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The disappeared

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

The first time I came into contact with an image of the disappeared was a year ago. My mother and I had gone to a rally being held near the Karachi Press Club. We had walked from Regal Chowk in a crowd of people and stood outside the Press Club to listen to the many speakers who had converged that day in protest against the city government's forced evictions. After everyone had spoken and the crowd began to disperse my mother's face turned towards the gates of the club. A young woman was sitting in front of a photograph, her fingers were tightly wrapped around the edges of the frame and her eyes had a distant, angry look to them. Her two children sat beside her and picked at the carpet they were sitting on. We went over to be with them. The woman's husband had been picked up in the middle of the night some months before. No one told his family where they were taking him or why. There was no warrant for his arrest; no charges had been filed against him. She had not seen her husband since.

A few days later we were at a Karachi stadium, not alas for sports, but to attend a series of talks set up by the World Social Forum, and it was there that we saw the faces of the disappeared once again. Relatives handed out photographs of loved ones snatched away by intelligence authorities, photocopied papers were passed around listing the details of many midnight abductions, and people sat in solidarity with those who lay in an unimaginably painful limbo -- not knowing whether to mourn the men they assumed were dead -- or to carry on clinging to the hope that they might still be alive.

Amnesty International, citing the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, says that while disappearances were relatively rare in Pakistan before 2001 -- the year the twin pantheons of American free trade were brought to the ground -- they have since become rampant, even outside of the 'war on terror' aegis. It has recently been reported that as many as 4,000 Pakistani citizens have disappeared under Pervez 'nobody-voted-for-me' Musharraf's government and are thought to have been illegally detained and tortured in secret prisons, packed off to Guantanamo Bay, or killed.

Disappearances are not unique to Pakistan, not at all. But we have finally caught up with the many, and may I add dictatorial regimes, around the world that have used this tactic against their own people to silence dissent, quell resistance, and crush 'anti-state' activity. It was mothers, old women, tired of waiting for their sons to return home, who had led the movement to uncover the truth behind disappearances in Argentina during the military junta that presided over 30,000 unlawful abductions in the late 1970s. In Chile, under the military government of Augusto Pinochet (who now lies in a Santiago hospital recuperating from a heart attack -- an organ many people assumed could never hurt him on account of its being wholly absent in his body before),

3,000 men and women have disappeared. The Gestapo dabbled in disappearances too, as has the CIA in the various countries it unpopularity lorded over for the better part of the twentieth century. And now the state of Pakistan can claim its own unknown victims.

Who are the disappeared?

They are Baloch nationalists, Sindhi activists, professors, labour leaders, and political workers. They are fathers and sons. But they are denied even their names and identities as their cases are often unkindly reported in the media with the importance of ticker news 'Man, 48-years-old, suspected of having links with terror organisations reported missing'. It just scrolls by. Before you have a chance to register the information, you've already missed it.

Why had they been taken? What were their crimes?

Distributing illicit pamphlets? Speaking out against the state? We're never told. That is part of the secret. That is part of why the disappeared can never be seen again. But because of the eerie and almost daily sight of women holding up photographs at public gatherings and outside government plazas and offices, at least we have seen the faces of the disappeared -- proof that they once existed, even if they will never again be found.

Why disappearances in particular?

Because with the absence of a body and no press conference listing the crimes of the accused to contend with, the state is officially distanced from any acts of violence or barbarism. They cannot be held accountable for what you never saw; silence and invisibility greatly benefits the brutality of the state. It is a terror enacted wholeheartedly on the populace's imagination -- as opposed to their bodies. You could have disappeared and no one would ever know what happened to you; your guilt presupposed over your innocence without having been tried in a court of law, condemned to a life -- or death -- forever unseen and unsung.

This week the government, for so long playing a tedious game of see no evil/hear no evil, has finally outed itself. Last Saturday the deputy attorney-general admitted that the whereabouts of 20 men picked up by intelligence agencies were known to the government. A case registered with the Chief Justice of Pakistan has forced an end to the authority's silence. On Monday seven other men who had disappeared two years ago were finally released, no charges had been proven against them. Four other men were also 'found' and returned to their homes in Swat, Kohat, and Hazara. Oops! Just kidding! They weren't Al Qaeda operatives after all, sorry about that whole hide and seek thing, here are your family members back -- You're welcome! The Supreme Court didn't find this charade funny and following this week's unexpected developments in justice for the disappeared is set to take up several other cases detailing illegal abductions filed by relatives of Pakistan's many missing men.

Today is international human rights day. While I have problems celebrating these sorts of days -- shouldn't every day be international human rights day? -- the time is upon us to mark this occasion in a meaningful and powerful manner. Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean playwright and poet,

writing on the thousands of disappearances in his country said "distance has become necessary to kill comfortably, to erase that killing before it happened and after it happened. So it can happen again". Our passivity to the injustices being perpetrated against our society only makes killers more comfortable.

Do something different today, be active, be enraged. Visit the Asian Human Rights Commission website at [www.ahrchk.net](http://www.ahrchk.net) and read their latest release on disappearances in Pakistan. The AHRC have demanded a commission be set up to investigate illegal abductions and appeals to "all concerned people, including journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers and relatives of victims, to become actively involved in pressing the government to see such a commission established and the persistent abductions and killings brought to an end at once". They're speaking to you. Sign up today and raise your voice in solidarity with the thousands of disappeared all over our country.