

Pakistan's madrassas may be less of a problem than its mainstream schools

Source: The Economist *print edition*

Posted: April 4th 2007

THE "battle" for Pakistani minds is sometimes not a figurative one. A bloody clash erupted last month when security forces prevented pro-Taliban militants from recruiting pupils for *jihad* at a private secondary school in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president, casts such incidents as part of a struggle between his "enlightened moderation" and obscurantist militants. But critics say General Musharraf is failing in one important arena. His five-year old plan to reform Pakistan's *madrassas* is "in shambles", according to a report last week by the International Crisis Group, a research and policy outfit.

Pakistan's real educational battlefield, however, is less in its *madrassas* than in its rotten mainstream schools and universities. In the absence of a decent education, points out Javed Ashraf Qazi, the education minister, "illiterate masses become ready recruits for all sorts of unhealthy activities." Perhaps recognizing this, America has not wasted a dime on *madrassa* reform. But it has pledged \$256m for mainstream education between 2002 and 2007.

Officially, 53% of Pakistanis are literate. Others say the figure is nearer 30%. Literacy, often defined as no more than the ability to write one's name, is as low as 3% among women in some rural areas. Pakistan has a rapidly ballooning population of 160m with over 85m people below the age of 19. The education system, left to atrophy for 30 years, is crippled by every possible ill: crumbling classrooms, poor teaching materials, untrained and truant teachers and endemic corruption.

It is not all grim. The government is taking education more seriously and pouring in more resources. In the province of Punjab, which has a population of 83.7m, the World Bank has ploughed \$850m into educational reform. Over the past three years more than 1m children have been enrolled in Punjabi schools for the first time. The provincial government has introduced free textbooks, a \$4 monthly stipend for girls, and a teacher-training scheme and has cancelled token school fees. Like NWFP, Punjab has purged its textbooks of much pro-*jihad* and anti-Indian propaganda.

But the good news ends there. Poorer provinces have been unable to cash in. Baluchistan, blighted by a low-level separatist insurgency, has been able to increase spending by only 20-30%. Across Pakistan as a whole, only 52% of primary-school-age pupils attend school. Of those, nearly one-third will drop out. Only 22% of girls above the age of ten complete primary schooling, compared with 47% of boys.

Some 3,500 schools do not have a building; of those that do, 4,000 are classed as "dangerous"; 29,000 schools have no electricity; 14,000 have no drinking water; 22,000 do not have a toilet; 4,000 consist of a single classroom; and fewer than 100 secondary schools have science labs. The quality of education is still poor, and the government is far off its target of providing universal primary education by 2015.

The private sector, which accounts for 30% of primary and secondary education, fares little better. Private schools are mostly over-subscribed, poorly paid and staffed by badly trained teachers. Many "English-medium" schools, offering to bridge the social divide between the Anglophone elite and the "masses", are a swindle. Pupils are instructed mainly in Urdu. Nevertheless, educationalists are concerned that the divide between schools is reinforcing the social chasm.

To be fair, the government is seeking to combat these woes. It has pledged to boost spending on education from 2.5% of GDP to 4%. But similar promises were made last year. Already some 40% of the education budget is returned to the exchequer because of a lack of "capacity", or the failings of a cumbersome bureaucracy.

Pakistan's higher education has received the most obvious boost of energy and money. A Higher Education Commission was created in 2002 and is run by a distinguished hyperactive organic chemist, Atta-ur-Rahman. With an annual budget of \$449m, Mr Rahman has sent hundreds of students abroad on scholarships, embarked on a university-building spree, published lists in newspapers of dubious degree-givers, hunted down plagiarists and introduced performance-related incentives to improve teaching quality and research. Respected academics, such as Abdul Hameed Nayyar, believe that the haste of some of the reforms has "actually degraded higher education". Even if that is unfair, the present flurry of educational enthusiasm may not make a lasting difference. Its chances remain hostage to Pakistan's chronic political instability.