

The cost of Pakistan's war on terrorism

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Many Pakistanis are facing a crisis of conscience as the government pursues a war on terrorism, which is starting to show signs of success. However, it has led to hundreds of hangings by the state, extra-judicial killings by the police, the disappearance of many people suspected of belonging to separatist groups and other violations of human rights. The fight against terrorism has gained momentum, but the bodies are piling up in the streets.

Since December, when an attack on an army school in Peshawar left 150 people dead – mostly children – the military and the civilian government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif vowed revenge on terrorists. Since the army had sponsored Islamist extremist groups since the 1980s, the change of strategy was welcomed by most people tired of the violence.

That month, Pakistan lifted its seven-year moratorium on the death penalty and has since executed 200 people, including juveniles. There are some 8,000 people on death row – not all convicted of terrorism – and the government has pledged to hang them all. Pakistan is now in the same league as North Korea and Saudi Arabia for [executions by the state](#).

At the same time, parliament passed a constitutional amendment allowing the military to set up special courts to try alleged terrorists, with procedures that are closed to scrutiny – bringing condemnation by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and global human rights organisations. The military had demanded this move after civilian (judicial) anti-terrorism courts proved ineffective – some 17,000 cases have piled up unheard in the latter. There have been gross miscarriages of justice. On August 4, Shafqat Hussain, who was convicted of murder by a civilian court while still a teenager and had his execution halted four times, was hanged despite [worldwide appeals for clemency](#), including from the United Nations and the EU.

Now there may be an international price to pay. The [Council of the EU has expressed concern](#) over Islamabad's refusal to respond to the Union's request to halt executions and ban the death penalty and reminded it that Pakistan's preferential trade conditions are tied to "effective implementation" of international covenants on human rights and torture.

Yet Pakistan has been hard hit by the terrorism of such diverse groups as the Pakistani Taliban, anti-Shia and anti-Christian sectarian militants from the Sunni sect and anti-India groups active in the disputed territory of Kashmir. A year ago, the army began a determined anti-terrorist operation in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan, where it has killed or captured many Pakistani Taliban and their allies, although others have fled into Afghanistan. People have breathed a sigh of relief as bombings have lessened since the push began.

Likewise in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest metropolis. With a population of 20m it has known years of mayhem and anarchy as militants and political parties have kidnapped and tortured citizens and forced businesses to pay protection money. But now army Rangers and the police have launched a clean-up campaign that has cut the murder and crime rates, and been welcomed by the majority of inhabitants.

However, recent reports speak of hundreds of extra-judicial killings carried out by the law-enforcement authorities in the city. Police officers told Reuters that [such killings were standard policing techniques](#) to ease the burden on the courts. Ghulam Qadir Thebo, inspector-general of police for Karachi until July, said officers had killed 234 criminals in clashes since the start of the year. Other police put the deaths at more than 1,000.

Police say these extra-judicial killings occur because they are fed up with catching criminals and terrorists and then seeing the courts free them in the face of judges' fear of sentencing them, or even hearing their cases. In late July, [police killed a Sunni militant Malik Ishaq](#) and 13 of his followers in a shootout in Punjab province's Muzaffargarh. As the leader of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) terrorist group that had killed hundreds if not thousands of Shia, he had remained free as judges were too scared to sit in cases against him. The LJ hit back on August 16 when a suicide bomber killed Punjab home minister Shuja Khanzada and 18 others in an attack at his home in Attock near Islamabad. This was the first time LJ had killed somebody from the government and marked an escalation in the violence, with a clear signal that the terrorists would retaliate against extra-judicial killings by the state. Meanwhile, in Balochistan province, where there has been a separatist insurgency for 10 years, hundreds of people have "disappeared" into the hands of the military or the police only to turn up dead months later. On August 11, the bullet-ridden [bodies of five men and two women](#) were discovered near Quetta. Nobody claimed responsibility for the killings. The media and human rights groups in the city have been cowed by both the security forces and the separatists.

The separatists are divided into many factions, several of which kill non-Baloch civilians at will; the military insists that the intelligence agencies of India and Afghanistan are [supporting the separatists and fuelling terrorism](#). The war against terrorism is not only upsetting the legal balance in Pakistan, but has reconfigured the political landscape. The army is now the driving force behind both foreign policy and internal security while the government plays more of an advisory role.

There are so many different groups in Pakistan that use and advocate violence to achieve their aims, but while people want to see extremists caught and punished many are concerned by the brutalising effects of state policy. A far more sophisticated approach is needed. The public's fears about the direction the country is heading in need to be addressed with more than just guns.

