[**Missing persons**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725578/missing-persons)

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MUCH has changed in Pakistan of late. A new army chief has taken charge of the country’s most powerful institution. The previous chief, the now retired Gen Qamar Bajwa, before he departed, admitted to the army’s unconstitutional meddling in political affairs and said the institution would henceforth stay away from politics.

This shows that the security establishment took time to reflect, decide to accept its past mistakes and undertake course correction in the face of public pressure. Which seems like the right thing to do. But why should such acceptance be limited to politics? Gen Bajwa did mention the human right abuses perpetrated by the Indian military; however, he didn’t utter a word about the missing persons, and enforced disappearances in the country. Is the institution’s acceptance of mistakes selective? Will it not give up the alleged practice of enforced disappearances?

According to a report circulated on social media, the Quetta corps commander, Lt Gen Asif Ghafoor said his heart beats with the families of Baloch missing persons. The families of the missing are living through daily trauma. Words — without action — coming from those in a position to end the criminal practice sound empty and rub salt into the wounds.

Two men with good intentions can prevent much pain.

The media is busy portraying a positive image of the new army chief Gen Asim Munir. Many anchorpersons are calling him a morally upright man who likes to go by principles. But the real test would be to ensure that enforced disappearances never occur again. It is easier to do it when a senior military official says he feels for the families of the missing persons, and the new chief is someone who has a strong moral compass. Two men with good intentions in the same institution can save the families of missing persons from a lot of suffering and daily pain.

Currently, the civilian counterparts of the military also appear interested in resolving the long-standing issue of missing persons. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif himself told the media in Quetta that he will talk to the concerned authorities about it, and Rana Sanaullah, the interior minister, flew to Quetta to meet the protesting families of the Baloch missing persons. The Balochistan National Party-Mengal’s chief Akhtar Mengal has been actively asking for the release of all missing persons, and of putting an end to the criminal practice of enforced disappearance of Baloch youth since 2018 when he won the elections. What else is needed when the establishment has willing stakeholders who want to work with it on this problem?

The new army chief has an opportunity to actually listen to what people in Balochistan want. This can be the first step towards establishing peace in a province which has been burning in a conflict for more than a decade. The stories of the families of missing persons were painful when narrated by them in front of the commission formed by the Islamabad High Court. The commission was headed by Akhtar Mengal who visited the missing persons’ families, and the students of the Balochistan University in Quetta to record their grievances, and present a factual report to the Islamabad High Court in November. At the beginning of the visit, Akhtar Mengal did express the helplessness of the commission, but promised to listen to the families, and present their case before the Islamabad High Court.

The families of the missing have endured every difficulty in searching for their loved ones — from long marches to protesting in front of the press clubs of every big city of Pakistan. Many children, including Sammi Baloch and Ali Haider, grew up in protest camps while asking for the release of their fathers. During the course of this search they were harassed and intimidated by the police personnel of various provinces, with women being dragged to police vans or passing out on the roads. Yet, they haven’t given up hope for the return of their loved ones.

They deserve an answer from the establishment whose present members claim to care about the families. Young Baloch men shouldn’t have to live under the constant fear of being forcibly disappeared by the state from their homes, universities and marketplaces. The Baloch youth have grown up amid conflict; every young Baloch has a friend who went missing and has yet to return. Every Baloch family has a story of enforced disappearance. The suffering and trauma are collective. An end to this collective trauma is only possible if the new military command ends enforced disappearances.

Let’s hope that self-introspection and apologies take place, and a truth and reconciliation committee is set up on this grave matter. Having already taken the decision to stay away from politics, the security establishment, by resolving the issue of missing persons, will save the people of the peripheries a lot of unnecessary pain.

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