

It's hell living in Sindh

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The best pun ever made was about Sindh, the southern province of Pakistan on the coast of the Arabian Sea.

In the last century, the commander of the British East India Company's army was campaigning near the independent state of Sindh. His superiors ordered him not to enter that country.

Disobeying orders, the British general crossed the border, defeated the ruling nawab and conquered Sindh. He sent back a one-word telegram: "Pecavi." Which means, in Latin, "I have sinned."

There is nothing amusing about the situation today in Sindh. The province is fast approaching a state of near anarchy and possibly even civil war, sending shock waves across Pakistan that threaten the basic integrity of this shaky, deeply troubled and very strategic nation.

Sindh has always had its share of crime and violence, but over the past year there has been a dramatic upsurge of criminal activity. Gangs of bandits, known here by the old British Raj term, dacoits, have staged hundreds of kidnappings of wealthy people for ransom. In the countryside, other dacoit bands kidnap even the poorest people for pitifully small ransoms.

The capital, Karachi, and the second city, Hyderabad, have become the most dangerous cities in Pakistan — no mean feat in this trigger-happy country. Even Peshawar, up on the violent Northwest Frontier, and Quetta, capital of wild

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Baluchistan, have had to take second billing to Sindh's crime-ridden cities.

Robberies and armed attacks are a daily occurrence. In May, the Karachi Stock Exchange closed for three days after dacoits gunned down a stock broker in the exchange and made off with 500,000 rupees. On top of that, hospitals went on strike for a week, causing the deaths of dozens of emergency cases.

Far worse, the two main ethnic communities of Sindh are now at each other's throats. The majority of Sindhis are farmers and live in rural communities dominated by great feudal landlords, the most prominent being the families of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her husband.

After the partition of India in 1947, large numbers of Indian Muslims fled to Sindh. Unlike the province's Sindhi-speaking natives, the newcomers spoke Urdu. They tended to be urbane and educated. These refugees, called Mohajirs, quickly dominated the Sindh's cities and commercial life. Today, for example, Sindhis are a minority in Karachi, Pakistan's only major port and the centre of the nation's commercial activity.

Growing ethnic, linguistic and economic tensions between Sindhis and Mohajirs finally exploded into violence during the past five years. Bloody riots between the two groups have now given way to a spreading wave of armed attacks in which thousands have died or been injured.

Bands of unidentified men have opened fire with automatic weapons in recent months on groups of innocent bystanders. There are almost daily incidents in Karachi and Hyderabad of snipers picking off pedestrians at random. No one knows who these attackers are. But their intent is clear: To provoke more violence in Sindh.

Pakistani government officials claim that India's intelligence service, the RAW, is behind the attacks. They allege, without any hard evidence, that India is seeking to break up Pakistan by destabilizing Sindh and getting revenge for supposed Pakistani support of rebellions by Sikhs in Indian-ruled Punjab and by Muslims in Kashmir.

The government of Benazir Bhutto has proven powerless to deal with the worsening situation, even though Sindh is the core of her political support. Pakistan's independent-minded generals are now grumbling that they may have to take drastic action before Sindh dissolves in chaos.

If this happens, there is a very real chance that India may seize the opportunity to invade Sindh — just as it did with former East Pakistan in 1971.

Or, civil war in Sindh could just as easily embolden existing separatist movements in the province of Baluchistan and in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

Sindh is burning but no one seems to know how to put the fire out.

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