

## Unanswered questions about 'missing stories'

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**“LAHORE: Writer and journalist Mohammed Hanif of A Case of Exploding Mangoes fame seems to enjoy leaving questions in his readers' minds, and so he did at one of the sessions at the Lahore Literary Festival on Sunday.”**

The session focused on the writer's latest book, a slim publication based on six real-life stories of Baloch people who are missing and others who are not, “for the simple reason that they are dead”.

IA Rehman, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan director, rescued the session after Rashid Rahman, the editor of Daily Times, who was earlier scheduled to moderate, couldn't make it in time.

The session that started with a joke by Hanif about “a missing moderator”, became more serious after Hanif shared a few heart-wrenching stories about the missing Baloch. After proofreading the six stories, he said, he could not bring himself to read them once again as they contained so much human misery and pain. “I thought to myself, ‘Oh my God! There is not one moment of relief in there’,” he said.

The Urdu version of the book, translated by IA Rehman, is titled: Ghaibistan Mai Baloch (Baloch in the land of the disappeared). The book includes stories of a girl who is protesting for her missing brother when she should be attending school and a man who was certain that his missing son was alive because the clothes on the body he was shown were not his son's.

Hanif said the stories of Baloch who do make it back to their homes are rarely reported as they start living invisible lives fearing they will be abducted again. “They go missing, again,” he said.

Hanif read a story from the book about Voice of Missing Baloch Persons vice chairman Qadeer Baloch's son, who was picked up two years ago and was later found killed.

He read: “In the last week of November 2011, Qadeer Baloch, a retired UBL employee from Quetta, did something that no grandfather should have to do. He held his four-and-a-half-year-old grandson's hand and took him to see his son Jalil Reki's mutilated, bullet-riddled body and made sure the kid got a good look at it. Qadeer Baloch also had a chat with the boy and told him who had killed his father and why.”

Hanif continued to read for five more minutes to a mesmerised audience who listened without a sound. He said Qadeer Baloch was currently camped in front of Karachi Press Club along with the families of some other missing people. The camp, he said, includes a 13-year-old girl whose father, a doctor, has been missing for three years. He said Qadeer Baloch was commonly known as the “missing person mama (uncle)”.

How many missing Baloch are there? “There are more than 8,000 if you believe Baloch nationalists, hundreds according to human rights organisations, 1,100 according to our interior ministry and none according to our intelligence agencies,” he said.

He said the media did not cover the issue enough, partly because journalists were unwilling to travel across the largest province of the country. He shared with the audience a conversation he had with the head of a television channel who preferred to cover the January 2013 long march in Islamabad than the Hazara protests in Quetta. He said he regretted that most students at universities in Lahore didn't know the name of a second city in Balochistan, let alone what had led to the present situation.

When a Baloch student from the audience raised the “sardar influence” (feudalism) as an impediment to peace

in Balochistan, Hanif rejected the argument as a “myth”.