

Pakistan: Jun/Jul '10

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After just three months' of training, latest IWPR recruits are reporting on strife-torn tribal areas.

The new phase of IWPR's Open Minds project in Pakistan is showing early results, with some students writing conflict-related news stories after only three months of journalism classes and discussion sessions.

In May 2010, the project expanded its operations into nine new schools, two of them in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where the Pakistani government has very little control and the army is conducting longstanding operations against anti-government insurgents including the Taliban.

Students in these areas face multiple problems relating to army operations and insurgent resistance. Now for the first time, through the Open Minds project they are able to publicise the difficulties local people face. There are no established local media outlets in FATA, and army movements make it very hard for any other journalists to get to these areas.

IWPR's partner organisation Peace Education and Development Foundation, PEAD, identified this problem during its previous work in the Ekka Ghund and Prang Ghar areas of Mohmand Agency, one of the districts of FATA.

Since PEAD secured two schools in these two areas to work with the Open Minds project, there has been some remarkable progress among the students after just three months of journalism training and discussion classes.

In July, PEAD received emailed reports from three students who, PEAD staff told IWPR, had never used a computer until Open Minds came to their school.

As part of the project, IWPR supplies participating schools with computers and internet connections, enabling them to participate in online debates with other schools across the country.

In their reports, the students documented aspects of everyday life in this conflict-affected area.

Muzamal Shah, a student from the government high school in Ekka Ghund, wrote about the poor quality of local education, which he said was because of "the shortage of qualified, honest, devoted teachers".

Decades of conflict and poverty in FATA, which various commentators have accused Pakistani governments of neglecting, means there are very few well educated candidates for teaching jobs.

The other students to email PEAD from the same school class, Asfar Khan and Zia ul Huq, touched more directly on the roots of conflict in FATA.

In a joint email sent from the school's newly-created communal email account, they described a recent fight over land containing marble deposits between two tribal groups, the Masud and the Gurbaz.

Landholding in FATA is extremely insecure and ill-defined, a deliberate policy of the former British colonial rulers that has been retained by post-independence Pakistani governments.

In Prang Ghar, students provided on-the-ground reporting on civilian life amid the ongoing war between the army and insurgent groups.

Dawood, a student from the village of Shkapoor, wrote two short articles about the army-imposed curfew and a bomb which exploded near his school. The blast closed the school and preventing PEAD from carrying out Open Minds training for about a week.

In one of his stories, Dawood wrote on June 21 that "many houses had been demolished" by the Frontier Corps police searching for militants, and "roads going towards the north of Mohmand Agency were closed to all types of transportation and communication, even pedestrians".

Curfews imposed in the area by the army and the central government-run Frontier Corps regularly restrict local people's movement in even essential tasks like buying food, going to school or travelling to local clinics for medical care.

Dawood's other story covered a suicide attack that hit Prang Ghar on July 20.

In the blast, he reported, a hundred people were killed and 180 seriously injured, with five dying of their wounds subsequently. Dawood was able to name several of the victims, and described how ten members of one family were killed.

He also reported on how, at a meeting of the people of the nearby Ekka Ghund area, wheelbarrows were donated to those affected by the blast to help them rebuild their houses.

Ella Rolfe is IWPR's Pakistan Programme Coordinator. Sameena Imtiaz, director of PEAD, also contributed to this report.

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