

[Resource Exploitation in Gilgit-Baltistan - An Overview by Imtiaz Hussain, President of Gilgit Baltistan National Congress \(GBNC\)](#)

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Imtiaz Hussain, President of Gilgit Baltistan National Congress (GBNC) presented this statement during a conference in UNHRC, Geneva

Mr. Chair, Respected Member of the European Parliament, Mr. Mumtaz Khan and ladies and gentlemen

Today I am here to talk about the environmental impacts on the lives of the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is part of the former Princely State of Jammu & Kashmir under Pakistani occupation.

In the last twenty years, Pakistan has initiated several large scale projects in Gilgit-Baltistan including mega dams and highways, which pose great threats to the fragile ecosystem. Most of these projects especially the Diamer dam is being constructed to benefit Pakistani citizens of Punjab province. One of the hydro-electric projects in pipeline called Skardo Dam will help generate 15,000 MW of electricity. The dam will inundate both Skardo and Shigar valleys displacing more than half of the population of Baltistan region, which at the time being stands at half a million. As hundreds of thousands of people will be forced to become internally displaced persons (IDPs); it will break their connection with the ancestral land and destroy cultural identity. In the same manner, it will destroy permanent sources of livelihood. In my opinion, Skardo dam is a political gambit played to grab the land of Baltistan and make Pakistan's occupation permanent.

Likewise, Pakistan is adamant to pursue construction of Diamer dam despite serious reservations of the natives of that district, since more than hundred miles of land will be inundated. In February of 2010, two people, Saifullah of Gunar-farm and Farahmulk of Chilas lost their lives and fourteen other were seriously injured when Pakistani security forces opened fire on thousands of protestors who demanded shelving the project. Many were detained and tortured without a proper judicial trial and the right of appeal in the apex courts. The cultural loss after Diamer's inundation demands attention as forty thousand historical petroglyphs will submerge. The natives are justified in their protest since this dam will be constructed to benefit the people of Punjab.

Further all these dams including the Bunji dam will be built in a seismic zone, which may ensue in structural limitations. Breach of any of the dams will create havoc downstream damaging life and assets. Bunji dam producing 7,500 MW of electricity at the cost of US\$ 8 billions is being constructed in an area where three mountain ranges of Karakoram, Himalayan and Hindukush converge. A 13-mile long tunnel will be bored near the collision point of these ranges to pass the water, adding to further instability. Similarly Diamer dam, costing US\$ 16 billions, will be constructed near the epicenter of the earthquake of 2005, which killed more than hundred thousand people in Pakistani occupied Kashmir.

Reports claim that seepage has already started in the recently constructed Sadpara dam of Skardo. This dam is also constructed in a high seismic zone and poses threat to the fragile ecosystem. All these dams are like ticking water bombs and any breach of walls will ensue in great destruction.

While the engineers are trying to fill the cracks in the walls of Sadpara dam, another man-made disaster called Ataabad Lake in Hunza demands immediate attention. This lake was created due to a blockage of Hunza River. The lake has inundated seven villages and killed twenty-two people. Thousands of dollars worth of assets were lost in the water as the villagers saw destruction with helplessness. The situation has created forty thousand internally displaced people (IDPs) who await rehabilitation. Government has failed to provide adequate relief to the victims. Several people were reported to attempt suicide to end their misery. Due to government's criminal negligence, the lake has now expanded over more than 30 kilometers of length and continues to grow.

Recent flashfloods in Gilgit-Baltistan have created similar wave of IDPs, who also failed to receive adequate help from the government. As of now, more than two hundred people have died; eighty thousands have been affected directly due to loss of land and resources and another half a million are indirectly hurt as the entire region is cut off from rest of the world paralyzing the socio-economic system.

While the floods have done some damage to local forests, major destruction occurs due to logging and smuggling by Pakistani timber mafia, which destroys resources with impunity. Destruction to thousands of acres of forest-cover has failed to generate revenues for the natives; however, the environmental consequences in the form of mudslides are grave. Destruction to forest inevitably leads to death to the wildlife, including endangered animals like snow leopard, Tibetan wolf and bear, markhor and marco polo sheep.

While Pakistan uses water resources of Gilgit-Baltistan to irrigate the fields of Punjab, it has failed to translate into obtaining royalty and usage compensation. Contrary to this, Pakistani provinces receive billions of rupees from Islamabad on annual basis as royalty over River Indus. Income in the form of royalty over rivers like Indus, Shyok, Shigar, Suru, Hunza, Gilgit and Astore could help bring economic prosperity. The per capita income of the people of a region with such an abundance of resources is still one-fourth of Pakistan's national average.

Pakistan's military and strategic infrastructure including the highways has affected the shelf-life of the local glaciers. Two surveys conducted by the international union of conservation of nature (IUCN), first in the year 2000 and then in 2008 show that majority of the glaciers feeding water to the villages are receding at alarming rate. The situation might cause water loss in the upper reaches of the hills in future ensuing in even greater number of IDPs. Among the most affected glaciers are Khunjerab, Passu, Batura, Baltoro, Siachen and Hispar. When the tourists visit the glacial moraines, they leave garbage which poisons the drinking water. This happens since government does not have an environmental policy to provide guidelines to the tourists.

All these projects are undertaken without the consent of natives since Gilgit-Baltistan is not a part of Pakistan and hence lacks membership in national hydro-electric board, Indus river system authority and council of common interests, all of which deal with the water issues in the country and protect the interests of the natives of each province. Government insists that since Gilgit-Baltistan is not part of Pakistan, therefore natives cannot participate in discussions over resources usage; cannot contribute during planning and implementation stage of the projects; and cannot claim royalty and usage compensation. The harm coming from these projects is evident yet government refuses to stop them.

The natives feel that Pakistani actions in Gilgit-Baltistan lead to mass-scale human rights violations. The natives continuously remind the Pakistani occupiers to comply with the international laws and immediately halt all the projects, since they are constructed in a disputed territory. Further Pakistan must withdraw from the region as per the UNCIP resolutions of 1948 and 1949 and return control over water, mineral and forest resources to the natives.

I would like to make some recommendations to the local government. Small run off the river hydel schemes should be constructed in Gilgit-Baltistan instead of large dams to avoid environmental disasters. Pakistan must accept the right of the upper riparian and allow the natives the right over their water and electricity usage.

Government must pay for the loss of land and commercial activity due to Ataabad Lake. Deforestation must be controlled and Pakistani timber smugglers must be ousted from the region immediately.

The detainees who protested Diamer dam must be released immediately. Environmental policy should be devised to guide the tourists. The flood victims and victims of Ataabad must be provided with free food, shelter, medicines, clothing, bottled water and books. Since the winter months are nearing, rehabilitation of IDPs must be expedited and the irrigation system and farmlands must be repaired before the sowing season in March so that agricultural activities could be resumed in time and the nation could avoid a famine in the next year.