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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311
Washington, DC 20016

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PAKISTAN

Nicholas Schmidle is a Phillips Talbot Fellow of the Institute studying identity and politics in Pakistan.

Proper Connections

Drugs and politics overlap in a Karachi neighborhood

By Nicholas Schmidle

MAY 2007

FARID JAN, THE BEARISH, CLEAN-SHAVEN police chief of a seedy Karachi neighborhood called Lyari, stepped out of his white Land Cruiser on a Sunday afternoon in May, folded his arms across his broad chest, and watched his men lob tear gas at packs of oncoming rioters. The Land Cruiser joined a fleet of other official vehicles — navy-blue Toyota pickup trucks and khaki-colored armored personnel carriers — parked in a roundabout, empty of traffic, and littered with broken glass, pieces of brick, and spent bullet casings. The police, outfitted with oversized flak jackets and helmets that sat askew on their heads, ducked behind the carriers and trucks as rocks flew in their direction. The mob was comprised mostly of teenagers, with weak arms and bad aim. The rocks generally landed well off target.

A curly-headed kid in his late-teens, wearing Adidas track pants and holding two golf-ball-sized stones, tried to sneak up for a closer shot. He was unaware of the undercover officer hiding in one of the side alleys. Disguised in a white *shalwar kameez*, the officer snatched the boy and dragged him back to the cluster of police vehicles. A few policemen wrestled the young hooligan into the covered bed of a pickup truck, smacking and punching him along the way. Farid Jan tried to appear relaxed and unruffled, but he eyed my camera nervously. He finally asked, in a decidedly non-asking tone, “Your work is finished here, right?” I put the camera away. Farid Jan relaxed, and we tried to have a normal conversation, despite the tangy whiff of tear gas and the sound of rocks banging against car metal.

Farid Jan looked at me, an expression of resigned helplessness on his face, and



Tear gas billows behind police officers at a contested roundabout in Lyari on May 13.

noded in the direction of the boy in the Adidas pants. What could he do? Those throwing rocks were only kids. A few days earlier, a 12-year-old fired a pistol at his men. "If we shoot back, it will start an even bigger problem," he moaned. Lyari (pronounced LEE-AR-EE) was already rife with vendetta killings, without adding a case of police officers targeting a young boy.

My visit to Lyari that afternoon followed months of reporting on the foggy nexus between politics and organized crime in this down-and-out neighborhood. Two days after the riots, I went back to meet Latif Baloch, a 50-something reporter for the English daily *Dawn*. Baloch and I walked the narrow streets that cut through Lyari, side-stepping potholes the size of bathtubs. Camels and donkeys pulled carts with wooden wheels that often fell into the holes, splashing a dark, shimmering liquid. The water lines and the sewage lines often mixed, said Baloch. Six-story apartment buildings on either side of a one-lane street stood so close that they appeared to be leaning onto one another. A window on the third-story suddenly popped open and a plastic trash bag flew out. It floated end over end before landing in a pile of wet, stinking trash that lined the road. The garbage trucks don't collect around these parts.

Baloch brought me to a private school he owns called Gul-e-Noor, or Flower of Light. A few children ran up and down the stairs of the cramped school. The electricity had already been out for two hours. It wouldn't come back on for another hour, by which time the lack of any windows or breeze left me wearing a shirt soaked with sweat.

The literacy rate in Lyari is below 20 percent. Unemployment is above 80 percent. Every morning, day laborers squat on the curbs with their trowels and pickaxes. When potential employers drive by scouting for workers, the laborers puff their chests and twirl their tools. Most people in Lyari live hand-to-mouth, with cash on hand to last them just two or three days. Prolonged periods of riots and strikes, like the three-day stretch in May, can be extremely trying. (The Karachi Chamber of Commerce estimates that three days of strikes equals about \$400 million in lost national income.)

The populism of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a staunch opponent of President Pervez Musharraf, has attracted a large following in Lyari. Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, founded the People's Party in 1967, rallying support around the slogan "Roti, Kapre, Makan," or "Bread, Clothing, Shelter." The elder Bhutto's charisma and sloganeering captivated the

poor residents of Lyari. To this day, he is heralded as a saint there. "Take a pillar, put it in a public square, and write Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's name on it and people will vote for that pillar," said Maula Baksh, a former captain on the Pakistan national soccer team and a longtime Lyari resident. On Sunday, People's Party flags flew in the center of the roundabout. A poster picturing the face of Benazir's late brother, Murtaza Bhutto, was affixed to a nearby lamppost. Anti-Musharraf slogans and "Long Live PPP" were spray painted on the metal shutters protecting storefronts from vandals.

But populist politicians, said Latif Baloch, aren't the only ones capitalizing on people's poverty and desperation. While the People's Party dominates politics in Lyari, drugs and gangs rule on the streets. "Every home has at least one or two unemployed, able-bodied boys," said Baloch. "The drug dealers find them and pay them to stand at street corners to inform on police movements in the area." I described the scene from Sunday and told him about the boy in the Adidas pants. Baloch nodded, like he had heard the story many times before. "During a political crisis, the drug mafia increases its activities so it becomes easier for them to transport," he said. "The young kids are being paid by the drug lords to make trouble and disrupt the flow of traffic."

Baloch's explanation echoed what a former gangster named Ram Jani had told me months earlier. Jani, a 37-year-old who started selling heroin when he was fourteen, told me that when he was "involved," he was always looking to plant children as moles in parts of the neighborhood. Usually, Jani said, the kids' were told to inform on what other gangs, not the police, were doing. The police, he said, were easily bought. He blamed his arrest in 1998, when he was caught driving a stolen car with six kilograms of hashish in the trunk (and a Russian-





Police officers, armed with Kalashnikovs and weapons for firing tear gas, snatch one of the hooligans throwing rocks.

made, unregistered pistol in his lap), on his own laziness. Had he paid off a few more people, there wouldn't have been a problem.

"Everyone is involved," Jani said, including members of the national and provincial assemblies, police, paramilitary Rangers, and jail wardens. The job of a gang leader is to keep all those people satisfied. That means everyone gets their cut. Jani grinned devilishly. "With proper connections, you can do anything."

MAULA BAKSH, THE SOCCER PLAYER, RECALLED Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's first visit to Lyari in 1963. At the time, Bhutto was a minister in the military government of Field Marshall Ayub Khan. Several thousand residents poured out of their ramshackle huts to hear what the young minister had to say. The government classified Lyari as a *katchi abadi*, or illegal slum area, until Bhutto distributed ownership deeds following his election in 1971. Toward the end of his speech, Bhutto told the crowd: "I too know how to play football!" He made the sports reference to suggest that he could play the kind of political games needed to address the crowd's grievances. But his choice of game — football — displayed his political savvy: though most Pakistanis are fanatic about cricket, people in Lyari are football fans. Baksh, who captained the Pakistan national football, or soccer, team in the late 1960s and early 1970s, told me, "I have so many pictures of that great leader. He will be my leader

until I die." Baksh has skin the color of caramel, with full cheeks and a warming smile. "I have been compared to Pele with my face and style of play," he said immodestly, one morning at the Saifi Social Sports Center. Baksh owns the center, a sparsely decorated room with a television propped up in one corner. When I visited, the TV was off while ten retirement-aged men leaned on an alcohol-less bar, chit-chatting and drinking tea.

In 1969, Bhutto returned to Lyari for his first address as the Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party. The campaign ahead of the 1970 parliamentary elections was in full swing. Meanwhile, sugar prices had reached an all-time high. The economic plight of the poor fueled young Bhutto's charisma and popularity; he was just 42 when the People's Party swept the December 1970 polls in West Pakistan. But the cult of personality that developed around Bhutto doomed the party from its formation. According to Baksh, no other politician in the People's Party has compared to Bhutto in style or substance. Yet Bhutto gradually ruled over the party in an autocratic manner that alienated important segments of his support base, such as the left, the intelligentsia and the urban poor. And so while citizens in Lyari still vote for the People's Party, they are increasingly despondent about its inability to fulfill lofty promises. "I am not satisfied with the people running the People's Party today," said Baksh. "Maybe Benazir thinks we are rebels for criticizing the party, but we are not rebels. We still love this party. But they should ask themselves why their margin of victory in

each passing election is getting smaller and smaller.”

The next morning, I asked Rafiq Engineer, a member of the People’s Party and representative in the Sindh provincial assembly from Lyari, why his party’s supporters in Lyari were losing conviction. Rafiq, answering like a seasoned politician, proceeded to blame the unemployment and poverty in his constituency on privatization. The original ideologues of the People’s Party were all socialists and Bhutto nationalized the railway, shipping, finance and insurance sectors after his election in 1970. “Because of all this privatization, people have been terminated from labor jobs,” said Rafiq. When I asked Rafiq why he, being a member of the provincial assembly, didn’t channel any of his development funds into repairing the roads in Lyari, he told me that the MQM, which forms the government in the provincial assembly, was “holding his development funds hostage. They won’t release them.”

I parked in front of a shop in Lyari on a December evening last year. The owner, a 50-year-old man named Abdul, sat in front of his inventory of Chinese-made pillows, blankets and wicker-chairs. For the previous three days, it had been raining in Karachi. The unpaved road in front of Abdul’s shop had turned to slop. A teenage boy used a rake to drag the mud off to one side. Hawks and kites mingled above the minarets and mobile-phone towers. Abdul’s teeth were stained maroon from chewing betel leaf. He laughed and gestured toward the river of rainwater flowing down the street. “Last summer, the city didn’t supply water to this neighborhood for five months,” he said. “Now, they can’t drain it out.”

Though he doesn’t vote anymore, Abdul once supported the People’s Party. “They came, collected our votes, and then left and we would never see them again. They come for our votes, but they live in Defense,” he added, referring to the posh Defense Housing Authority, where most of Karachi’s wealthy citizens reside. “Voting doesn’t matter anyway. If the police are with you, then you win.” Abdul’s comments flashed in my mind months later while reading *The Pakistan People’s Party: Rise to Power*. The book was written by Philip E. Jones in the late 1970s. Reflecting on the elder Bhutto, he writes, “Bhutto is one of those leaders who has loved ‘The People’ in the abstract. There is no evidence, outside his political life, that he ever involved himself in activities or organizations dedicated to ameliorating the sufferings of actual individu-

als.” Maybe the People’s Party politicians were successful at mimicking Bhutto after all.

THE POLITICIANS IN LYARI MAY COME

and go, but according to Hashim, a 66-year-old man, the drug dealers are always around. I met Hashim one night in an apartment where he and his friends regularly gather to play ludo and smoke hashish. To get to where Hashim was sitting, I walked up a dark, musty staircase and past a handful of goats chewing straw and pissing against walls made of cinder block. One section of the apartment was roofed; the livestock area was not. My colleague, a reporter named Rafi, didn’t comment on the goats when we walked in, so I didn’t either.

The man sitting beside Hashim rolled a small pile of tobacco and hashish into a cigarette. “You people drown your sorrows in beer; we drown ours by blowing smoke into the sky,” said Hashim, in slightly accented English. During the 1970s, Hashim worked as a riveter for British Aerospace, based in the United Kingdom. Before that, he lived in New Orleans. Fifteen years ago, he moved back to Lyari, where he has been since. He told me most people in the neighborhood are jobless. “They just make their money by buying and selling drugs,” he added. What about the police and Rangers parked down the street? Less than 50 paces from Hashim and his apartment full of goats was a one-room police station. Weren’t the police doing anything? Hashim looked amused. Everyone scratches everyone else’s back, he said. “Even the police get ten grams of hashish every week.”

Although the corruption and desperate living conditions facilitate drug traffic in Lyari, it also prospers



Men sitting around a ludo table in Hashim’s apartment.

because of the Baluchi connection. Rehman Dakait and Arshad Pappu, the (now arrested) chiefs of their rival gangs, are both Baluchis. Since Lyari is populated mostly by Baluchis, many people have family and commercial bonds throughout Baluchistan. Most of the heroin and opium leaving southern Afghanistan for global markets transits Baluchistan. An hour northwest of Karachi, just inside the provincial boundaries of Baluchistan, is the ironically named city of Hub. When Ram Jani, the gangster with the trunkful of heroin, was arrested he was speeding back to Karachi from Hub. According to Jani, Hub is the wholesale market of illicit goods.

BEFORE THE MERCHANTS HAD LIFTED their metal shutters and opened their stores, Rafi and I went to Lyari to meet Ram Jani. In the early morning, the day laborers holding brushes caked with dry paint were the only ones out. We parked next to a butcher's wooden kiosk, below a web of tangled electric lines draped with clothes and shards of cellophane bags. Jani said he would call when he was ready, so we got out of the car and stood beside the kiosk. The butcher had shiny hands from handling meat without gloves. He yelled at a kid to fetch two cups of milky tea for Rafi and me. Then he went back to swinging his cleaver. Meanwhile, a young boy, presumably the butcher's son, grabbed gelatinous handfuls of fat from a cutting board and shaved off tiny pieces of meat. They would be ground later and made into kebabs. Jani finally called. Rafi threw his car keys to the butcher, who caught them in his shiny hands and said he could move to the car if needed. Then we walked into a winding alley, toward Jani's home.

Jani was waiting downstairs. He stood just over five-foot tall, with a frail frame and an unimposing disposition. He wore a black, overstretched, inside-out t-shirt, with jeans, also several sizes too big, cinched at his chest with a fake-leather belt. When he smiled, he revealed teeth the color of potting soil.

We walked to a restaurant and took a table near the front. Jani ordered tea and *parathas*, a lightly-fried breakfast bread. The restaurant was otherwise empty. Only five or six of all the tables — there must have been more than 40 — were occupied. Flies flew sluggishly and sat on the rim of my tea cup. Jani apologized. He said we should have met a few years ago. When he was in the game, he was making good money and we could have gone to a fancy place, outside of Lyari. Regardless of where we went, he said, no one ever used to hand him a bill. They knew him. Just then, a sickly man in his 60s or 70s sat down at the table nearest ours and turned his chair to stare at us. Jani smiled and said to ignore him: "He gets drunk everyday and does somersaults down the street."

Jani sipped his tea and described how he became a star in Karachi's underworld. "My father died in 1984, when I was fourteen. That's why I started this," he said. At the time, Jani wasn't going to school. Even today, he

cannot read or write. He showed me his thumb. "*Ango-tha Chaap*," he said. That means "fingerprint." Illiterate people in Pakistan often "sign" their name with their thumbprint. At the age of 14, with no other commitments and his mother and siblings to support, Jani hung out on street corners selling heroin in "tokens." A token went for 25 Rupees (about US\$.50) each. Each token provided about six injections worth of smack. He bought the tokens for 20 Rupees and sold them for 25 Rupees. "My friend and I always worked together," he said. "At the end of the day, especially once we started moving things besides heroin" — some guns and cars — "we were making 2,500 to 5,000 Rupees (US\$45 - \$85) a day."

In the beginning, Jani said, the heroin he sold was of the "finest quality." But by the late 1980s and early 1990s, with demand way up and the scrupulousness of his customers steadily decreasing, Jani started mixing the heroin with, in his words, "cheap medicine." I asked if he dabbled in heroin himself. He shook his head. "I only smoke *charas* (hashish)," he said.

In 1998, Jani was promoted and became the right-hand-man of a kingpin named Raisoo. With the rise in status, he also graduated from street corners. He started running guns and ferrying stolen cars between Hub and Karachi. Later that same year, he was arrested coming back from Hub, the city in Baluchistan. He had six kilograms of hashish, an unlicensed pistol and a stolen car. He spent the next four years in a high-security prison. "I received special status there," he said. The wardens got him drugs in jail, which he, in turn, sold to the other inmates. The wardens were making a profit, Jani was taking a cut, and everyone was happy.

Nothing hardens a criminal like jail time, and Jani emerged on top of his game. (When I asked him if he had killed anyone, he said he hadn't, but that he may have shot and wounded a few people who were late on payments.) Jani immediately reintegrated — into the mob. "When a gangster is arrested for the first time, he becomes a star. Once I was out, the Don called on me. Then the political parties called." For a political party in Pakistan, the most important thing is winning elections. But second to that is street power. And one of the most convincing displays of that is a party's ability to organize a strike. So when parties would call Jani, they would say, "We want this area shut down," Jani explained, "I would send a small boy to all the shopkeepers with the message: 'Tomorrow is a strike.' Then, in the middle of the night, we fired a few shots into the air. That reminded people. Then they understood that the strike was serious."

In 2003, Jani was making the equivalent of \$100 to \$200 a day. But that same year, Jani's lucked turned: he was arrested and thrown in jail again. This time, his in-laws took away his wife and 8-year-old daughter. They scolded Jani and said he would never see his family again.

After release from prison a year later, Jani promised

his wife that he'd quit the gang life. "It was really because of my baby girl," he said. A girl whose father is incarcerated, he explained to me, is considered unworthy to be married.

These days, Jani works as an electrician. He makes less than \$10 a day. "It's ok with me though, because when you are making big money, you fear for your life. Now, I sleep safely at night."

We finished our tea and parathas, and walked out of the restaurant without paying the bill. (I didn't notice until later.) No one stopped us. Apparently, some people remembered the old Ram Jani.

ALTHOUGH LYARI HAS BEEN THE PEOPLE'S PARTY'S turf for the past four decades, the MQM, an ethnic-based party with a reputation for thuggery, has been making gradual inroads. In the 2002 parliamentary elections, an MQM candidate, for the first time, scored one of the area's two seats in the national assembly. No one is sure how it happened. I didn't meet a single MQM supporter in Lyari. Most people suspected that election engineering was to blame. Some pointed to intimidation at the polling sites or ballot stuffing, but most thought that the intelligence agencies — who wanted to see the MQM, a Musharraf ally, in power — simply fudged the numbers. One Saturday night in December, Badshah Khan offered his explanation for the MQM's rise — and a taste of how they do business — in Lyari.

Badshah Khan, like Rehman Dakait and Arshad Pappu, is a household name around Lyari. He runs illegal gambling dens, prostitutes and drugs. At around 7 p.m., I waited for him in an alley beside People's Stadium, a modern soccer stadium built during Benazir Bhutto's government. (Nowadays, the stadium has been overrun by Rangers, who use the stadium as a base.) The stadium stands beside Mauripur Road, which forms the southern boundary of Lyari and is a major road leading to and from the Karachi port. Big trucks carrying shipping containers race up and down the road at most hours of the day. During traffic jams, enterprising teenagers snatch tire jacks (and anything else not tied down) from the truck

beds, to be later sold to jack-less truckers. Once a week, donkey cart races are also conducted on the road. Musharraf once remarked during a visit to Lyari, "The donkey cart race reminded me of a Ben Hur movie."

Across Mauripur Road, opposite Lyari, is a slum, where homes are made of trash bags and salvageable pieces of discarded rubbish. The electricity had gone out and submerged the slum in an inky black darkness. The only light came from reflections of burning fires, cast off of tin siding. Even from across the street, it smelled like a combination of burning plastic and a fish market. After about ten minutes, a tall man, with long arms and a slow, measured gait, emerged from the alley, followed by a small man, clutching a stack of papers and racing to keep up. Badshah Khan and his minion.

Khan dangled a cigarette, fixed to a long, silver tip, from between his pointer and middle finger. He stepped out of a shadow and made eye contact, as if to confirm that we were the people waiting for him. Then he nodded toward a side street. Rafi, my colleague, and I followed him. Khan seemed to coast along, his stride graceful and



Lyari lacks any drainage or trash collection system.

elastic. His fingertips on his right hand were dyed with henna. His short hair and kempt beard were also hennaed, a shade of Bert-and-Ernie orange. He wore a cardigan vest overtop of his shalwar kameez.

We entered a two-room travel agency, sat in the back room, and closed the door. Khan introduced himself. His voice was froggy and uninterested. "My name is Badshah Khan. Those who matter know my name," he said. He snapped and his minion came running with a stack of papers. The small man dropped them on the desk. Each

folder contained a different police charge sheet against Khan. "I have 35 criminal cases pending against me," he said. Some included murder. "What will I get from this interview?"

Khan, age 69, is accustomed to a life of kickbacks and bribes. He wanted money to talk. Eventually, he conceded after I convinced him that I couldn't afford to pay. He guessed that he had spent a combined 30 of his 60 years in prison. I asked him how he managed to always commute his jail sentences. Some were even for life. "We pay everyone," he sneered. "The police, the judges, the politicians, everyone."

IN 1985, DURING A SHOOTOUT WITH THE POLICE, Khan was wounded and arrested. He landed in the prison hospital and stayed there for several months. One day, he got a new bedmate — Altaf Hussein. A year later, Hussein would form the MQM and start earning his reputation as a gangster in politician's garb. The more experienced Khan took the younger Hussein under his wing. "He had some political affiliations and wanted to follow developments of what was going on 'outside,'" Khan said. Since there was only one television in the hospital, Khan used his connections to make sure Hussein could track the news. That television cemented the special kind of bond that is unique to bed-ridden inmates.

Nearly 20 years later, the strength of their relationship was tested. Raisoo, who was Khan's rival (and Ram Jani's former boss), had linked up with the MQM and "invited" them to Lyari. In 2004, the MQM established an office near People's Stadium, in the heart of Khan's neighborhood. The party wanted to expand its influence beyond the mohajir-dominated areas of Karachi and Lyari, with its Baluchi population, offered a perfect opportunity. I had already visited one MQM office in Lyari, where a party worker named Bayeed sat in the principal's office of a primary school. The walls were adorned with portraits of Altaf Hussein. If the MQM wanted to set up an office, I asked, why didn't they rent a space rather than occupy a school? "Before we came, people had stopped sending their kids here," Bayeed said. "Every night, drug addicts used to jump the fence and then sit here doing drugs all

night. We pushed them out and the staff and students started coming again." The MQM has always shown a penchant for strong-arm tactics.

Not long after Bayeed settled into the principal's chair at the school and the MQM built up its office near People's Stadium, the latter office was attacked by armed hooligans. Both sides exchanged gunfire and one man fell dead in the crossfire. Khan claimed he was an innocent bystander; the MQM said the man was one of theirs, and blamed Khan for his murder. When a potentially explosive gang feud threatened to break out, Khan feared for his life, and the gangster wrote a letter to his old friend Altaf Hussein. Khan gave his take on the incident, exonerating himself of blame, and reiterating that the victim was a local Lyari man, not an MQM worker. He faxed the letter to London, where Hussein has been in self-exile since 1992. Khan recalled, "Altaf ordered an investigation. When he learned the facts" — which supported Khan's letter — "he ordered his men to vacate the office and dismissed his workers from my area."

AFTER AN HOUR, KHAN SAID HE WAS TIRED of talking. "I cannot explain my life in an hour," the drug lord joked. He turned to Rafi. "Tell him," Khan began, pointing to me, "That if he wants to talk more, to bring some money next time."

I asked one last question: Who would Khan support in the next election? In the past, his street boys worked at the behest of the People's Party. "I am a People's Party supporter at heart," Khan said. "But the situation has changed because the MQM is now in touch with me." The pangs of indebtedness weighed on Khan. Hussein had, after all, prevented a fierce turf battle from breaking out on Khan's doorstep.

Badshah Khan twirled his right hand, the one with the long, silver cigarette tip between two fingers, and rolled his wrist, like a university professor pretending to mull a sticky philosophical problem. Who will I support? he repeated. Then Khan winked to suggest that he had already thought it over and had devised a plan. "When the elections come," he said, "I will flee this country." □

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Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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Phone: (202) 364-4068
Fax: (202) 364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Bookkeeper/Program Assistant
James Guy

Publications Manager:
Ellen Kozak

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