

Into the Lands of the Pashtuns



Bernd Thalmann

Bernd Thalmann, a corporate partner in the Frankfurt office, traveled to Pakistan in October 2006. As one of the members of the Board of Oxfam Germany, a German charity organization, he visited the northeastern part of the country, which was devastated by an earthquake that killed more than 73,000 people and left more than 3.3 million homeless. He then traveled to the western part of Pakistan, close to the Afghan border, into the core tribal areas of the Pashtuns, a large ethno-linguistic group with populations primarily in eastern and southern Afghanistan and in the north-west of Pakistan. Oxfam works there with its partner organizations to improve the education, health and status of women and girls.

Here are his observations of the trip.

The hospitality of the Pashtuns is said to be legendary. I was not to be disappointed during my travels through the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Wherever we went there was green tea, or a Pepsi. People would offer to slaughter a chicken, prepare dinner for us, even if they had very little to share.

But we came to see the girls and the women.



The local non-governmental organization receiving Oxfam funding, Khwendo Kor (meaning “sister’s home” in Pashtu), is operating girls’ schools and is training traditional birth attendants in rural areas of northern Pakistan. We got to see the girls in the community based schools—simple huts with wooden structures and brand-new aluminum walls and roofs. The old mud huts had collapsed when the earthquake hit the region at 9 a.m. in the morning, burying 18,000 school children.

But we did not get to see the women. They are not allowed to leave their homes. Even the female doctor who is accompanying us has difficulties just talking to them, let alone examining their bodies. There are no hospitals anywhere near the villages. No one knows how many women die during pregnancy or delivery. No one knows how many women there are. They have no identity cards. They do not exist in the statistics. They do not vote. They have no rights.

“Women are held as slaves here,” says Meryem Bibi, the founder of Khwendo Kor. Meryem, an energetic woman in her fifties, grew up in a small village near the Afghan border and now is determined to enhance the socioeconomic status of women and children. “This is very convenient for the males. Why would they want to change it?”

Girls are married at the age of 10 or even younger. They move to the house of their husband's family. The girls' fathers have no interest in sending them to school. "It's like watering your neighbor's plants," is the laconic remark of one of them.

We are escorted by police to the rural girls' schools. Educating women and girls is a dangerous business in this part of the world. "They are spreading obscenity, they are spreading Christianity," are the common accusations that have to be taken very seriously. The mere rumor can put the teachers' lives at risk or cause a girls' school to be closed, if not burnt down. And the threat does not always come from the Taliban. Pakistan's landed wealthy certainly have no interest in educating the masses. "All Taliban are Pashtun, but not all Pashtuns are Taliban," adds Meryem Bibi. And (male) Pashtuns just don't like to change their traditional ways of life.

Khwendo Kor has adapted to the situation. The teachers and birth attendants are recruited from the local villages, trained by professional staff. This creates trust. The curriculum also includes the Koran, this calms down the local mullahs.

The children sit on the floor, looking into their (English) textbooks. Most schools in the rural areas do not have books at all, we are told. Most children in these areas do not go to school. So this is real luxury in rural Pakistan, the "Land of the Pure": 60 children of different ages crammed into a mud hut, squatting down on simple mats, looking into basic textbooks, being taught by a village woman who received some basic training a few months ago. And in winter? When it really gets cold in the mountains? I see no stove. Most children only have plastic sandals. "It's tough for the kids," one of the men says. "We somehow manage to survive, but the children often get sick and some do not last through the winter."

We move to a bigger town, closer to the Afghan border. A trading outpost. There are brick houses, the traffic is noisy and chaotic, pick-up trucks dominate the scene. One of the buildings houses a learning center run by Khwendo Kor.





The children work during the day in the local businesses - their employers can be convinced to send them to the center once or twice a week where they learn to read and to write, even to operate a computer. The kids love it; the businessmen have begun to appreciate the work, some even come themselves for training.

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Back in a small village, we are sitting outside in the pleasant October sun, on carpets under big trees, surrounded by village folk—all men and boys. Sometimes, one of the men would wield a Kalashnikov, but always with a smile, never meant as a threat. “Pashtuns are warriors. They are not happy if they have nothing to fight about,” says my travel guide. I am not so sure.

I see poverty. Unemployment. Frustration. Anger. The Pakistani Government does nothing to improve the situation of the people.

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