

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

In Gilgit-Baltistan, there is an environmental and humanitarian crisis in the making. In spite of UN resolutions, Pakistan is currently planning to build five mega dams in the disputed area. Without the participation nor consent of the local population, constructions for the first dam, the Diamer-Bhasha, have already started. When concluded, the dam will have inundated cultural heritages as well as destroyed 32 villages and displaced more than 50.000 people. Thousands of acres of agricultural land of the local people will be inundated in the reservoir and the catchment area of the dam. Soil erosion will deteriorate a vast area of land and will cause instability in irrigation channels. There will be also major changes in the habitat, resulting in severe consequences on water supply and fishery. Furthermore, the dam is located in the ranges of Hindukush and Himalayan mountains, a seismically sensitive area. As a result, the dam may pose an enhanced threat of earthquakes.

In addition to environmental threats, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan face cultural humiliation and demographic change. As a strategy to erode indigenous identities and the linguistic heritage of the region, Pakistan's educational policy bans mother tongue learning. Moreover, in light of Pakistan's occupation, the traditionally Shia people of Gilgit-Baltistan are becoming a minority in their own territory thanks to forced influx of Sunni migrants. Fuelled by Pakistan's policies, tensions between Shia and Sunni communities have increased since the 1980s, especially after the construction of the Karakoram Highway, which connects this previously isolated region with China and mainland Pakistan.

Deprived of accountable governance structures as well as of constitutional and human rights, the two million indigenous peoples of Gilgit-Baltistan wait for their fate to be resolved under UN resolutions. If the international community wants to avoid the world's next humanitarian crisis, it must remind Pakistan that their actions in the region are contravening international law and that the dispute over Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan can only be resolved with Pakistan withdrawing its army and intelligence officials from the region. Only then, the indigenous people of Gilgit-Baltistan will be able to autonomously decide about the fate of their region.