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## Breaking the Silence on Sectarian Violence: Women Raise their Voices

By Leena Z. Khan

“The first duty of a government is to maintain law and order so that the life, property and religious beliefs of its subjects are fully protected by the state.”

—Speech by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, delivered on August 11, 1947

SEPTEMBER, 2001

KARACHI, Pakistan—In 1947, the year Pakistan gained its independence from India, the population of Karachi was 300,000. Today Karachi is home to more than 13 million restless, neglected, frustrated people and is bursting at its seams. Karachi is struggling to define its identity in terms of character, culture, religious tolerance and spirit. Called “the city of lights,” Karachi was once known as a city of learning and hope for Muslims and attracted individuals from all corners of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Looking to a promising future, immigrants to Karachi in a short period of time became a microcosm of Pakistan’s multi-ethnic community.

Today the picture is quite different. The growing dissension among religious groups is one of the most disturbing features of life in Pakistan. There is more sectarian violence, more illicit weapons, more children without schools, more roads in disrepair, more drains clogged and sewers overflowing, more smuggling, than



in any other city in the country. At times I have experienced a numbness as life continues for the majority of Karachiites who have learned to have little expectations from law-makers. There is a tremendous sense of loss, sadness and disillusionment today in this city of 13 million.

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On June 16, 42-year-old Dr. Syed Asad Ali Bukhari, was shot dead outside his medical clinic in Faqir Colony, Karachi. On June 26, 40-year-old Dr. Mohammad Raza Pirani, was shot dead by unidentified men outside his medical clinic in Soldier Bazaar, Karachi. On July 20, 30-year-old Syed Mushtaq Haider of Khudadad Colony<sup>1</sup> was shot dead outside his home as he was preparing to leave for work. On July 26, 62-year-old Shaukat Raza Mirza, the managing director of Pakistan State Oil, was shot dead by unknown assailants as he was driving to his office. On July 20 a senior defense-ministry officer Zafar Husain Zaidi, 59, was shot dead by unknown assailants while on his way to work. On September 5 a prominent religious leader, Ali Hasnain Naqvi, was shot dead in Federal B Area, Karachi while on his way to a mosque to lead afternoon prayers.<sup>2</sup>

Murders involving doctors,<sup>3</sup> school teachers, businessmen, academics, scholars, and in recent days, even children, have taken place among members of the Shia sect. Tensions are running high in Karachi, where most of the killings have taken place. On September 12, General Pervez Musharraf called upon *nazims* (mayors) to use their authority to bring improvement to the law-and-order situation in Karachi. He was recently quoted as saying, "we must fight against subversive elements in Pakistan to rid the country of sectarian terrorism".

Sectarian violence is not new to Karachi. In the early '90s hundreds of lives were lost due to sectarian and ethnic strife. As Karachi attempts to heal from those turbulent years, sectarian terrorists have resurfaced again, this time with better arms and better equipped to carry out these crimes with impunity. Since the military seized power in October 1999, more than 220 people (mostly

Shias) have been killed. The worst-affected areas have been in the Federally Administered Tribal Area, where Sunni-Shia clashes have accounted for over 60 dead. The contagion has spread to Karachi, disrupting economic activity and undermining business confidence.

Law-enforcing agencies have been calling these cases "blind murders." What has alarmed many is that the assailants are still at large. No one has been formally charged with these crimes despite evidence that particular sectarian groups have orchestrated the killings. The strange irony of these killings is highlighted by the presence of rangers<sup>4</sup> on nearly every street corner with automatic weapons dangling from their shoulders. This sight has become almost a mockery, as the majority of these shootings have taken place during daylight hours on busy thoroughfares. The killers simply leave once the act is committed and to date, none of the killers have been caught and brought to justice. It is believed that these are not isolated attacks, but rather are linked to a sophisticated network of organized crime.

The question that everyone is asking is what measures the government will be taking to cure this malignant disease. General (President) Musharraf has urged religious groups to tolerate diverse religious viewpoints and has unequivocally denounced the violence. It is unfortunate that his denunciations have proven ineffective. Sectarian killings have continued, raising the death toll to over 60 in Karachi alone. General Musharraf then decided to ban the Sunni Deobandi<sup>5</sup>-inspired Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) and the Shia Sipah-e-Mohammad (SM). Their "parent" organizations, the Sipah-e-Sahaba and Tehrik-e-Jafaria, respectively, were given a slap on the wrist, and were warned of "serious consequences" if they didn't behave.

The banning of the LJ and the SM seems to be a mock measure as scores of sectarian activists are arrested one day and quietly released the next. The parties concerned may operate under different names or under no name at all. While moderate Muslims are dissatisfied with these measures, extremists are deeply offended by them. The government's attempt to guide or oversee *medressas* (re-

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<sup>1</sup> Khudadad Colony means "God's Colony" and is one of the first settlements of post-partition Karachi. The settlement was founded by a group of *Mohajirs* (Urdu-speaking immigrants from North India).

<sup>2</sup> Since I began writing this newsletter, Shias have been killed on practically a daily basis. The numbers are mounting, making it difficult to keep track of the death toll. Most recently, Razi Hyder, aged 55, and his 13-year-old son were gunned down in Karachi near the Defense Housing Authority locale, an affluent part of the city. Razi Hyder was driving his son to school when a car of four or five terrorists opened indiscriminate fire. Razi Hyder was a teacher at Habib Public School, where his son went to school.

<sup>3</sup> It has been estimated that the number of doctors murdered in Karachi since the early 90s is around 70, of whom 60 belonged to the Shia sect of Islam. It is believed that the others were targeted because they bore names that are common in the Shia community. Last year alone six doctors were killed, while the year 2001 has claimed seven victims. (Newline, "Doctors Under Fire" August 2001.)

<sup>4</sup> Rangers have been called into Karachi by the military government because the police have failed to maintain law and order. Rangers control water distribution in the city through tanks. They also control fishing rights in Karachi. Neither the Sindh nor the federal government have ever provided information on the amount of funds being used by the rangers for their various activities.

<sup>5</sup> Deobandis and Bralevis were two major schools of Islamic thought which emerged after 1857 in India. These groups tended to voice concerns with what they viewed as the psychological, cultural spiritual disintegration of the Muslim community in India. While differences occurred between the Deobandis and Berelvis they shared in common a dogmatic approach to Islam.

ligious schools) has been interpreted as an attempt to control their belief systems and steer them away from their objectives. General Musharraf, cognizant of these realities, has decided to proceed with “caution” on this front. The army’s “corporate” interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan dictate linkages with *jihadi* groups (groups waging “religious wars”) and are motivated by tactical or strategic foreign objectives.

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On the morning of July 20, Syed Mushtaq Haider said goodbye to his wife, mother and children as he left his home in Khudadad Colony for work. As he stepped into the street, two men on a motorcycle sped by and fired several bullets into his body. Mushtaq, while still conscious, staggered back into the house. He collapsed into his mother’s arms and uttered his last words. “Mother, I have been shot.”

Mrs. Kazim, a *zakira*<sup>6</sup> I had met at a ladies’ *majlis* related this series of events to me two days after the young man’s murder. She told me that a *soyem*<sup>7</sup> was being held in his memory and asked if I wanted to attend. I had been

to a *soyem* in the past, but not for someone who had been murdered. Although I was uneasy about attending this one I agreed to go along.

Mrs. Kazim picked me up on the morning of the *soyem*. As we drove she expressed a deep sense of frustration over the killing and the inaction by the law-enforcing agencies. She told me that the legal system has been a stumbling block in resolving all sectarian motivated crimes. She believes that crime is organized in Karachi and the police are often paid off by the culprits. “The last person you would go to in a murder case is the police,” she said. I asked her with astonishment what the common person is to do when faced with such a tragedy. Her answer: “First the community comes together to mourn. We then pray.”

My uneasiness returned as we approached Khudadad Colony. Police were directing traffic in the neighborhood where the young man was killed. Clouds loomed above as Mrs. Kazim and I got out of the car and began to walk toward the red-and-black *shamianas*<sup>8</sup> indicating where the service was being held. I later discovered why the *soyem* was being held in the street, rather



<sup>6</sup> From the word *zkr*, or to speak, a *zakira* is a woman who leads a *majlis*, or gathering held for a religious event.

<sup>7</sup> A *Soyem* is religious gathering which takes place on the third day of after a death.

<sup>8</sup> *Shamianas* are open tents commonly constructed at religious occasions and weddings in the Indo-Pak sub-continent. *Shamianas* are of brightly decorated typically in yellow, red and black.

than the customary *Imambargah* (Shia mosque). Most of the families in the neighborhood were Sunnis and made a special request to Syed Mushtaq Haider's family to hold the *soyem* in the neighborhood so they could attend. Under the circumstances, they felt that if the *soyem* was held in an *Imambargah* they might not be welcomed. The family agreed with the request and had the street blocked off. The *soyem*, they decided, would take place in the very street he was killed.

The mood in the neighborhood was tense. Dozens of rangers were standing guard at every corner. I could hear the voices of wailing women as we approached the women's side of the *shamiana*. After solemnly removing our shoes and placing them alongside hundreds of others on the roadside, we entered the *shamiana*. The mother of the deceased sat on the floor, surrounded by her daughters and family members. She cried uncontrollably and her eyes were swollen. I expressed my condolences in Urdu and took a seat next to Mrs. Kazim on the floor. "Oh *maula*<sup>8</sup>, they killed my son!" she wailed. Women sitting nearby tried to console her. "*Sabr karoh* [be patient]," they told her. As the daughters attempted to comfort their mother they lapsed into sobs themselves. It was a painful scene to watch.

Some women sitting nearby began to converse about the alarming number of men who had been killed on sectarian grounds in recent months. One veiled woman sitting next to me rhetorically asked, "Where is the common man to go to seek justice? How much longer can we continue to let this happen?" Another woman added, "We cannot continue to let this happen. Our sons are being killed for no reason and the police stand by and watch. They know who is behind these acts but choose to do nothing." Nearly every woman I spoke to had been personally affected by sectarian violence, either by a killing in their own families or of an individual they knew well. I sensed from the conversations taking place around me that people were afraid to talk, the exception being gatherings such as this *soyem*.

The women became quiet as the *maulana* (Muslim scholar) began to speak. He began with verses from the *Qur'an*. The women could not see the *maulana*, but only hear his voice since he sat on the men's side of the cloth partition. "*Bis'millah Ir-Rahman Ir-Rahim* (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) *Allah Humma Salleh Ala Muhammadin wa ali Muhammad* (O Allah bless Muhammad and his descendents)," he recited. After this recitation, the voices of two men began to recite *nauhas* (lyrical dirges) lamenting the martyrdom of Husain (grandson of the prophet Mohammad who was killed at Karbala, Iraq). The dirges in Urdu evoked a tremendous sadness in the mourners. Nearly every woman sitting around me was sobbing.

After the recitation of the dirges the *maulana's* voice

came back, this time charged and angry. He reminded the listeners of the recent violence between Sunni groups, namely the killing of Maulana Qadri, who is believed to have been killed by the LJ. Maulana Qadri was the leader of the Berelvi Sunni sect in Pakistan. His killing was important because it highlighted the tension between Sunni groups, since he was killed by a rival Sunni faction.

Throughout the *soyem* the *maulana* insisted that this was not a Sunni-Shia problem, but that of various "external" elements trying to weaken the country by supporting religious *jehadi* groups. He repeatedly accused the police and government of deep-rooted corruption and of not taking any measures to curb the violence. It began to rain, and the *maulana* brought the *soyem* to a close. He ended by saying "we can no longer remain silent and we must never forget."

Syed Mushtaq Haider was not a prominent figure, nor was he involved in any political activity. By all accounts, it appeared that he was targeted solely because he happened to belong to the Shia sect. As I left the *soyem* I couldn't help but feel the helpless resignation that pervaded the mourners and the family of the young man killed. I had just come face to face with an entire community affected and targeted by religious extremists. I had no idea that sectarian violence was a problem of such magnitude until my arrival to Pakistan. I was stunned that people were being targeted solely because of their religious beliefs in a country founded on principles of religious pluralism and tolerance.

Haider lived with his wife, parents and children and was the sole breadwinner in the family. He was not well-off, and in fact struggled to keep his children in school. Those who knew him told me of his kindness and willingness to help anyone in need. What has added to the tragic circumstances surrounding Haider's murder is that his case seems to have been forgotten. His murder was not a high-profile case and did not make the headlines. No investigation is being carried out and none of the assailants have been caught to date. I've been told that even witnesses to the shooting have not been willing to talk to the police out of fear of retaliation. Today his family is angry, disillusioned, and has no faith whatsoever in the law-enforcing agencies.

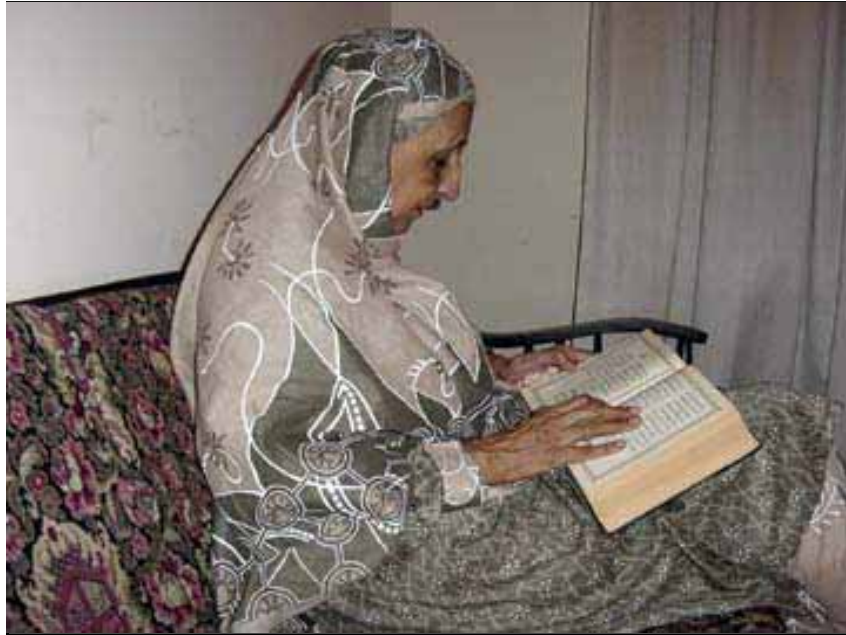
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There is a grave concern over the increase of target killings in Karachi. Shortly after attending the *soyem* I had a conversation on the phone with Professor Shaista Zaidi, a prominent leader in the Shia community. I asked her about the alarming number of sectarian killings in recent months. She told me that Shias are being targeted on almost a daily basis. "Killing one person is like killing the whole of humanity," she told me. Those behind these terrorist attacks are illiterate and totally against what Islam

<sup>8</sup> *Maula* means master. The woman in this context was most likely referring to Husain (the Prophet Mohammad's grandson) or Ali.

stands for.” Shaista Zaidi invited me to her home for further discussion on the subject.

I was greeted by a tall graceful woman with an air of simple elegance. Shaista Zaidi invited me to the living room, where she said we would not be disturbed. I could hear the voices of several small children playing in the next room, which was separated by a cloth curtain. Her home was decorated in a very simple fashion — no decorations, no pictures on the walls, but a number of books on a shelf. She offered me tea before we started talking. I



*Professor Shaista Zaidi, a prominent religious community leader calls for unity among all Muslims — “Drawing distinctions along sectarian lines is contrary to Islamic teachings.”*

had already asked her on the phone if she would be willing to be interviewed in the context of sectarian violence. She had no objection. “The world should know about the persecution of Shias in Pakistan,” she said. “What I will be telling you today I have said already. I have nothing to fear and nothing to hide on this subject.”

Before we started our discussion, Zaidi asked me about my great-aunt, who had made our initial introduction. She showed a keen interest in what brought me back to Pakistan and how my experience had been so far. Coming back, I told her, had not been easy; in fact had been a struggle in many ways. But despite the day-to-day challenges of living in Karachi on my own, it had been a meaningful experience on many levels, I told her. As we conversed about our families, it turned out that Zaidi had known my grandfather, who she remembered fondly. “Your grandfather was famous, you know. He was well-known for his translations and knowledge of Persian poetry.” This brought back a flood of memories for me, since I recalled him quoting the poetry of Hafiz Shirazi and others in Farsi.

The conversation took on a more serious tone as we

shifted the subject to the rising trend of target killings. Zaidi began by telling me about the number of doctors killed in Karachi alone, on sectarian grounds. Doctors have been targeted by the right-wing SSP, and specifically its militant wing, the LJ, which has been involved in many of the killings. Since 1999, where arrests have been made, the police records have described the accused as belonging to the SSP. I listened intently with growing horror as she described the killings of several Shia doctors she knew personally, all killed in the past 14 months solely because of their religious sect. She also believed that the SSP was directly involved in the murder of Maulana Qadri, who she told me was a strong Shia sympathizer despite being a Sunni leader.

She posed the question, “Why do the police say repeatedly that they cannot do anything? It is because they are linked to the criminal activity themselves. This is organized crime and is being committed from within.” Police activity has been questionable. In fact, on September 12, police smashed the cameras of a number of press photographers and resorted to teargas shelling and a baton-charge as Shias protested targeted killings in Karachi. The protesters retreated into an *Imambargah*, where the police attempted to break open its iron gates to arrest people. After failing in their attempt to break the doors open, the police lobbed teargas shells inside the *Imambargah* where hundred of women were also present. Press photographers had taken photos of the police firing teargas shells

at the *Imambargah*, and the enraged police grabbed the cameras from the photographers, pulled out their rolls of film and smashed several cameras.

Zaidi explained that filing a FIR (first information for the report) with the authorities is just a formality, but in nearly all instances is the beginning as well as the end of the case. Many judges fear retaliation from terrorist networks, and therefore do not call back suspects in sectarian murders for further questioning. In one sectarian murder, the case passed through the hands over nearly 40 judges she said.

The current sectarian crisis cannot be seen in isolation, but must be understood in a wider context of U.S. interests in the region and the so-called threat of the “Talibanization of Pakistan”. There is strong sentiment among community leaders and individuals such as Zaidi that sectarian activities are being carried out by Taliban-inspired *jihadi* groups, which are well-armed and are linked to larger networks of terrorism. She explained that the Wahabi school of thought (Saudi model), on which the Taliban regime is modeled, has typically been hostile towards Shias. She emphasized

that American foreign policy in the region was also to blame and drew a link between the U.S. funding of the Taliban in the early 80s and the alarming growth of *jihadi* groups. She, like many Pakistanis, is suspicious of U.S. involvement in the region. Zaidi believes that American foreign policy is motivated by self-interest and not by a desire to achieve peace in Pakistan and bordering nations. She was particularly critical of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war.

“The American government has had a history of patronizing dictatorships and extremist groups throughout the world and yet they continue to talk about democracy,” she continued. The Taliban had in fact been receiving U.S. funding and were being trained by the U.S. in Pakistan for a number of years during the time of General Zia ul-Haq and the Afghan-Soviet War. It was then that the U.S. funded extremist groups, including that of Osama bin Laden, a Sunni, to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. As a result of this policy of politicization of religion, Zaidi believes that Islam’s image has been tarnished in the West, and most people there have come to believe that Islam is a violent and intolerant religion. “Today we have Muslims killing Muslims. This is the new form of imperialism by western countries, a form of divide and rule.”

Many believe that the *jihadi* groups in Pakistan today are Taliban-inspired. These groups have begun waging “holy” or sectarian wars on religious groups and minorities not following their repressive version of Islam. Zaidi explained the motivations of *jihadi* groups. “The *jihadi*-inspired groups here in Pakistan are taught to believe in *medressas* that they will receive a *sawab* (a reward for committing a good deed) and are guaranteed a place in heaven if they kill a Shia.”

She also is certain that the government has more information about the perpetrators of these crimes than it is willing to admit. I asked her about the recent ban of LJ and SM by President Musharraf and wondered whether this would curb sectarian violence in any meaningful way. Although she appreciated the assurance given by Musharraf, who has denounced these acts of terrorism, she does not think that a party ban is a real solution. She advocates a meaningful dialogue on religious tolerance and making no distinctions between Sunnis and Shias. “By banning both the LJ and the SM, the government has made them equal. The SM was created long after the LJ as a measure of self-defense, since the government was providing no protection to the Shias. I do not agree with the TJP, who have stated that if the government will not bring the wrongdoers to justice, they will take the law into their own hands if necessary. What they are advocating is violence.

“If you look at Iran,” she went on, “you will see that

the government’s policy has not been anti-Sunni. Iran has been funding the Palestinians, who are predominantly Sunni, in their struggle for freedom. Imam Khomeini took the position that whoever makes distinctions between a Sunni and Shia is not a Muslim. Even the influential Shia organizations in Pakistan have accepted this position and have told their congregations that it makes no difference if they pray in either a Sunni or Shia mosque. It is duty of every Muslim to be discerning about what is being told to them. If they are being fed information promoting bigotry and hatred, it is their duty to boycott those gatherings. By banning the TJ and the LJ, they are not addressing the root of the problem, which is bigoted thinking. Today they may call themselves the ‘Lashkar-I-Jhangvi,’ tomorrow they will change their name to something else.”

The *qutbas* (religious sermons) being delivered at *majlises* have recently taken on a bigoted tone, she told me. “Imam Husain was everyone’s hero, both Sunni and Shia.” Hundreds of Sunnis used to attend *majlises*, but in recent years anti-Sunni rhetoric by various *maulanas* has discouraged Sunnis from attending. “Advocating any type of bigotry or violence is irresponsible. People are doing this for cheap popularity.”

Zaidi is articulate and chooses her words thoughtfully. I could see why. She was a debater for many years at Karachi University where she received her BA in honors. Then, from Edinburgh University in Scotland, she received her Masters in mathematics with honors. She began teaching at Karachi University and Sir Syed College since 1965 and has been retired for three years.

Zaidi also has a wealth of religious knowledge. She is among the most prominent *zakiras* in Pakistan and is constantly in demand to lead *majlises* because of her knowledge of Islamic history. “I did not consciously chose to become a *zakira*,” she told me. “It never entered my mind. But one day my mother suggested to me that since I had been giving lectures at the university and was a debater, I should consider reciting *majlises*.

“Around the same time, a very good translation of *Nahjul Balagha*<sup>10</sup> was published in Urdu by a Sunni scholar. I had grown up listening to *majlises* all my life, but had never attended any where the sayings from the *Nahjul Balagha* were explained.” Because of her passion for Islamic history, Zaidi began translating and explaining the *Nahjul Balagha* to gatherings of women in the sixties. “When I first began to recite I was the most unpopular *zakira* in Karachi. People would come to a *majlis* expecting to mourn, to cry. They feel that crying at *majlises* will bring them a *sawab*. I was not interested in reciting the *masael* [the trials and tribulations of Husain at the Battle of Karbala]. I did not know how to make people cry. I was more interested in teaching people Islamic history.

<sup>10</sup> *Nahjul Balagha*, translated as “The Peak of Eloquence” are the compiled sayings of Hazrat Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. Hazrat Ali, famous for his bravery, also had philosophical inclinations. He wrote about practical life, how to be fair and just rulers, administrators, judges, and teachers.

People began coming up to me afterwards to tell me that they had never known what I had just said and asked me to hold *majlises* more often. I was encouraged by the response.”

No formal training is required to become a *zakira*. Zaidi explained to me that most *zakiras* learn through oral tradition. “I have been attending *majlises* all my life, and learned from my mother and other women,” she explained. Zaidi can still be found immersed in reading. While we were chatting, she took out *Nahjul Balagha* and quoted me a passage in Urdu, which in English read as “patience is a kind of bravery, to sever attachment with the world is the greatest wealth; piety is the best weapon of defense.”

“We are fortunate today because of the number of books by well-respected historians and Ulema [religious scholars],” she continued. But she was quick to caution against the large amount of literature by Shia scholars, much of which is anti-Sunni propaganda. “It is irresponsible to read something without questioning the source or who the authority is. Not every book written by a Shia Ulema is credible. Most people don’t do this and accept what they are told on its face value out of fear,” she said. Zaidi does not differentiate between Sunni and Shia religious scholars and quoted the names of several Sunni Ulema as well as Shia. “I read everything and make up my own mind about what to believe.”

Zaidi remains fearful for the future of the Shias in Pakistan. “I am afraid that what has happened in Afghanistan will happen here — the elimination of individuals belonging to minority sects by religious zealots. The process has already begun. There are indications of intolerance and targeting of religious minorities other than Shias, including Christians and Ahmadis<sup>11</sup>.” She believes that if the government does not take a serious stand in addressing the messages of intolerance being propagated in *medressas* and other religious institutions, there is a serious threat of Pakistan becoming another Afghanistan.

Zaidi is committed to ending sectarian violence through peaceful dialogue and nonviolence. At community and religious gatherings she has advocated the formation of *mohalla* (neighborhood) committees, which could point out individuals propagating violence. She has not given up despite the rise in the number of killings in recent months. “Women now more than ever have an important role to play in fighting sectarian violence. We are required to fight on many fronts, illiteracy, domestic violence, an endless number of human-rights abuses. Change may come slowly. We should never give up or think that our actions don’t matter. We may not see the change in our lifetimes, but change will

happen. And people will listen to women.”

Now, when I hear or read about sectarian violence, I no longer think of it as another one of the numerous problems in Pakistan, but associate it with faces of despair and anguish of a mother and sisters of Syed Mushtaq Haider. When I open the morning paper and read about yet another target killing (which practically happens on a daily basis), I think of how an entire family has been shattered and has lost all faith in the law and order of this country. When I hear that General Musharraf vows to “get tough on sectarian violence” I will think of the children of Haider who will grow up believing that unless there is a high-profile case, it will not be thoroughly investigated due to police negligence. I will associate sectarian violence with a climate of intolerance due to the rise of extremism by the religious orthodoxy.

Most importantly, I will remember the words of Zaidi, who said to me as I was leaving her home, “*himmat nahee haro*,” or “don’t ever give up hope.” Zaidi is truly a woman of her words who today heads *Bazm-e-Amna*, a social welfare organization. And, as a *zakira*, Shaista Zaidi believes that she has a higher responsibility to her audience and believes in historical accuracy when reciting a *majlis*. She hopes that one day Sunnis will begin to attend *majlises* again. “The rift between Sunnis and Shias started during General Zia’s regime. It is a tragedy what is happening in our country today. We all have a responsibility to end this madness.”

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As with any cloud, there is always a silver lining. I saw this silver lining at a demonstration held at the Mazar-e-Quaid<sup>12</sup> on September 6. The demonstration was organized by hundreds of women and NGOs and attended by women from every corner of Karachi. From elderly women in their seventies and eighties to school-children, the demonstration was attended by women from all walks of life. They marched on the long thoroughfare in front of the Mazar demanding an end to sectarian terrorism.

The energy among the women at the demonstration gave me hope. Perhaps no other demonstration in Pakistan in recent years has brought such a diverse group of women together, since sectarian violence has serious implications for all women and minority groups alike. The march was attended by a number of women’s organizations: Idara Amn-o-Insaf, Tehrik-i-Niswan, Irteqa, Bazm-i-Amna, Karachi Women’s Peace Committee, PAWLA (Pakistan All Women’s Lawyers Association), Human Rights Forum, Pakistan Medical Association, Gospel Welfare Organization, Pakistan Labour Party, Lawyers for Hu-

<sup>11</sup> Ahmadis, a 19<sup>th</sup> century splinter group of Islam do not acknowledge Mohammad as the last prophet.

<sup>12</sup> Mazar-e-Quaid is the mausoleum of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. The first prime minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan, is buried there as well.

man Rights and Legal Aid and many others.

I identified two distinct groups of women at the demonstration. One group belonged to the NGO community, many of whom were dressed in western clothes and chanted slogans in English calling for an end to the violence. However, the majority of the women, dressed in long black *chadors*, some with their faces veiled, seemed to belong to middle and lower income levels. Although the media have highlighted the murders of Shaukat Raza Mirza and Zafar Husain Zaidi, both affluent individuals, the majority of women participating in the march were from the working class. The Urdu and English newspapers in Pakistan rarely report on the lower-profile cases. However, I have been told by individuals in the Shia community that most victims of target killings belong to the lower-income levels.

At the demonstration, I was surprised to see the mother of Syed Mushtaq Haider, who was wearing a *chador*. I was encouraged to see her there and greeted her



Women marching as they chant slogans demanding an end to sectarian violence

as our paths crossed. I held her hand for a few moments and with a far-away look she said with tears in her eyes, “they killed my son.” She walked away and disappeared into the crowd with the other demonstrators. Although I consider myself an optimist, I feel that this is one of those instances where time may never heal this mother’s pain.

For the second time in Karachi’s history, the position of City Nazim (mayor) has gone to the ultra-conservative Jamaat-i-Islami.<sup>13</sup> Naimatullah Khan, who belongs to the al-Khidmat panel of the Jamaat-i-Islami, was elected as the city’s mayor on August 7, 2001. The new mayor faces a growing list of menacing problems – garbage heaps throughout the city, power outages, the absence of an organized mass-transit system, traffic anarchy, broken roads, outdated and rusted water and sewage-pipe networks throughout the city, water-tanker racketeering and the increase of terrorism and sectarian



“There is no protection for citizens in this city”



<sup>13</sup> The first time the Karachi mayorship went to a Jamaat-i-Islami candidate was to Abdul Sattar Afghani in 1979.





Chanting "Catch the killers and bring them to justice"

violence. These challenges are daunting. Although he made a short appearance at the rally on September 6, he insisted that "Karachi does not have a sectarian problem." He called the recent killings acts of terrorism that were "being carried out to destabilize, the economic capital of the country." "If it were sectarian killings or violence, then the common people in the neighborhoods would be fighting each other," he concluded.

The Nazim's statement was puzzling. The question arises about why he has chosen to limit the parameters of sectarian violence to destabilization of the "economic capital of the country." Had the Nazim stayed longer than for a photo opportunity with some of the community leaders and had actually spoken with the demonstrators who are living the grisly aftermath of sectarian terrorism, perhaps he would not have made such a statement.

The march ended at sunset on a large-grassy field in front of the Mazaar-e-Quaid. It was a moving sight and seemed to be the most appropriate place for women to be demanding justice and the end of intolerance.

One day after the women's demonstration, hundreds of men belonging to the Shia sect led a protest march. The march ended in stone-throwing, broken wind-

shields and disorder. This time, ten leaders and several protesters were taken in for damaging property. The law-enforcers' message to the Shia community seemed to be "we are unable to protect, but we will arrest you if you protest." The Shia community is understandably angry. It is inevitable that more protests and arrests will continue in coming months in the wake of target killings and a climate of growing religious intolerance.

As zealots wage an unholy war on their fellow citizens, individuals and public-spirited

organizations continue to denounce sectarian violence. In recent weeks, Shia leaders have been voluntarily seeking arrests, in protest over the number of sectarian killings. The city administration has responded by deploying a heavy contingent of police and paramilitary forces around a number of *Imambargahs* in the city.

Amid this sectarian chaos, I am reminded time and again that Pakistan was created to enable the Muslims of the subcontinent to practice their religion freely without fear of persecution. Sadly, today one needs to look hard



(above) Woman on left: asking the government "Why are target killings taking place? Woman on right: "The lives of the martyred is the death of oppression"



(Above, left) "The killing of humanity is the end of civilization" (Above, right) "Unity not division of Muslims" (Right) "Should we pick up our books or carry the bodies of the dead?"

to find the Pakistan envisioned by the Quaid<sup>14</sup>, as people live in despair in the darkness of sectarian terrorism. But in the words of Zaidi "no amount of terror and intimidation will ever silence us. We will continue to fight for what is right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington September 11, I was invited to attend a meeting held by a number of community women at a nearby mosque. The meeting, which had been planned before the devastating attacks had been carried out, was organized by several women leaders from both the Shia and Sunni community to decide what action should be taken to combat sectarian violence in the city. Just two days before, the *maulana* of the Defense *Imambargah*, one the largest mosques in Karachi, and his 11-year-old son were

shot dead. At the meeting the women demanded to be heard, accusing the government of Pakistan of not making terrorist activity within the country a priority. There was talk of organizing a procession with banners, this time to the governor's house, and even risking the possibility of arrests. After several women voiced their fears about taking such a procession, one woman responded, "My sisters, it has come to the point where we have no choice now but to risk our own lives. Our children are now being killed. It is now time for the mothers, wives and sisters of those killed to demand that action be taken by the government. It is a disgrace that our leaders are focusing their attention on what is happening in America, when a war is being waged on their own soil." She reassured the women that there was nothing to fear and the results would be positive so long as they remained united. "We may even lose our lives," she said. "But our religion teaches us to not to remain quiet

<sup>14</sup> The "Quaid" means "Great Leader" and refers only to one man in Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

in times of oppression. We should not be afraid to give up our lives so that we can practice our religion without fear of persecution.”

The discussion turned to the recent attacks in the U.S. Sadness and regret was expressed over the loss of innocent civilian lives. Several women drew a distinction between those who lost their lives and their families with the policies of the U.S. government. A woman asked with bitterness, “Why can’t the American government see why so much hatred is directed toward them? Their arrogance and double-standard foreign policies have destroyed most of the developing world, from the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq to the butchering of Palestinians through their support of Israel.” She condemned the U.S. backing of General Zia, Pakistan’s ruthless military dictator from 1977 to 1988. “It is a shame that those killed in

the attacks have to pay for America’s foreign policy,” said another woman. “But the rest of the developing world has seen war, death and devastation to the point where it has become a part of our lives.” Other women were in agreement.

One community woman drew links with the current situation in Pakistan, the creation of *jihadi* groups and sectarian violence with the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in the 80s. She told the group how the U.S. government funded the same “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan of the 80s who are today’s “terrorist” groups waging “holy wars” against religious minorities within Pakistan. With such complex political histories and current realities of U.S. policies in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Muslim countries, it comes as little surprise that most Pakistanis do not trust the American government. □



*The women marched head on with a defiant confidence in the presence of scores of police and chanted:*

*“Ummah ko takseem nah karoh!” (Stop dividing the Islamic community)*

*“Daishat gardhee khatham karoh!” (End terrorism now)*

*“Khatiloh ko sazah doh!” (Punish the killers)*

*“Hum sab eik hain!” (We are one)*

*“Pakistan Zindabad” (Long live Pakistan)*

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Fellows and their Activities

### **Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

### **Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

### **Martha Farmelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

### **Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

### **Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

### **Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

### **Leena Khan** (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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