Verb) in a performance where a judge places a deaf couple under guardianship, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007.

Click to expand Image
Members of the deaf theatre group "Seña y verbo" (Sign and Verb) in a performance



where a judge places a deaf couple under guardianship, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007. © 2007 Carlos Ríos-Espinosa
Training for people with disabilities and their families is also required. Many struggle to understand what this reform means, its implications, how to claim ownership of these implications and how to promote and defend their rights. Families will need training from civil society, from us, so their rights in relation to supported decision making can be explored and clarified, and so they no longer fear that their children will be left unprotected when guardianship ends. And that's just one of many aspects.

Then, society in general must work to materialize this cultur-

al change, to open up to diversity and, in particular, to accept disability. More broadly, it's about becoming an increasing-

it with substitute decision-making.

What are the major obstacles to ending legal guardianship

and granting legal capacity?

Mexican culture is very protectionist and paternalistic, there is this very deep-rooted idea that guardianship protects people with disabilities. But far from providing protection, guardianship makes people more vulnerable and subject to the will of third parties. I think this culture is one of the main challenges. Unfortunately, governments have implemented welfare-based and protectionist policies, and the current administration believes that giving grants to people with disabilities is enough to meet its obligations. Furthermore, I think the current level of political polarization affects our cause. The issue of disability has never been high on any political agenda. Instead, it's just been treated a matter of social assistance.

You have been a leader in the disability rights movement for decades. In fact, we met in 2007, when I was a member of Mexico City's Human Rights Commission board and you co-authored a report on disability rights for the Commission. I learned a lot from that report, and you encouraged me to get involved in the issue of legal capacity. Now, 15 years later and after constantly pushing Mexico to change its legislation, this victory has finally happened. After all this time, what fuels you to continue this work? ?



We need to see the bigger picture: The recognition of legal status and legal capacity is a human right, it is universal, and it should not be attached to specific groups. Every person, simply by virtue of being a person, has the right to exercise such capacity, to make decisions autonomously. If support is needed, support can certainly be provided. But the decision rests with the person. There is no reason to replace

Marite Fernández addressing the public during a demonstration before the Senate demanding the right to legal capacity, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007. Click to expand Image

Marite Fernández addressing the public during a demonstra-

ed?

Mexico ratified the CRPD but also made what's called an interpretive declaration to Article 12 on the recognition of the legal capacity of all persons with disabilities in every aspect of life. Mexico basical-

Deciding Is My Right was formed recently, 2020, and includes many Mexican organizations representing people with disabilities, including Asociación Mexicana de Síndrome de Costello, Centro de Autonomía Personal y

UNAM), Red Orgullo Loco, and Yo También. Our initiative is not limited to recognizing the legal capacity of persons with disabilities; we are advocating for a universal recognition of legal capacity, which would also benefit older persons, who are similarly often victims of legal guardianship. The older person's organization that is part of our collective is Comité Ajusco A.C. We also have specialist lawyers involved, and some of them even work at the Supreme Court.

We also have people with different disabilities as part of the coalition, and accommodations have been made to promote or facilitate their participation in our different activities. For example, there's a blind person, Ernesto Rosas, so we used documents in formats that could be read by his screen reader. We also self-describe ourselves at the beginning of meetings.

There is Fernanda Castro Maya, an activist with an intellectual disability, and Ricardo Adair, a person with autism. They require easy-to-read formats, so we use simple language and words. There are also people with psychosocial disabilities, who have asked for meetings not to start too early or for more time to be allocated to certain activities, and we always try to meet those requirements. Finally,

tion before the Senate demanding the right to legal capacity, Mexico City, Mexico, 2007. © 2007 Luis Rodríguez Martínez My engagement with the movement dates back to 1995, when I met Piña Palmera, an organization in Oaxaca that works with indigenous rural populations, families, and persons with disabilities. I was deeply moved by their work.

What keeps me going is, on the one hand, seeing the many things still needed to truly achieve equality for people with disabilities and the full exercise of their rights, and on the other hand, seeing that progress is being made. There will not be any progress unless civil society pushes the agenda. That is the driving force in my life. I am already 71 years old, and since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, I've had significant muscle loss as a result of having polio as a child. I struggle more and more to do things and I move around a lot less. I do as much as I can with supports.

Mexico ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD] in 2007, so why weren't the rights of people with disabilities fully respect-

ly said that legal guardianship complies with the CRPD, which is totally false. This was a major blow for people with disabilities in Mexico.

There was an upside to the government's interpretative declaration: It prompted the disability rights movement to unite, learn more about the CRPD, and join forces to eliminate legal guardianship. This contributed significantly to the strength of the movement. Among the most memorable demonstrations we mounted was with a theater group of deaf people called "Seña y Verbo" (Sign and Verb), who performed in chains outside the Senate as people being "chained" by legal guardianship. So, that was the beginning. Fortunately, as a result of Mexico's 2011 constitutional reform on human rights, it withdrew its interpretative declaration to the CRPD. But this still left Mexico's domestic legislation untouched. Now that has changed.

Tell me about the Deciding Is My Right coalition.

Social A.C. (CAPYS), Colectivo Chuhcan, A.C. Confederación Mexicana de Organizaciones en Favor de la Persona con Discapacidad Intelectual, A. C. (CONFIE), Documenta A.C., Entropía Social, Fundación Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, Fundación para la Inclusión y Desarrollo de Personas con Discapacidad,



A.C., Human Rights Watch, Movimiento de Personas con Discapacidad, Movimiento Asociativo Jalisciense pro Personas con Discapacidad, A.C. (Madijal, A.C.), Programa Universitario de Derechos Humanos (PUDH-

there are people with physical disabilities, like Cristian Mendoza from the Movement of People with Disabilities, and myself, and we prefer virtual rather than in-person meetings.