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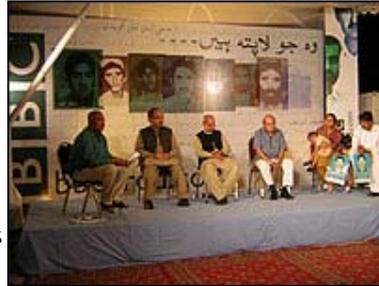
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Last Updated: Monday, 3 July 2006, 17:49 GMT 18:49 UK

BBC in 'missing Pakistani' debate

The BBC Urdu service has held a special debate to discuss the issue of missing people in Pakistan.



Organisers say that disappearances are a neglected political issue

The information minister and families of Pakistani nationals who have disappeared all took part.

Using its reporters across Pakistan, the BBC's Urdu on-line service compiled a list of about 40 such people.

Correspondents say hundreds of people have gone missing in Pakistan, but authenticating the numbers remains a difficult task.

Emotions

The BBC's Mazhar Zaidi, who produced Monday's hour-long discussion in Islamabad, said the programme was highly charged.

"Families of disappeared people who took part were crying and hugging each other," he said.

"They were able to quiz the information minister as to why their dear ones had never been produced in courts or formally charged."

The sentiments of the mother of Muneer Maingal - who was reportedly detained at Karachi airport in April and has not been seen since - typified the emotions of many relatives.

"I want to smell the fragrance of my son again," she said.

The issue of disappearances in Pakistan came to the fore after the body of journalist Hayatullah Khan was found last month in a tribal region near the Afghan border.

He went missing in December. Most other disappearances have involved people active in politics.



Muzaffar Bhutto's family spoke during the debate

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Journalists in Pakistan believe Mr Khan was taken by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, and so do his family.

The authorities insist they had nothing to do with Mr Khan's death and say they are launching a judicial inquiry.

Another one of the 40 cases examined by the BBC Urdu service was that of Muzaffar Bhutto, a political activist arrested by the authorities in Karachi in 2005.

His brother said he had not been seen since then, despite repeated pleas for information.

"Our programme was a huge success," said BBC Urdu.com Editor Waheed Mirza.

"In addition to the 40 cases we selected for examination before the programme, we also learnt of several other cases provided by individuals and organisations who phoned in."

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