

## The Ticking Bomb

By Massoud Ansari

“Educating girls will deviate our generation from the right path. They must be restricted to their homes,” decreed 32-year-old Maulana Fazlullah in one of his infamous broadcasts. He warned his listeners to pull their daughters out from “un-Islamic” schools that promote “obscenity”.

After this call, his followers destroyed 40 girls’ schools in less than a year from July 2007 to May 2008 in Swat Valley. The attacks stopped when Fazlullah struck a ceasefire with the security forces about two months ago. However, when the ceasefire collapsed a month later, the siege against education was laid again. Schools in Matta and Kabal subdivisions were targeted: within 20 days, 24 schools were bombed or torched (this figure is being continuously revised). “Militants have destroyed 64 girls’ schools in Swat Valley alone,” Sardar Hussain Babak, Frontier province’s education and literacy minister, tells the *Herald*.

According to official figures, there are 566 girls’ schools in Swat, including four government girls’ higher secondary schools, 22 girls’ high schools, 51 girls’ middle schools and 489 primary schools. Of these, 131 have either been set alight or closed, rendering 17,200 girl students school-less.

In the din of the insurgency going on in Swat and the tribal areas, the collapse of the education system seems to have gone unnoticed. What is being destroyed in the Frontier province and the tribal areas is not just the present but also the future. The bigger questions about the moral legitimacy of the war have thrown a blanket over the human face of the conflict. And Swat is but one chapter in this tragic story. For obvious reasons, the government does not have the complete figures for the number of girls’ schools destroyed in the tribal areas. However, the news filtering in from the agencies indicates that the situation is grave.

According to education officials, Bajaur Agency is the worst affected: almost all the girls’ schools in the agency have been destroyed or closed down. No girl goes to a school there. In North and South Waziristan agencies, the situation is no different as most girls’ schools, including 180 community schools set up with international assistance, have been shut down.

In Darra Adamkhel in Khyber Agency, local residents had set up a private school for girls where 600 students were enrolled. This, along with most other schools in the town, has been padlocked. Parents who could afford to do so have shifted to neighbouring Peshawar or other settled areas for their daughters’ future.

According to the education department, the modus operandi of the militants is simple and effective: first pamphlets carrying such simple warnings are pasted at the school gates, “We have decided to bomb the school building. If any student shows up, she will be

responsible for her own death...” Following this, militants issue threats to transporters or bus drivers who take pupils to schools. At times, threatening pamphlets are also dropped at the homes of students or school heads. Teachers are also terrorised.

These tactics have ensured that there is minimum loss of life while a school is bombed or torched. “They have never attacked any of these schools when pupils are around,” says an education official. Clearly, the aim of the militants is to create a general scare besides forcing people to stay away from sending their daughters to schools.

In most cases, in fact, militants turn up at night for their raids. They tie up the watchman, collect all Islamic literature and the copies of the Holy Quran from the school and leave after torching or bombing the building.

But this is not to say that they are not willing to take lives to get their message across. In October last year, unknown militants killed a female teacher in Mohmand Agency for not heeding the warning that she should be covered from head to toe. Soon after that, all the girls’ schools in the agency were closed. Indeed so effective has been the drive that scores of teachers have given up their profession and others have handed over the threatening letters to the authorities to explain why they cannot continue teaching. Officials say Parachinar in Kurram Agency is the only area in all the seven tribal agencies – North and South Waziristan, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, Bajaur and Orakzai – where the situation is a little better. The government college for girls, which was set up there in 1995, is still functioning with 900 students studying there.

And this college and its continued activity are not the only signs of hope. The sheer fact that there exist – or in many cases existed — scores of girls’ schools and one women’s college in each agency and hundreds of boys’ schools and colleges means that people understand and accept the need to educate their next generation. Even Miramshah in North Waziristan, a hotbed of militancy, is home to the Razmak Cadet College that is still functioning after closing its doors for a few months earlier this year: its students score better grades than their counterparts in settled areas.

“People want to send their children – boys and girls – to school. But what can you do if their life is at risk?” says Mrs Bushra, a banker in Peshawar. She knows of at least a dozen families who have moved out of the tribal areas for their daughters’ education. However, she points out, not everyone can afford to leave their hometown. “Those who have moved away are probably a small fraction of the total population,” she says.

In fact, the threat parents are facing is two-fold. While the girls’ schools are being systematically destroyed, young male students are being conscripted by the militants and sent for insurgency training. “These local Taliban have been going to boys’ schools where they give lectures about armed jihad,” a local resident says. “In the past few months, dozens of young boys have been taken to the tribal areas, either by conditioning them or by force.”

One man from Darra Adamkhel nearly lost his son to this. His 14-year-old son was taken for training to Wana in South Waziristan after militants came to his school and preached about the need to wage jihad. When the father finally managed to locate his son, the latter did not want to return home. “He was determined to wage jihad. I brought him back with great difficulty,” says the father.

For many, however, the militants’ opposition to education in the province is nothing new. “Nearly 70 years ago, the local clergy opposed Baacha Khan, who launched a movement to set up around 1,200 schools across the Frontier province on land donated by people,” says Babak. “Even at that time the mullahs used the mosques to preach against modern education.”

His views are echoed by others who see the attacks on schools as a move far more serious than the campaigns against video shops and barbershops. Mian Nisar Gul Kakakhel, the Frontier minister for prisons, says: “These mullahs are against schools and want people to remain uneducated because ignorance allows the clergy to sustain itself.”

“As the world provided weapons to the mullahs during the so-called Afghan Jihad, they should now invest in the education of our kids,” says Babak. “I need funds to establish 5,500 schools in the Frontier.”

Clearly the education minister’s demand does not seem unreasonable but sadly he does not have a plan to ensure the safety of the schools he wants to open or of the existing ones.

At a level, he reflects the indifference of the state towards education in tribal areas. The new government has no idea how to stop the assault on education — neither did the previous one for that matter. The military is just as guilty: when it launches an operation in an area, one of the first steps it takes is to occupy local school buildings and use them as bases or camps. Swat is a case in point.

Similarly, instead of confronting the Taliban’s anti-education campaign, the authorities have been living in denial. For instance, in the face of threats from militants last year the local administration in Darra Adamkhel directed female teachers and girl students of government schools to wear a burqa while going to and coming back from schools. Some analysts suggest that this does not augur well for a society that has poor socio-economic indicators. According to the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan has one of the highest female illiteracy rates in South Asia – about 54 per cent – and the lowest rate of enrolment for girls. Those shortcomings are particularly pronounced in the Frontier, which as of 2004 had the lowest ratio of female enrolment of any province in Pakistan, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG). Literacy figures for the tribal areas are even worse: while 29 per cent of tribal men are literate, only three per cent tribal women can read and write as per ICG.

To make up for all this, the provincial government allocated 70 per cent of its entire education budget to girls’ schools between 2002 and 2005, according to government

figures. Local authorities also give small stipends, ghee, flour and free textbooks to encourage parents to send their daughters to schools.

The results have been hopeful. For example, in Swat Valley alone, primary school enrolment for girls increased by nearly 31,000 after 2002 or 77 per cent. Similarly, enrolment increased by 6,000 in two years in Jamrud, says a senior official at the FATA Secretariat. The annual education budget for Fata region is an encouraging 3.9 billion rupees for an estimated population of five million.

Sound progress though this may seem to be, evidence suggests that all this may go to waste unless the militants' assault on education is halted. That will require much more than just allocating money for the right cause. Only by a concerted effort at the social, cultural, economic, political and security level – all put together – can the tide be turned against those bent upon bombing the future into destruction even before it could aspire to be.