



Update from The Church of Pakistan: Internally Displaced Persons May 2009

Pakistan, 'a Land of the Pure' is a Muslim majority state that was created in August 1947 as a result of the partition of the Indian sub-continent. Since its birth, the 161.1 million people of the country are faced with domestic political upheavals, regional confrontations, economic uncertainty and international pressures because of its strategic geographic location. The history of the country is marked with military rule, political assassinations, with marginalized activity on health, education, and poverty alleviation. Pakistan, the sixth most populated country, has already fought four wars with its neighboring country India over the disputed northern area of Kashmir. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan remained a strong ally of United States during the Cold War era until Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The country was left alone to wrestle with the challenges of Afghan refugees, instability in Afghanistan, illegal drug trafficking, massive illegal weapon smuggling and the Mujahideens, who later became the Talibans.

Till 1970s, the government of Pakistan and its 95% Muslim inhabitants were mostly secular and moderate in policy and judgment. However during General Muhammad Zia ul Haq's tenure, 1978-1988, as the President of Pakistan, a series of Islamic Laws (Shariah) and its related ordinances were introduced as part of Islamization program. It was during this era that notorious Blasphemy Law and Hudood Ordinance were implemented, which to date are often used as a persecution tools against minorities and women. This transformation process made Pakistan culturally monolithic, increasingly Islamic state, and marginalized the minorities. The minorities, in Pakistan are often discriminated on the basis of their faith. They are socially, economically and politically weak. 80% of the Christians are associated with menial jobs and are often considered as "infidels". Their properties, houses, Churches are often attacked and individuals are forced to convert to Islam. Such is the misery of the Christians in Pakistan. This has been escalated for the Christians of Swat and FATA by the military operation against the militants.

Although the country is blessed with every kind of natural resources yet majority of the people are forced to earn merely \$2 a day. Pakistan an impoverished and underdeveloped country, 136th of the 177 countries, has suffered from decades of internal political disputes, and low levels of foreign investments. Inflation remains the biggest threat to the economy, jumping to more than 9% in 2005 before improving to 6.9% in 2007, mostly due to the unprecedented economic support by the European and the US government to combat the militancy in the country.

For the last few years the country is challenged with Sectarian violence and growing polarization between Islamic militancy and moderate Pakistanis. After September 11, 2001, attacks in USA; Pakistan was compelled to lead in the war against terrorism and became a key ally of the United States, a move that lacked public support. Pakistan, with the 5th largest Army in the world and the only declared Islamic Nuclear state, was engaged in a fierce battle against the non-state actors, the Al-Qaeda and the Talibans. They were believed by the West to be hosting terrorist activities around the World and establishing their tentacles in underdeveloped countries.

US invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan government's inclination towards West was all what the extremists required to exploit the minds and sympathies of the underprivileged people of Pakistan. The government's inability to provide basic services in the remote and urban areas of Pakistan provided an opportunity to these extremist groups to strengthen their presence in Federally Administered Areas (FATA) and the Valley of Swat by engaging in community development programs through their Madrassas, the Islamic schools. These extremist groups are supported by some Islamic Development

Agencies. Many of the graduates later join the extremist groups that are strong supporters of the Al-Qaeda. FATA and Swat areas, where literacy rate were low and people lacked basic human services turned out to be a thriving place for these extremist elements to establish their foothold.

These extremists started to implement their version of Islamic lifestyle, challenged the writ of the people's elected government, set up their own courts and anyone who did not agree with them or accepted them was ruthlessly murdered. In an effort to flush out the safe heavens of the Taliban militants and the Al-Qaeda along side Pakistan-Afghanistan border a huge military operation was launched by the Pakistan Armed Forces under the watchful eyes of the United States. This alliance of the government with the West and United States was perceived as a promotion of western culture and a switch from Islamic identity. This is publicized widely by the Islamic extremist to gain sympathies of Pakistani Muslims who felt betrayed by US foreign policy towards Pakistan during Cold War era.

FATA and Swat valley are also a home of Christian minority community. They are residing in these areas for generation but recently the extremist elements are compelling them to either pay "Jazia", protection tax, or vacate the area. The harsh and aggressive attitude of the extremist Taliban has forced the local Christians to disguise themselves as Muslims.

The recent ongoing military operation in Swat, Dir and Bunner areas have resulted in huge migration of people to safer areas. The Government of Pakistan is striving hard to settle these displaced people in tents but at present seems to be failing to fulfill the needs of the displaced families. More than 900,000 people have already moved to safer areas. The Christians and other minority community is left at the meager doorsteps of the Church. These Christian families left their homes without any belongings and money. Some of these families have walked with their siblings for six (06) hours to reach to safer places. These displaced Christian families initially went to their relatives for support but the burden is a little too much for the already poor hosts.

The Church of Poor, Diocese of Peshawar, in its limited resources has opened its doors at Christian Vocational Training Center, Mardan to support these displaced families. Arrangements of one hundred and fifty (150) displaced Christian families have been made. The Diocesan Health Sector is also providing medical care to the females, children and elderly. Our humble staff welcomed two (02) new born babies as well in their relief camp.

As more and more Christian families are arriving the Church looks at its friends, congregation and partners to join hands in comforting these homeless people. The Church urgently needs Food, Medicine, and Beddings to cater the growing need.

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Left: Christian Vocational Training Center: A home for 150 displaced Christian families from Swat, Dir, Bunner and Parachinar.



A displaced family from Swat.



Ms. Banita Rumalshah comforting a grieved mother.