[**The unheard voices**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1679397/the-unheard-voices)

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EITHER directly or indirectly, terrorism has lasting effects on its victims and their families. The well-being of victims is, however, a neglected area in the criminal justice systems of most developing societies. It can be helpful for policymakers to understand how terrorism affects individuals. Victims of terrorism can be classified either as ‘direct’ or ‘secondary’ victims. A direct victim refers to those who have died or suffered serious injuries in a terrorist attack. Secondary victims are the next of kin or dependants of direct victims.

It is important to recognise ‘secondary victimisation’, which refers to suffering caused not as a result of an act of terrorism, but due to poor institutional responses to it. Lack of awareness about rights, due compensation and legal procedures adds to the miseries of victims and their heirs. Rigid procedures, red tape and lack of transparency are other irritants.

The Madrid Memorandum on Good Pract­ices for Assistance to Victims of Terrorism is helpful in outlining what can be done to holistically assist victims both immediately after an attack and also during criminal proceedings.

In developing societies, restitution provided to victims is usually restricted to financial compensation. However, without an assessment of the physical and psychological needs of victims of terrorism, planning and allocation of resources for their welfare is a flawed exercise.

Assistance to victims requires close coordination.

Assistance to victims requires close coordination between victim assistance experts, crisis response teams and police. The provision of accessible crisis services to victims through a hotline or other use of technology can greatly facilitate in this area.

Countries which have incurred heavy human losses as a consequence of terrorism also need to compile a databank to keep track of victims, which can help in developing victim support strategies.

During coverage of a terrorism incident, victims’ privacy is often compromised, which needs legal intervention and the observance of a code of conduct. Media coverage should be based upon ethical standards and safety police should make efforts to keep information of victims protected and safeguarded from public disclosure.

The media should adopt self-regulatory measures to remain sensitive to victims and their experiences. Journalists should be trained to inform victims that talking to the media or otherwise is a choice.

Victims are important witnesses in investigations and trials and their ability to participate without fear of intimidation is essential to maintaining the rule of law. They should be adequately informed of the consequences of their choices, including the impact of their statements on an ongoing investigation.

Victims’ first interaction with first responders actually sets the tone of their subsequent meetings with other officials and may imp­ro­­ve public perception of state responsiveness. Effective coordination between law enforcement, criminal justice and other departments can be helpful in preventing secondary victimisation.

An integrated response to victims also needs defined policy guidelines. Reducing unnecessary bureaucratic requirements reduces the anxiety often experienced by victims and their families. The appointment of victim support specialists and focal persons within the criminal justice system can also improve communication and coordination between government agencies and victims.

During criminal justice proceedings, victim protection professionals should strive to prevent emotional harm to victims and ensure free legal aid. Investigators should inform victims in advance about court proceedings. In case there is no legal obligation, investigators should educate the victim in case they want to be a volunteer. Investigators, pro­secutors, and jud­ges should also be trained on how to question traumatised victims. Re­­g­ular meetings between victims, investigators and prosecutors can also help alleviate victims’ feelings of helplessness.

Pakistan has lost about 80,000 souls as a consequence of the ‘war on terror’. Our parliamentarians can play an effective role by helping synchronise national compensation laws with international standards. Ensuring transparency, immediacy, victim advocacy, outreach and a humane approach will yield significant dividends.

Pakistan also needs to establish a national victim support fund and incorporate the well-being of victims of terrorism in its National Action Plan. The introduction of an insurance model dedicated to compensation of victims independent of the judicial process will also be a practical manifestation of the respect for right to life as enshrined in Article 9 of the Constitution.

The unheard voices of the victims of terrorism need to be made part of the counterterrorism narrative as they can greatly enhance its credibility. Leaving victims and their heirs unattended, however, completely undermines the very purpose of a state.

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*Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2022*