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Pressured from All Sides in Pakistan's Swat Valley

By Kathy Kelly

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In May of 2009, under tremendous pressure from the United States, the Pakistani military began a large-scale military operation in the Swat District of Pakistan to confront militants in the region. The UNHCR said the operation led to one of the largest and fastest displacements it had ever seen. Within ten days, more than two million people fled their homes.

Now, a year later, our small delegation visited the Swat District. After a breathtaking ride through the Hindu Kush mountains, traveling in a pick-up truck from Shah Mansour in the Swabi district, we arrived in Swat's capital, Saidu Sharif.

Saidu Sharif is a small town, ringed by mountains. The Swat River, a few hundred yards in width, runs through it. It's easy to imagine a former time when tourists would flock to visit this scenic treasure. While we were there, the town seemed tranquil. Stores were open and the streets were bustling. Merchants, children, shoppers, bicyclists, goats, cars, donkey carts, rickshaws, and tractors jostled for space in the narrow roadways. But, we also saw dozens of uniformed men, carrying weapons, suggesting that tensions still prevail in Swat.

We arrived at sunset, shortly before the evening call to prayer. On top of a hill, we approached a modest home, a courtyard surrounded by rooms which housed several families. Our host in Saidu Sharif operates three small shops. He had purchased the house with money earned while he worked as a shopkeeper in Saudi Arabia. Joining him was his close friend who had spent ten years working in Saudi Arabia, also as a shopkeeper. Now, he has an antique/specialties shop in Mingora. Both men hope that tourism will be revived, soon, in the Swat Valley. They are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

Our host family extended the warmest of hospitality. They served us seasoned rice, yogurt, chicken, parata bread and, for desert, pudding with the word "Welcome" spelled out in bits of coconut. We discussed life and conditions in Swat until late evening. We learned that the brother of one of our hosts had recently lost his spouse in an attack that had also destroyed his home, an aerial attack by the Pakistani military that was supposed to be targeting Taliban militants. Our host offered to take us in the morning to speak with her brother, the other survivors of the attack and others in the area who had been affected by the fighting. But the visit was never to occur.

The next morning, May 9th, tragic news arrived that her brother had just died. He had started his morning prayers, finished them, walked into the washroom and took his last breath.

Despite such a horrendous loss, and although falling headfirst into the sudden whirlpool of urgent funeral preparations, the family continued to look after us graciously. They managed to arrange for us to meet with a distant relative later that day in Swat.

We expressed our earnest condolences with our goodbyes and in the afternoon removed ourselves from the circle of their bustle and grief. A quick drive through town followed, and we were on the next stage of our journey.

The relative they arranged for us to meet, Jamshaid Ali, is a "Nazim" or "mayor" of his town's governing council. He is a man of considerable local power and prestige, yet he had his own story of violent loss to share with us. While one side of the family had recently faced the careless injustice of the Pakistani military, this very wealthy Nazim and his brothers had barely survived successive assaults by well-armed militants in the area.

The account of the assaults, according to Jamshaid, went like this:

In December of 2007, militants in the Malakand province warned Jamshaid to resign from his public post, or else. He'd worked for years as a contractor, managing large construction projects that added to his already considerable inherited wealth. He says that while he served, for ten years, as an elected official, he obtained funding from the government for projects that would benefit his district, and he added his own money into these projects.

The militants, however, had put him and all his brothers on a hit list, targeted for assassination. On December 28, 2007, Jamshaid Ali survived a remote control bomb attack that killed eight others. Starting the next day, fighters used heavy weapons and mortars to attack his home and the homes of his relatives in Barkala Bishbarn. The attacks lasted for two days.

A year passed. Jamshaid Ali had spent this time in constant, wary vigilance. He and his family found housing outside of the Swat District.

On the 7th and 8th of October of 2008, attackers ransacked and blew up the homes belonging to Jamshaid Ali and his brothers. One brother told us that he and his wife had tried to fight off the attackers, his wife helping to load the machine gun he was using. He told us about this in the room where it happened. But when militants had launched a grenade into the house, they had

realized they were defeated and managed to survive only by hiding. The militants killed one of the household servants (named Saeed Karim Bakhat Wazir), the next day.

Jamshaid showed us a newspaper with his photo: one of about a dozen men shown out of eighty six that the Taliban had ordered to appear before a Taliban Shura Council which would hold them accountable for their wrongdoing. The council was held in the meeting house of a Taliban-run section of Swat. He had refused to attend.

He said that the militants destroyed forests, fruit gardens and trees belonging to him and his brothers. Four pipelines for water were destroyed, ruining crucial infrastructure for the mosque in the village, the government primary school and the home of one villager. They also blew up the girls' primary school.

Jamshaid and his brothers have applied to the Pakistani government for hundreds of thousands of rupees, each, in compensation for their losses. As wealthy land owners, they're lucky; they have the resources, chief among them security, with which to document their losses. Most Pakistanis living in Swat, suffering through grief for loved ones or the sudden homelessness of displacement, are not able to document their circumstances. Nor have all those who have been displaced been able to return home.

Jamshaid was able to produce a booklet presenting tables, photographs, medical reports, news clippings, and detailed accounting of the losses sustained by him and his family members. In all, sixteen houses were destroyed. The "before" photos show picturesque villas nestled in the mountainside. The Pakistani government has not given one rupee of compensation, at this point, to Jamshaid Ali and his family members. We imagine how hard it must be for Swatis who aren't prosperous to petition their government for compensation.

Rumors are still flying, in the Swat District, as to who attacked Jamshaid and his family, and why. Some believe that that the militant activity which destroyed Jamshaid's home was more the result of a family rivalry than "Taliban" activity. In an area with very striking economic inequality, there are still feuds between wealthy landowners for dominance of the region.

With the external pressure put on the Pakistani government to violently confront militant groups in Swat and other districts in Pakistan, there have been reports of families attempting to use the government forces to knock off their rivals. There are also instances of similar tactics being employed in Waziristan, where locals will feed the U.S. false intelligence, hoping the CIA will use a drone strike to eliminate a rival.

Whatever the truth is about these specific incidents concerning Jamshaid, we left the Swat district with strong impressions of inequality and insecurity afflicting residents throughout the area. Numerous people accused of being militants have been imprisoned. Several women in Jamshaid Ali's family acknowledged that torture was regularly used to extract confessions from the accused prisoners. One of them insisted that electric shock and beatings were necessary, "otherwise no one would be so honest as to confess what he has done."

According to the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, militant groups conscript youngsters, telling a family that they must either pay a large sum to support Taliban projects, or send one of their sons to join as a new militant. This is a horrible reality, reminiscent of the conscription of child soldiers in Uganda. In fact, many of these forcibly enlisted children are the ones who are often attacked or imprisoned in the Pakistani government's efforts to sweep the area and rid it of Taliban and other militants. In the face of such tactics, the Pakistani military and Frontier Corps militias have hardly distinguished themselves from non-state actors like the Taliban.

Mr. I.A. Rehman, head of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, told us that he is very worried about the way the military carried out operations in Swat. There have been credible reports of civilian losses, mass graves, extra-judicial executions and mysterious disappearances. He said that the government is holding over one thousand people incommunicado, while refusing to take any of them to trial. It's likely that many of these prisoners were taken from Swat and Malakand, during past seasons of military offensives here.

People living in Swat have borne the brunt of military offensives, forced evacuations, militant attacks, reprisals, destruction of homes and livelihoods, economic decline, and ongoing insecurity.

The government offensives, the militants, the landowners and the United States insistence on crushing the Taliban have all made life unbearably difficult for the people of Swat. A hospital administrator in the region, Syed Muhammad Ilyas, said it will be ten years before Swat will return to normalcy. Yet we are inspired by the hospitality, resilience, and courage of Swati residents who carry on in their daily lives through such turbulent times. As we continue our delegation, we'll try to relay more about people who have suffered acutely from war, displacement, and neglect in a land of incredible beauty.