

IPS Direct to Your
Inbox!

your Go

- **Global Affairs**
- **Africa**
- **Asia-Pacific**
Afghanistan
Iran
- **Caribbean**
Haiti
- **Europe**
Union in Diversity
- **Latin America**
- **Mideast & Mediterranean**
Iraq
Israel/Palestine
- **North America**
Neo-Cons
Bush at War

Subscribe

- **Development**
MDGs
City Voices
Corruption
- **Civil Society**
- **Globalisation**
- **Environment**
Energy Crunch
Climate Change
Tierramérica
- **Human Rights**
- **Health**
HIV/AIDS
- **Indigenous Peoples**

PAKISTAN: Cleric Turns Heat on NGOs

By Zofeen Ebrahim



KARACHI, May 22 (IPS) - "These foreign agents are against our religion. How can we allow work here when we know they come with an American agenda and support Israel?" asked Fazalullah, the pro-Taliban cleric, referring to non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

"All Pakistanis working for them (NGOs) are enemies of the country," he told IPS over telephone home in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), that borders Afghanistan.

Over the last few months, NGOs and aid agencies have been finding it increasingly difficult to work in the most underdeveloped parts of Pakistan, such as the district of Swat in the NWFP.

The venom and sting in the 33-year-old cleric's voice were diffused in the long distance call and weakened as his words are translated into Urdu by his cousin and spokesman Muslim Abdur Ra. The underlying threat was chillingly clear.

Badar Zaman, president of the Swat Youth Front, an NGO working in non-formal education for girls, funded by the government, is already feeling the hostility. "Our work can only be carried out through our employees," he explained.

"We have become strangers in our own hometown, now a hotbed for Islamist militancy. Nobody respects Maulana Fazalullah. He is holding all of us hostage with his own version of Islam," Zaman said.

The 45 non-formal schools established in the community and the one girls' college, together accounting for an enrolment of over 3,000 girls, are already in jeopardy.

"We have had to hire an elderly woman to accompany our two school supervisors. Instead of the way they use a private car and we have had to reduce their working hours. This has affected our mobility. From a target of five schools, these women can only visit two schools a day."

In the last two months, Zaman has received about 12 death threats. "The letters say that unless you have an 'agency' with the U.S., keep beards, reconvert to Islam and find other means of employment we will have consequences. These are the same letters that have been distributed to girls' schools, CD and DPT barber shops and the NGOs, including those dealing with family planning."

Saeed Jafar Shah of Caravan, an NGO working in the same region, agrees with Zaman. His NGO focuses on voter education and registration and also on a project to eliminate timber poaching in Upper Swat. The natural resource management is under threat.

But Shah, like Zaman, refuses to close down his office even if it has meant seeking police protection against attacks by the timber mafia which has resorted to using religion to prop up its activities. "They have killed a community guard at one of our check posts. They are using scare tactics and the mosque to threaten us. The simple village people have begun looking at us with suspicion as the clerics wield a lot of influence here," Shah said.

Caravan's 'Feed-the-Poor' project sponsoring 50 widows and 110 orphans was hit after the cleric ordered the beneficiaries not to cooperate with the 'agents of Israel'. "They said whatever good we were doing was for the agents of Israel."

- Labour

- Population
Reproductive Rights
Migration&Refugees

- Arts &
Entertainment

- ExPress Freedom

- Columns

- In Focus

- Readers' Opinions

- Email News

 What is RSS?

LANGUAGES

ENGLISH

ESPAÑOL

FRANÇAIS

ARABIC

DEUTSCH

ITALIANO

JAPANESE

NEDERLANDS

PORTUGUÊS

SUOMI

SVENSKA

SWAHILI

TÜRKÇE



News Feeds
RSS/XML

"Recently, on a field visit, our female workers were not allowed to enter homes and meet the women. We encourage them to register as voters. The community elders said workers were not observing purdah (seclusion of women from public by means of clothing, including the veil, burqa and walled enclosure as screens and curtains within the home) and working alongside men. Our female workers felt very uncomfortable when they were told that the womenfolk of the village do not speak to such women (our workers).

Last month, some 70 government-appointed lady health workers resigned from their jobs in Swat after sermons in mosque given by clerics said they were 'sinful' women. Conditions have now been improved for the government's Lady Health Workers' Programme, begun in 1993, to continue providing do preventive and curative primary healthcare in those remote areas.

On May 19, an eight-member (including three women) family planning team was taken hostage by 100 militants in North Waziristan, one of the seven principalities in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

In view of the danger to women, the administration of the Bajaur principality has barred women workers (who make house-to-house calls) and replaced them with male workers.

In another border town, Darra Adamkhel, local people have been asked to dissociate themselves from international NGOs. A local cleric, Mufti Khalid Shah, issued a decree, last month, declaring that such NGOs are Zionist agents and that every Muslim was duty-bound to destroy their offices, attack their vehicles and kill their members.

Two weeks ago, the United Nations announced that it had suspended its work in the quake-affected Pakistan-administered Kashmir after the situation turned "life threatening" for aid workers. Unidentified militants in Bagh district burnt down homes of some aid workers and issued warnings against hiring local contractors. Fazalullah is both revered and feared. Favouring horses over motorised vehicles, he has no qualms about using technological devices for propaganda work -- anything from cellphones to sophisticated weapons. But his most lethal weapons are the 12 unlicensed FM radio stations that uses to transmit messages.

"The channels are used to preach the teachings of Islam," said Muslim Abdur Rashid, the Maulana's spokesman. "Almost everyone is now converted. You would be happy to learn that all the women have, of their own volition, started observing the purdah, and that dance and music have stopped." A couple of days ago, at the cleric's behest, many simple villagers smashed up their TV sets and torched them.

Fazalullah is especially venerated in the area by women who regard his words as God's decree. "I am anyone more loved, after God, it's him, especially by the women," said Naheed Shamsur Rehman, a primary school teacher in Swat.

"And why not? For the first time, someone is talking of women's rights as spelled out in the Holy Quran. We talk of our right to inheritance, provision of mehr (a sum of money or other property which the wife is to receive from the husband at the time of marriage), asking fathers to get the consent of their daughters before contracting their marriage etc," says Shamsur Rehman. "He never uses force, and that is the reason for his success."

"Yes, women are our most loyal supporters. All we had to do was to convince the women. It was not easy, but we made our task of influencing the men easy," said Rehman.

"Recently many women offered up their jewellery when he asked for funds for the construction of a school and men came in droves to help with the construction," said Zaman.

Asked about rumours that the Maulana had ordered parents not to send their girls to schools, the Maulana's spokesman Rashid said: "There is a lot of propaganda against us. We're not against acquisition of education."



Make IPS News your homepage!



Free Email Newsletters



IPS Mobile



Text Only

knowledge or girl's education, but we are against what is being taught in schools. That is taking t from their religion. And that is the reason we feel that such education is causing more harm than

"There are some 30 adolescent girls who have stopped coming to school," said Saima Amir Bach supervisors for public schools. "Their parents have suddenly decided that it's better for them to s and learn the Koran and its translation. Of course it is the work of Maulana Fazalullah. But nobod a word against his preaching."

Asked about the abandoned the polio campaign Rashid said cautiously: "We don't stop people fr their children vaccinated. But yes, we look upon it with much scepticism. We believe it has ingred cause infertility, because the West does not want the Ummah (collective Islamic nation) to grow

Rashid admitted to IPS that he had no scientific proof to back the claims. "Only time will prove us said adding that the cleric's two children (aged two and four) have not been immunised against p (END/2007)

[Send your comment](#)

RELATED IPS ARTICLES

- ▶ **PAKISTAN: Taliban Writ Runs in Border Areas**
- ▶ **PAKISTAN: Media in General's Crosshairs**

[READ IN IPSNEWS.NET >>](#)

IRAQ: BEYOND THE GREEN ZONE



▶ **POLITICS-US: Bush Campaigns to Sustain Military "Surge"**

[More >>](#)

CONFRONTING CLIMATE CHANGE



▶ **ENVIRONMENT: Carving Up the Melting North**

[More >>](#)

POPULATION

