



Liberation United Front (BLUF) claimed the responsibility of taking Solecki — an American citizen — hostage.

This incident took many observers by surprise. It was particularly surprising because of the precision and skill with which the militant group took the UNHCR official hostage. He remained in custody for 61 days before being released by his captors.

Shortly after the release of John Solecki, three Baloch political leaders were found murdered in a desolate place near Turbat. They were identified as Ghulam Mohammad, Lala Munir and Sher Mohammad. These murders sent a shockwave throughout Balochistan. The entire province was paralysed and massive protests erupted in every nook and corner of Balochistan. The unprecedented response over the killing of the three Baloch leaders also jolted the establishment.

Unidentified gunmen shot and critically injured eminent Baloch intellectual Jan Mohammad Dashti in an assassination attempt in Quetta in broad daylight. Baloch nationalists blamed the intelligence agencies for both the murders and the attempted murder.

On the contrary, there was no let-up in the targeted killings on an ethnic and sectarian basis. In some cases security personnel, mainly from the police and the Frontier Corps, were targeted. In mid-December a DSP and two of his armed guards were ambushed and killed outside his Quetta residence. So far 70 people have lost their lives in the shocking incidents of targeted killing. Both the governor and the chief minister condemned the killings saying that innocent, unarmed and poor people had been the main targets.

In the meantime the Balochistan High Court had issued orders to register a murder case against the former president, retired General Pervez Musharraf, for the murder of Nawab Akbar Bugti and his comrades. Earlier, a subordinate court had rejected the plea of Nawabzada Jamil Akbar Bugti. He appealed to the superior court, where orders were issued to register the murder case against



By Saleem Shahid

Balochistan in flux

INSURGENCY continues to persist in Balochistan with no sign of relief for the people, while the restoration of normality in the province also seems like a distant dream. The year 2009 remained a year of turmoil, to say the least. Targeted killings — around 70 people lost their lives in ethnic and sectarian attacks — and political gridlock seemed to be the major issues affecting the province.

At the same time Balochistan remained in focus internationally with persistent claims from US officials and American media over the presence of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his Quetta 'Shura' in the province, said to be responsible for the covert war close to the Afghan province of Helmand and its adjoining areas bordering Balochistan.

Presumably for this reason, US President Barack Obama decided to dispatch 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan — the bulk of them to be deployed on the Balochistan border in the disturbed Helmand Valley. There were continuous fears among the people that the US would soon start drone attacks in Balochistan.

There was a unilateral ceasefire from Baloch militant groups earlier in the year. However, finding no response from the government the militants ended their ceasefire and resumed their activities.

There has been no relief on the political front. More people 'disappeared' during the year and the Baloch nationalists blamed the intelligence agencies for the enforced disappearances reported from the central and western parts of Balochistan. At the same time the government withdrew more than 89 criminal cases against political opponents, including some cases against Sardar Akhtar Mengal, Nawabzada Jamil Akbar Bugti and other prominent political personalities. However, the withdrawal of criminal cases left no impact on the political scene, with Baloch nationalists blaming the government for intensifying the military offensive against the people.

Two very important incidents took place in the middle of the year. These were the hostage taking of John Solecki, chief of the UNHCR in Balochistan, and the assassination of three Baloch political leaders in Makran. A little-known organisation calling itself the Baloch

Nawab Akbar Bugti and his comrades. Earlier, a subordinate court had rejected the plea of Nawabzada Jamil Akbar Bugti. He appealed to the superior court, where orders were issued to register the murder case against Pervez Musharraf and his accomplices, including former chief minister Jam Yousuf and the home minister at the time. However, there was no progress reported following the registration of the murder case against Gen Musharraf.

The federal government announced many measures and reforms aimed to address the grievances of the Baloch people. The first was the Balochistan 'package'. However, it fell short of the expectations of the Baloch nationalists. Their main demands were to release all detainees and trace and release all missing persons, claimed to be in the thousands. On the other hand the government had withdrawn 89 cases in two phases.

A number of relief measures for the government of Balochistan had also been announced, including the writing off of a Rs17.5 billion bank loan. The federal government agreed to pay off the loan.

The NFC award was said to be the greatest relief to the provincial government as the federation committed to pay back Rs120 billion as Gas Development Surcharge — all arrears from 1954 to 1991 — to the Balochistan government, while the wellhead price of natural gas was brought on a par with the other provinces. It had been the lowest in Pakistan.

On the administration front, the government removed seven major check-posts of the security agencies, lifting all curbs on free movement of the people. The century-old community policing system of Balochistan, known as Balochistan Levies, has been revived. The orders of Pervez Musharraf disbanding the Balochistan Levies had been reversed reviving the force.

Perhaps the most shocking incident was the assassination of serving provincial minister for education Shafiq Ahmed Khan outside his residence. This event also sent a shockwave. Most Baloch nationalist leaders participated in his funeral and condemned the killing in cold blood.

The insurgency the province has been facing for the last eight years is expected to continue for some time despite the claims from the prime minister that he is in contact with estranged Baloch leaders in order to find an amicable solution to the political and constitutional problems of Balochistan. ■



UN official John Solecki was kidnapped in February.—AFP