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**A**UTONOMY-seeking insurgents had a busy year in gas-rich Balochistan. They vented their anger against the establishment on countless power pylons, gas pipelines and railway tracks. But they were not the only ones inflicting damage on the civic infrastructure of the country's largest province.

In the summer of 2006, a powerful tropical cyclone, roaring past Karachi, pummelled the Makran coast, wreaking havoc in Pasni and Gwadar and rendering hundreds of thousands of people homeless. The scale of the calamity was so stupendous — the provincial relief commissioner put the number of cyclone-hit people at a quarter of a million — that it was some time before the government of

then chief minister Jam Mohammad Yousuf managed to provide succour and help to refugees marooned on high ground. Precious lives were lost in the meantime.

And as if the destruction caused by the tropical cyclone wasn't enough, torrential rains lashed different parts of Balochistan shortly afterwards and hampered the rescue and relief operation belatedly initiated by the armed forces. Hundreds of villages and low-lying areas were inundated by floodwaters. The province's communication and travel infrastructure was severely damaged. At a conservative estimate, over 200 people lost their lives.

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erated greater political controversy was the inauguration of the Gwadar port project. The inauguration, however, was preceded by a fiery parliamentary debate over the release of around one billion rupees to the Quetta-based Military Estate Officer by the federal government for the construction of an airport at Gwadar. The senators insisted that the money should have been paid to the Civil Aviation Authority instead.

Impervious to the criticism of censorious parliamentarians, President Pervez Musharraf inaugurated the country's third port at Gwadar on March 20. Eager to take the spotlight off the countrywide chorus of condemnation over the March 9 removal of former Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, the president announced plans for the

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Military

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federal minister for inter-provincial coordination Saleem Saifullah had reportedly said that a district could be carved out of one province and merged with another federating unit through a simple majority vote in the National Assembly.

While the Sonmiani port controversy simmered in Balochistan for a long time, no effort was made by the centre to allay the fears of the embittered local population nursing long-standing grievances. But, then, the federal government's treatment of the province has always been characterised by arrogance and disdain. Arrogance and disdain also marked the manner in which the government held the trial of former Balochistan chief minister Sardar Akhtar Mengal.

The year began with a revelatory statement by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan expressing concern over the way in which Mr Mengal's trial was being conducted inside the Karachi central prison. It was reported that he was forced to sit in an iron cage away from his counsel. He was denied basic amenities like bedding, medical treatment, home-cooked food and permission to see his relatives. It was plain that in addition to trying Mr Mengal on charges of manhandling snoop-ing sleuths of the Military Intelligence, a sinister effort was being made to humiliate him or to at least punish the sardar whose faction of the Balochistan National Party was the only political party whose members resigned from parliament upon the Aug 26, 2006, assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti in the Bhambore mountain range of the strife-torn Kohlu district.

Since violence begets violence, few were surprised when former spokesman for the Balochistan government Raziq Bugti was gunned down by armed assailants in an ambush on July 26. While it was Mr Bugti's job to defend government actions, he sometimes did it in an insensitive manner, showing scant regard for the victims of state oppression — of whom there is no dearth in Balochistan.

Illustration by Abro

## Military Estate Officer.

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First, they said, Balochistan had not been consulted by the federal government over the construction of a new seaport at Sonmiani.

The deputy speaker of the Balochistan Assembly said that neither he nor the chief minister was taken on board, though they were returned to the assembly from the district in which the proposed project was to be undertaken.

Second, they argued, the proximity of Karachi with two fully-fledged seaports to Sonmiani would in any case put the port in the Lasbela district at a disadvantage.

Third, they feared, the move was part of a conspiracy to merge the Lasbela district with Sindh. Matters were not helped by the fact that Senator Babar Ghauri, who belongs to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, was then federal minister for ports and shipping and former

the strife-torn Kohlu district.

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News of the assassination of the latest victim of state oppression came in the penultimate week of November. The fiercely independent Baloch nationalist, Nawabzada Balach Marri, believed to be the chief of the clandestine Baloch Liberation Army, was reported to have been killed along with his men-at-arms in Afghanistan on Nov 21. While the intelligence agencies peddled the notion that the 42-year-old rebel leader was killed in a clash with security forces in Afghanistan, most people believed that he died in a military operation in Balochistan.

The slain nationalist's father, Nawab Khair Buksh Marri, said he did not believe Balach was dead. He said he would accept condolences only when he had seen his youngest son's body. And till then he will face immense parental anxiety like thousands of families whose relatives have been missing and are believed to be in the custody of intelligence agencies. ■