

Pakistan Bars Activist From Traveling to TIME Event Honoring Her

Monday 21 October 2024, by [SERHAN Yasmeen](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2024).

When Mahrang Baloch accepted an invitation to attend an event in New York City this week in honor of her and 99 others recognized on this year's TIME100 Next list, she anticipated that she might face some obstacles at the airport. After all, the 31-year-old doctor had become a household name in Pakistan for her advocacy defending the rights of the country's Baloch minority — a fraught issue in a country where separatists have fought an insurgency for decades. And while her activism has always been peaceful, the response from Pakistan's government has not. Baloch says she has been the target of harassment, arrests, and even an assassination attempts.

On Monday, she was prevented from beginning a journey to New York, where she was to attend a TIME dinner.

Baloch told TIME that immigration officials from Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) detained her at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport and confiscated her passport, stating that she did not have a valid U.S. visa. In fact, her passport indicates she had been issued a five-year visa that day.

Local [news reports](#) later suggested that her name appeared on the country's no-fly list, or Exit Control List. "If my name were on the ECL, the U.S. wouldn't have granted me a visa," Baloch said on Tuesday, noting that those appearing on the list are typically notified, and that she had not been. A State Department spokesperson told TIME in a statement that Washington is "monitoring the case closely and has raised its concerns with the Government of Pakistan," adding that the U.S. "stands with democracy and human rights defenders around the world. We call on the Government of Pakistan to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of movement."

After recovering her passport from the FIA officials, Baloch said she left the airport at around midnight, more than an hour after her flight had taken off. Her vehicle was stopped by uniformed and plain-clothes police officers from Sindh province, who she said proceeded to forcibly drag her and two of her fellow women activists out of the car. Baloch, whose recording of the encounter was reviewed by TIME, said that they were searched and subjected to verbal abuse and harassment. It was then, she said, that the police confiscated her passport, phone, and car keys, leaving them stranded on the side of the road.

"It's unfortunately common for the police in Pakistan to refuse to register cases against intelligence agencies, who operate with impunity," Baloch says. "I am under extreme pressure, and my security and safety are at great risk." A spokesperson for the chief minister of Sindh province told TIME that an inquiry into the matter concluded that Baloch was not wanted by Sindh police and that therefore "the allegation of [her] being picked up by Sindh police was not proved."

Also on Tuesday, Baloch learned via her lawyer that the real reason she may have been prevented

from traveling was down to her alleged appearance on another list, called the Pakistan National Identity List (PNIL), which contains names of individuals suspected of being involved in criminal activities such as terrorism, money laundering, and fraud. In practice, the Pakistani government has used the PNIL list to control the movements of high-profile figures such as [artists](#) and political figures, including former Pakistani Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#). According to documents reviewed by TIME, Baloch appears to have been added to the list on Oct. 3, the day after Baloch appeared on the [TIME100 Next list](#).

“People placed on [the PNIL] are never notified or given the opportunity of [a] hearing—they usually discover upon arriving at the airport,” says Imaan Mazari, a Pakistani human rights lawyer representing Baloch, noting that [a petition](#) challenging the list’s legality is currently being considered by the Lahore High Court. In order to remove her name from the list, Baloch will need to appeal through order of a high court—a process that can take time. “For that period, a person’s right to freedom of movement is already infringed,” Mazari says.

Baloch’s experience is not unique. In August, another Baloch activist, Sammi Deen Baloch (no relation), was prevented from traveling to Geneva for an advocacy mission to highlight human rights issues in Balochistan. Front Line Defenders, a Dublin-based human rights organization, says that such restrictions on movement [are commonplace](#) in Pakistan, especially for those who speak out against state repression.

And few have spoken out more vociferously than Mahrang Baloch. She first began spearheading protests in the early aughts after her father and fellow activist Abdul Ghaffar Langove was taken—allegedly by security service officers—and found dead with signs of torture years later. Since then, she has been a vocal critic of her minority Baloch community’s treatment at the hands of the Pakistani military, which rights activists allege (and Pakistan security officials routinely deny) to be behind widespread disappearances and extrajudicial killings targeting the country’s largest and southernmost province, Balochistan.

There, an estimated [5,000 people](#) have gone missing amid Pakistan’s decades-long crackdown on a separatist insurgency led by Baloch militants belonging to the [Baloch Liberation Army \(BLA\)](#) and other groups, which seek independence from Islamabad. The separatist BLA, which is designated a terrorist group by the U.S. government, has claimed responsibility for a number of violent attacks in the region, including [a recent blast](#) that killed two Chinese nationals near the Karachi airport.

Baloch’s advocacy has been credited with transforming the plight of her community from a peripheral security issue in Pakistan to a mainstream civil rights movement—one [The Diplomat](#) says “challenges the way Pakistan deals with and describes Baloch grievances.” But those efforts had come at great personal cost. Baloch says she has been arrested half a dozen times for her activism and regularly faces harassment and threats towards both herself and her family. Earlier this year, she faced [charges of sedition](#), which human-rights advocates have slammed as “[judicial harassment](#).”

“There is a complex web of violence and human-rights violations in Balochistan that creates a very challenging environment for human-rights defenders, particularly women human-rights defenders, working on issues of enforced disappearance,” says Sarah de Roure, the global head of protection at Front Line Defenders, which helped arrange and finance Baloch’s travel to New York. “She is being targeted as a woman, she is being targeted as a Baloch woman, because of the work that she’s doing, which is publicly speaking on the issue of enforced disappearance—initially around her own family, and then as part of a broader movement.”

Attracting international attention, such as inclusion on the TIME100 Next list, also “of course draws attention from the authorities,” de Roure adds.

Baloch says she is determined to continue amplifying the situation in Balochistan while confined to Pakistan.. “They were afraid that if I am able to reach New York, I will be able to expose their war crimes in Balochistan,” she says. “I’m not just a human-rights defender. I’m a symbol representing those war crimes, representing those innocent victims of human rights violations.”

Her next move, she says, will be organizing a peaceful demonstration to protest what just happened to her. “I was born to resist,” she says. “If I would remain silent, it would be unjust to all of the human rights defenders, it would be unjust to my values. ... We will fight this case.”

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