

# ICWA LETTERS

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**NES-5  
PAKISTAN**

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## Brand Games:

### Polo and Privatization in the Hindu Kush Mountains

By Nicholas Schmidle

JULY 2006

**ON THURSDAY EVENING, THE** night before the official opening of the Shandur Polo Festival, the merchants were already pitching tents on either side of a wide footpath that sliced through the middle of the barren campground. By dusk on Friday night, the site had transformed into a frenetic bazaar. "Ten rupees! Ten rupees!" a man called out as he moved his upturned palm over a pile of black digital wristwatches. Everywhere I turned, fluorescent tube lights swayed over displays of wall clocks, mini-flashlights, "saltish" biscuits, dusty children's-sized overalls and more. "Haallo sir! Come here sir!" another merchant barked when I walked past his stack of plastic-wrapped Chitrali *doppis*, the floppy, woolen hats that are ubiquitous in the mountainous areas of northern Pakistan.

Further up the bazaar, past a line of shops and food stalls with freshly dug Tandoori ovens blazing bright orange, a man stood holding a wad of bills and hollering out, "Five rupees! Five rupees!" His shtick, however, hardly needed ad-



*Bazaar faces*

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

vertisement. The word was out. A few dozen overeager gamblers crowded around a white plastic mat that was spread on the ground like a picnic blanket and divided into forty sections. In the middle of the game board, a teenage boy manned the metal arrow, to be spun once the Five Rupee Money secured everyone's bets. I threw down five rupees on slice number 27. If the arrow landed on 27, I won a dusty bottle of shampoo. Other prizes included a bar of soap, a blue toy car, and a package of D Cell batteries.

Nobody won, but everyone anteed up for another spin.

I turned to one of the spectators and asked him in Urdu, "What's the name of this game?"

He stared back at me with equal parts suspicion and disbelief, unsure how to respond and looking terribly confused. *How can this foreigner not know the name of this game? Does he think that the West invented gambling too?* Finally, he answered matter-of-factly, "Lottery."

Over the next two days, the arrow on the "Lottery" board never stopped spinning. In fact, I think the bazaar stayed open into the wee hours of the nights.



Photo: Rikki Schmidle

*A less-popular game of "Lottery." I suggested to the dealer that if he went in for more practical prizes — shampoo, soap, etc. — he'd get a better turnout.*

But I couldn't tell you for sure. I stayed on the other side of the valley, where another site, beyond earshot from the Main Camping Area, had been built to house a few dozen employees of big-name corporations and Ministry of Tourism officials — in short, the VIPs. (To call the VIP Camping Area "camping" would be a stretch: my "tent" was an aluminum pre-fab structure with a couple cots, blankets, working electricity, a vanity mirror and a sprig of plastic rose for decoration.) I am still not sure exactly how I wound up traveling with a pack of VIPs to the 2006 Shandur Polo Festival. But, in brief, I got a call from someone at the Ministry of Tourism on Wednesday night regarding a fax I had sent earlier that day. The fax mentioned that I was a writer from the United States, spending two years in Pakistan, saw a great opportunity to write a positive story with no Taliban or al-Qaeda...and that I had written for *The Washington Post*. Apparently, the letter elicited some interest from the Ministry. The rep on the phone invited me, on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, to ride on a chartered VIP flight leaving from Islamabad on Thursday morning.

"Meet tomorrow morning at the Rawal Lounge," the rep said. "And look for the guy in the camouflage pants."

**JUST BESIDE THE MAIN** terminal at the Islamabad International Airport is a mini-terminal, fronted by a strip of trimmed hedges and plush shrubbery, with its

own parking lot and battalion of security guards. This mini-terminal, better known as the Rawal Lounge, caters to the VIPs — government officials, foreign diplomats, big businessmen and their ilk — jetting in and out of Islamabad. The morning after I received the call from the Ministry of Tourism rep, I approached a cluster of people — mostly men in newly pressed slacks and crooked designer knock-off sunglasses, with a few women in bright-colored *shalwar kameezes* sprinkled throughout — waiting in front of the Rawal Lounge. I tried to look like I belonged.

A man in his mid-30s, carrying a camouflage backpack and wearing matching pants with cargo pockets the size of goldfish bowls, stepped forward. "Are you Nicholas?" he asked. I smiled, nodded and reached out my hand. "Salmaan Shehzad," he said, "Welcome along." Salmaan then shielded his eyes and scanned the main parking lot. His whole body had a nervous twitch. He rubbed his face and stroked his shock of charcoal-colored hair. "I'm waiting for a few more people, and then we'll go inside," he said. "So when does your column in *The Washington Post* come out?"

Salmaan Shehzad is the owner of a Lahore-based event planning and coordination firm that spends most of its time organizing golf tournaments and the occasional cricket match. This year, he teamed up with the Ministry of Tourism to put together the 2006 Shandur Polo Festival — an annual three-day polo bash played on the highest polo

field in the world, more than 12,000 feet above sea level. The deal went something like this: the Ministry of Tourism didn't have any money; people knew Salmaan because of a "Soft Image Pakistan" campaign he pitched to the Prime Minister the year before; they also knew he had a way with corporate sponsors, and so they asked him if he thought he could arrange for the roughly 8 million rupees (about US\$130,000) needed to make the event happen. "They said that if you want to arrange for everything, go for it," he said to me with the confidence and nonchalance particular to jewelry salesmen. "So I looked at a couple pictures on the 'net and saw some posters from last year, and I got the idea that Shandur could be branded." By the time of the event, Salmaan had raised more than 12 million rupees.

Getting the money, according to Salmaan, was the easy part. Now he had to show the sponsors a good time. That meant transporting — in comfort and style — three dozen city-slicking, bug-fearing corporate types to the Shandur Pass — a six-hour jeep ride from the nearest airport, and in the event of cloud cover (which automatically grounded flights), an 18-hour bus and jeep ride from Islamabad. The VIPs on board were a mix of Personal Secretaries to Federal Ministers, Assistants to Managing Directors, and Assistants to Personal Secretaries to Federal Ministers. By my measure, none of them qualified as VIPs in any meaningful sense, besides the fact that they were dispatched by *real* VIPs to follow up on how their efforts — and, most importantly, money — were being spent. Such an assignment, by default, made my travel companions "executives" for the weekend. At one point in Shandur, as Salmaan was deliberating over which VIPs would ride in which vehicles, the word "important" slipped out of his mouth. "Everyone here is important!" one of the middle-managers from Pakistan State Oil (PSO) — Corporate Sponsor #1 — screamed. "Find a jeep with A/C for everyone!"

**EVERY JUNE, A FEW** thousand mountain folk from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Northern Areas, two abutting provinces in northern Pakistan, converge on the Shandur Pass to watch three days of polo on what Pakistanis never stopped reminding me was the highest field in the world. The tradition dates back to 1936, when a British Political Agent named Captain Cobb suggested that the feuding *walis* of Chitral and Gilgit field their strongest polo sides and channel their animosities into a rough-and-tumble version of "the Game of Kings." Cobb proposed an alpine valley in the middle of nowhere known as Shandur, a site chosen, some argue, for its utter

inaccessibility and mutual inconvenience for people of both Chitral and Gilgit. (These days, the *Very, Very* of the Important People fly in and out by helicopter.) Regardless, the *walis*, or local rulers, agreed, and for a few days every summer since, the Shandur Polo Festival has hosted what local enthusiasts say is the rawest and fastest polo in the world — played in the thinnest air. Referees, umpires, and officials aren't invited, and the "rules," which to a casual spectator are conspicuously absent, were borrowed from a version of polo played by an ancestor of Genghis Khan.

On Thursday, we flew from Islamabad to Chitral. On Friday morning, a fleet of Land Rovers — Corporate Sponsor #2 — sat idling in the parking lot outside our hotel in Chitral, waiting to shuttle our crew of VIPs to Shandur. Eventually, two hours past our Estimated Time of Departure, Salmaan chased everyone into a vehicle and we were off.

When we finally arrived at the Shandur Pass, after six hours of bumping and thumping along unpaved roads covered with an inch of talcum powderesque dust, some of the VIPs were looking haggard. Naseem, a long-haired, middle-aged photographer and advertising rep for Servis — Corporate Sponsor #3, looked like he'd been rolled in flour and was waiting to be thrown in the frying pan. He ranted about the lack of hot water in the portable showers. "What I am going to do?" he stammered. "If I don't take a hot shower at least once a day, I don't feel like a *human*." He turned back and pointed to the dust-caked Land Rover he had been riding in. "This is *inhumane* treatment," he continued, "I wouldn't subject my parakeet to that kind of dust and dirt."

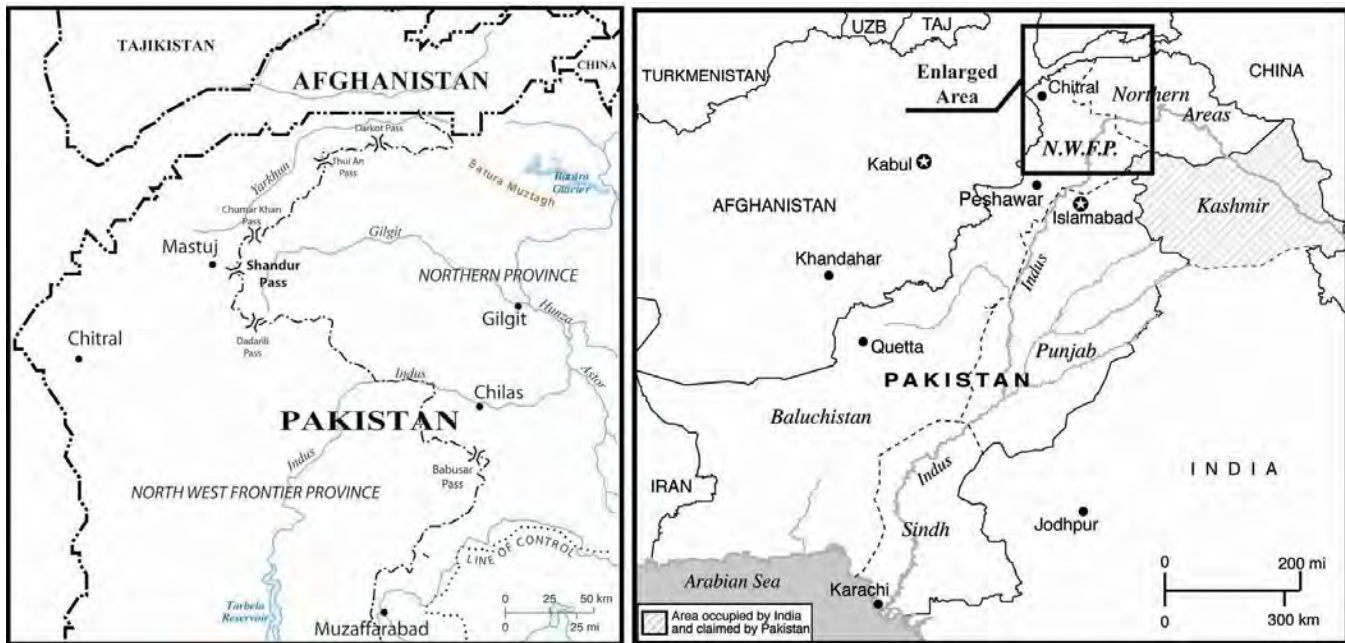
I replied that we were, after all, in the mountains.

"You obviously don't understand," he responded with a sassy voice and a perfectly straight face, "Before



Photo: Rikki Schmidle

*The Shandur Valley, home to the annual Shandur Polo Festival, in Pakistan's Hindu Kush Range.*



I travel anywhere, I *always* call ahead to confirm that my hosts have hot water...even my relatives...if they don't have hot water, I don't go."

Meanwhile, Salmaan was running around the VIP camp, trying to get the hot water flowing and the "Muslim showers" in the Port-a-Johns working. (A Muslim shower is a toilet side hose used for flushing yourself clean.) He clutched his Thuraya satellite phone like a bar of 24-kt gold and called in reinforcements of towels and bathroom trinkets. He twitched the whole time. A few hours later, he fell victim to altitude sickness and had to be evacuated.

The backdrop to all the VIP squabbling was a valley surrounded by craggy and snow-striped mountain peaks, and, nestled in the middle, a *burqa*-blue lake. The Main Camping Area, housing thousands, stood on the far side of the lake. The VIP Camping Area was outfitted with running water, a full restaurant and bow-tie wearing *chaiwallahs* (or tea boys). Minutes after hearing Naseem rant about the lack of hot water in the portable bathrooms, I hitched a ride to the Main Camping Area — or "the melee" as the VIPs called it.

During the ten-minute ride over to MCA, I despaired over the fact that my original story idea — featuring Salmaan as part of an unreported class of entrepreneurs in Pakistan, tired of their India counterparts getting all the attention — was dead. The complainers back at VIPCA intended to destroy Salmaan's chances of doing next year's event. One VIP, pissed off about an overcooked kebab, made a scene and exclaimed, "I paid one million Rupees for this!" He pledged thereafter to "make his [Salmaan's] life hell when we get to the bottom of the mountain."

Herein lay the problem. Most of the VIPs calculated that if their corporation spent a certain amount of money to sponsor Shandur, they deserved an equally proportionate amount of special treatment. Which is why the showers couldn't be hot enough, the water pressure couldn't

be hard enough, and the menu selections at the restaurant 12,000 feet above sea level couldn't be expansive enough. A number of them tooted their own philanthropic horns, while simultaneously wondering why it was taking the *chaiwallah* so long to bring them their tea. Consider the way the festival itself was branded. The most prominent advertisements were at the entrance to Islamabad International Airport and around the VIP Camping Area. Rather than targeting the 25,000 person audience at the Shandur Polo Festival, they ostensibly just wanted to be recognized on a personal level for having coughed up some cash. The result, for people on the VIPCA, was a self-congratulatory love fest, while those at the Main Camping Area kept asking: Where did those 12 million Rupees go?

**ON SATURDAY, I SPENT** the morning and most of the afternoon looking for non-VIP friends. I stumbled onto a camp of local journalists who insisted I join them for lunch. Twenty of us sat in a circle on a blanket made greasy from spilled *dal*. A single pitcher of water got passed around, and we all drank from the same metal cup.

Afterwards, I met a 21-year-old university student from Chitral named Adnan. He had been wandering the MCA trying to find the location of the afternoon concert. Nothing on the program, he said, was being followed. Adnan sported a fashionable goatee, impossibly dark sunglasses and a Stars-and-Stripes Du Rag. He turned 360 degrees and talked about how the government was ignoring Shandur and making this part of the country more and more backwards. I thought about the National Parks in the United States and suggested that too much development would perhaps spoil the area. Pakistanis are compulsive litterers, and I imagined a trail of soda cans and foil wrappers from "saltish" biscuits covering the dirt road from Chitral to Shandur.

"Avoiding development might sound good to you,



Photo: Rikki Schmidle

*The committee wearing doppis.*

but you people only use this road once a year. Traders from Gilgit and Chitral are driving on this every day," he said.

"But what would come next? Billboards? Hotels on the Shandur Pass?"

Adnan brushed my comment aside. "No one would have a problem with a billboard or a paved road if they could get work. One or two hotels on Shandur would be better for you people...and better for us." He continued, "But my biggest complaint is that the security this year sucks. There are way too many VIPs! Just look!" he said, pointing to a soldier monitoring the crowd from atop a large bump of earth. Adnan, like everyone else, knew that the abundance of security guards could mean only one thing: the most VV of all the VVIPs, President Pervez Musharraf, was coming on Sunday.

"We don't want the president to come...not if it means all this hassle," Adnan said. "This is way too much security for just coming to watch polo. Who is Shandur for? The people or the Army?"

Shortly after my conversation with Adnan, I retreated to the pre-fab tent village at VIPCA to escape from the sun. It blazed from breakfast until dinnertime, scorching necks, noses, and scalps. The out-of-towners were easy to spot because their faces were either the color of lobster shell or were globbed with white suntan lotion. Likewise, altitude

sickness was claiming victims left and right. For two of the event's three days, Salmaan lay bed-ridden in a small town, a two-hour drive from Shandur. Others met a similar fate. I managed to stave off symptoms by eating Excedrin like they were Tic Tacs.

**THE MAIN POLO EVENT** happened on Sunday morning. Security guards combed the premises with big sticks and guns. Because Musharraf was expected to arrive at 10:30 a.m., spectators had to be in their seats by 8:30 a.m., almost two hours before match time. The road between Chitral and Gilgit closed at 9 a.m. One roadblock stranded

a squad of police officers on the wrong side.

The foreigners and VIPs sat on the near side with a chair and a sliver of shade. (Depending on your level of importance, you received a proportionate amount of shade and padding. My chair was rusting, metal, and just outside of shade.) The locals went to the dustier far side and had to leave their cigarettes and water bottles in a four-foot-high pile.

At around half-past ten, the Army helicopters began descending in droves amidst a light breeze from the west. Each time one landed, it kicked up a huge cloud of dust that nearly swallowed the Local Side of the field before drifting towards the cigarette- and water bottle-touting,



Photo: Rikki Schmidle

*What would surely draw a "checking" call in the NHL is routine at Shandur.*



*The stampede*

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

partially tented Foreigners and VIP Side. To hold the audience's attention before Musharraf arrived, a couple dozen para-gliders leapt from the top of a craggy and snow-striped mountain, circled overhead, and then landed amidst a puff of neon parachute in the middle of the field. As one unlucky para-glider coasted in to land, one of the choppers blew past him, creating a blast of dust that knocked him to the ground from fifty feet up. A rescue crew rushed to the scene, but had to wait until the VVIPs left the helicopter.

Musharraf's helicopter arrived last. He wore a Chitrali *doppi* with two feathers stuck in the front, and greeted the cheering and idolatrous crowd with a salute. When the General and his entourage of VVIPs reached their seats, the game commenced.

At the end of regulation, the polo match was tied. As advertised, the game followed no apparent rules. Players swung their mallets recklessly at other players, their heads, and their horses.

With about five minutes left to play, a disturbance on the Local Side spun out of control. Apparently, a wall crumbled underneath someone's foot, and *EARTH-QUAKE!* and *BOMB!* scares precipitated a wave of panic. People dashed away from the crumbled wall, creating what looked like a ripple as the fear of being trampled spread. Musharraf's security detail smothered him like flies on old meat. The mob, in a frenzy, tore down a huge

poster featuring the President's mug that read "Chitral Welcomes You." The stampede eventually petered out, but the match never recovered. Already-amped security guards itched to restore control.

When the game finally ended, Musharraf chaired a brief trophy ceremony. During his speech, he promised to widen the bridge in Mastuj and to pave the road from Chitral to Shandur. I looked for Adnan in the crowd on the Local Side, but most people cleared out during the stampede. I doubted he was one of the few who stayed back to watch Musharraf. While the President passed



Photo: Rikki Schmidle

*Musharraf always dresses for the occasion.*

out trophies, a handful of dancers came out to perform a traditional jig. Musharraf joined in, a move that made everyone clap and cheer. If Pakistan ever had a “Soft Image” moment, this was it.

But suddenly, the security guards rushed towards the press area, waving their arms wildly and warning photographers not to take photos. “Turn off your cameras! Put that away!” they commanded. Armed guards ram-paged through the press gallery, pushing video-cameras face-down so that their lenses pointed at the dust and shaking fists in the face of defiant journalists. None of it made any sense.

“What’s wrong with Musharraf dancing?” I asked a local journalist next to me.

“Nothing...the locals love it. But if that footage gets out,” he explained, “the religious types [who see dancing as un-Islamic] will use it for political gain against Musharraf. It could destroy him.”

**ON SUNDAY MORNING, WHILE** everyone was at the MCA watching the polo match, the eight-car team from Land Rover took off. For three days, the VIPs had treated them like non-VIPs. In other words, like drivers. The Land Rover guys decided they’d been disrespected enough to justify their sudden departure. This meant that

when we all returned to VIPCA to start packing up and heading home, the vehicles we came up the mountain in were already half-way down. Fortunately, Salmaan had drafted a worst-case-scenario Backup Plan which called for an armada of beat-up jeeps and weather-worn Land Cruisers to be gassed up and waiting in a town not far away.

A little more than an hour later, the second-string transports arrived. They were a far cry from the Land Rovers, but most of the VIPs were pining for the comforts of home, and this looked like the quickest way to get there. Salmaan assigned seats to everyone; I got the back bench in a topless red jeep. Naseem, tickled with amusement, walked over. “You laughed at *us* on the way here,” he said as if reciting a well-known aphorism, “And we will be laughing at *you* on the way back.”

For protection against the dust and the potential sting of speeding insects, I wrapped a scarf around my face and slid my sunglasses behind my ears. To everyone’s surprise, the driver of our jeep possessed Jedi-like Driving Skills, and we zipped past dozens of open-bed trucks crammed with local men also wrapped up like mummies. Their eyes glowed with excitement as they headed home, holding satchels of shampoo and soap and clothes for their wives and children, after a long weekend of polo with the guys.

The sun fell behind a sharp wall of east-facing rock



*Security ready to apprehend anyone who so much as sneezes.*

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

and we descended towards a lush and shaded valley. All the trucks and jeeps raced to the bottom in a long trail of dust. I can't recall a more calming drive in my life.

That night, the World Cup final was to be played at 11 p.m. Everyone was excited to watch it back in Chitral. Barreling towards Mastuj in record-setting time, Salmaan and I commended our Jedi Driver and debated who had the better disembarkation plan in Chitral: Shower, Eat, Watch Soccer or Eat, Watch Soccer, Shower. I was seconds away from winning the debate when we came tearing around a blind curve. Our brakes locked up and we skidded sideways, nearly tapping the rear bumper of the last jeep in an endless line of stalled trucks, an act that would have surely initiated one of the most destructive domino effects in traffic-accident history.

Instantly, I knew that any hope of watching the World Cup was long gone. The line stretched for nearly a mile. No one moved. After undoing my Unabomber-wrap and shaking the sandbox worth of grit out of my hair, I headed towards the gas pump (beside which was a snack stand where I knew I'd find a Mountain Dew) and, ultimately, in the direction of the bottleneck's cause, the Mastuj Bridge.

As I weaved between cars, everyone I passed wore the same sunburned-but-not-beaten expression. A man named Shams, dressed in sneakers, khakis and the obligatory *doppi*,

called me over. He stood with five men, ruminating and rehashing the weekend. "I'm a Shandur veteran," he prefaced (this year marked his sixth consecutive trip), "but this year was by far the best."

"What did you think about Musharraf's visit?" I asked. "What is worth all the hassle?"

He answered by lifting his chin at the hundreds of cars waiting to cross the Mastuj Bridge. "The President said he'll fix it...and whatever he says he does." Shams continued to praise Musharraf for several minutes until I could request his leave to seek out my Dew.

On the stroll, my brain ran through the weekend in a roll of still frames: the serene valley; the Army helicopters and their mini-tornados; the VIP gallery; Naseem, covered in dust and unsatisfied with the shower facilities; the uber-horses and their Genghis Khan-inspired riders; the fluorescent tube lights in the bazaar at dusk; and Salmaan, shuffling about with his clunky Thuraya. I wondered what everything meant. But nothing particularly insightful came to mind. All I knew was that Salmaan might not get next year's contract, Servis probably wouldn't be anteing up and that this year's flock of VIPs would likely be staying home, but everyone else would be here — even if it meant being covered in dust coming up, and waiting in bumper-to-bumper traffic coming down. □

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ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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