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Pakistan

Open Letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres

- News from around the world -

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This open Letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres was sent by Nazneen Habib and Jahan Ara, sisters of Baba Jan, on the eve of his visit to Lahore.

We, sisters of Baba Jan, a political prisoner, request you to take attention of the unjust imprisonment of 14 activists from Hunza Valley in Gilgit-Baltistan, including our brother Baba Jan. We also want to bring to your attention the murder of Sher Ullah Baig and Afzal Baig, a father and his son, who when peacefully protesting against the failure of the government to provide promised compensation to victims of the Attabad Disaster of 2010 were shot dead in front of a crowd numbering in hundreds. Let us briefly elaborate on these events.

In January 2010, a mountain-side collapsed into the Hunza River and created what is now known as the Attabad Lake. The landslide immediately killed 20 villagers and rendered more than 600 people homeless. As the lake formed, village after village was submerged. In total, over 1000 people were displaced and over 25,000 were cut off from the rest of the country (the lake had destroyed the one road that connected the area to Pakistan).

The plight of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan was ignored. Baba Jan, toured the country lobbying for the government to drain the lake and create transport facilities for the affected. The Pakistan People's Party government acted too late. The lake is now a permanent feature of the area. To offset the protests of the displaced, the government promised monetary compensation to the affected people and support in their resettlement.

However, for many, compensation never arrived. An official list of those who were to receive compensation named 457 families. Over a hundred of these families did not receive their compensation, until recently.

On 11th August, 2011, around 200 people, including the members of 25 families affected by the disaster, protested for the rights of the affected people to promised compensation, as the then Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan, Syed Mehdi Shah, was visiting the town of Aliabad, Hunza. The police, instructed to remove the protesters by any means, started with a baton-charge and then proceeded to use tear gas, before opening fire with live ammunition. Their first victim was Afzal Baig, a 22-year old student. When his father Sher Ullah Baig tried to retrieve the body of his son, he too was shot. Both died. The valley erupted and a police station and other government buildings were burnt down by the protesters.

Baba Jan arrived 6 hours later. He organized the protesters in a peaceful manner and they were promised an investigation and firm action against the police officers responsible for the killing. The protesters waited for the government to act. It acted a week later. Arrest warrants were issued for over 350 protesters including Baba Jan. While most of those arrested were released, Baba Jan and 13 other protesters were kept in jail on-and-off for 2 years, while, two others absconded and have been able to obtain bail later. Baba Jan was granted bail in 2012, while another activist, Iftikhar Hussain's plea for bail was denied. Subsequently, Baba Jan's bail was revoked.

A judicial inquiry into the killing of Afzal Baig and his father was conducted. Its findings have not been made public but journalists who have seen it claim that it lays the blame on the police force and local bureaucracy for the incident.

Baba Jan and Iftikhar Hussain are respected community activists. Iftikhar Hussain is a senior leader of the Karakoram National Movement, a political party. Baba Jan is the former Vice President of the Awami Workers Party-Pakistan, the founding chairman of the Progressive Youth Front and the current Chief Organizer of the Awami Workers Party, Gilgit-Baltistan. In 2013, Baba Jan, was granted bail and resumed his activism. He successfully campaigned for the 'wheat subsidy' to be restored for the Gilgit-Baltistan region in 2014. For his efforts, his bail was withdrawn and he was sentenced to life imprisonment, along-with, 13 others. Undeterred, in summer 2015 he stood from jail to be a representative in the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly from Hunza constituency. Without funds

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and hindered by jail, he nonetheless, managed to gain the second highest number of votes in the elections. The seat became vacant again in 2015. Baba Jan was set to run but was not allowed to. His strong showing had scared

the Government of Pakistan and the election was delayed multiple times on various pretexts until Baba Jan was convicted and became automatically ineligible to run in the election. His electoral success proves he is a beloved community leader.

Several intellectuals including Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Mir Muhammad Ali Talpur and Aziz Ali Dad have signed petitions appealing for Baba Jan's release. In the last 8 years hundreds of protests have been held for the prisoners' freedom, throughout the country and worldwide. We have protested across the country and yet we await justice.

We call on you the General Secretary of the United Nations to pressure the Government of Pakistan to publish the findings of the judicial inquiry into the killing of Afzal Baig and Sher Ullah Baig. We ask you to make sure that Baba Jan and all other political prisoners of the Hunza Riots Case of 2011 be given a fair trial. That in the meantime, their rights as political prisoners be upheld. That visitor rights be restored and that all forms of psychological and physical torture end.

Nazneen Habib and Jahan Ara, Sisters of Baba Jan.

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