

Pak madrasas still host hundreds of foreign students

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's madrasas still host hundreds of foreign students one year after the London bombings sparked a major crackdown, but the pupils insist they are not being schooled in jihad.

President Pervez Musharraf pledged to expel all 1,400 non-Pakistanis from the Islamic schools following the revelation that one or more of the suicide attackers attended a seminary before the blasts on July 7, 2005.

At Karachi's sprawling Jamia Binoria al-Alamia, a moderate Sunni madrasa and one of the biggest in the southern city, there is still a separate section for foreigners. Those who remain here say the schools do not teach hate.

"I am surprised the Pakistani government wants all foreign students to leave. It hurts you as a Muslim and peaceful human being," a 19-year-old Canadian national who gave his name only as Ejazullah told AFP.

He condemned the London transport attacks -- which killed 56 people including the young British Muslim bombers -- as un-Islamic.

"Whether it is 9/11 or 7/7, killing innocent people is against the teachings of Islam," he said.

In the huge courtyard below the dingy room that Ejazullah shares with four pupils, some of the madrasa's 5,000 boys mill around in traditional Pakistani smocks, waiting for the prayer call. A girls' school is next door.

Pakistan's estimated 13,000 madrasas have long been accused of fostering militant Islam, but Ejazullah's roommate, 15-year-old Noor Elahi, is no radical.

Elahi said he missed the social life back home in the United States. His father Fazal Rahim, a taxi driver who moved from Pakistan 14 years ago, sent him and his younger brother to Karachi in August 2004.

"I love learning about Islam, but there is no life here in the hostel," he said.

"I want to go back but my father

wants me to stay for a few more years."

He too condemned the bombings, saying: "Those who are killing innocents are misguided people. They may have their own cause but it cannot be Islamic."

Saeed Hasan, 17, a Somali national who has lived in Canada and Britain, praised the education at the madrasa, saying he cares more for life after his Islamic teaching than he ever did in the West.

But the London bombings should be seen in the context of the West's policies throughout the Muslim world, he added.

"It's sad that several people were killed in London bombing, but it's also sad when you hear about killing of innocents elsewhere," Hasan said.

Pakistani madrasas like Jamia Binoria al-Alamia offer more than 1.5 million young people -- mostly men -- a free education in one of only 12 countries that spends less than two percent of its gross national product (GNP) on education.

However many were set up, often with US and Saudi funding, as indoctrination and military training sites during the 1979-1989 US-backed guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The most hardline schools, particularly near the Afghan border, went on to produce thousands of young recruits for the Taliban regime, both when it ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and then after it was ousted.

After the London bombings,

Britain pressed Pakistan to move against radical madrasas, and Islamabad insists it is doing so.

Pakistan has so far deported around 470 foreign madrasa students and the rest of them would be sent home soon, in line with General Musharraf's promise, a senior interior ministry official said.

A campaign to register all Islamic schools and bring them into mainstream education was also on course, he said.

"We are doing it in a phased programme. The others who are still here are being deported. There is no fresh admission in any madrasa here of any foreign student," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The official said some of the opprobrium heaped on the schools since the London bombings had been unfair.

"Why should we take the blame for everything nasty happening in the world -- blaming Pakistani madrasas," the official said. "These students should study in their own countries, after all there are religious schools in their countries as well."

The senior cleric of the Jamia Binoria al-Alamia's madrasa echoed his comments, urging British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the West not to blame madrasas or Pakistan for the London bombings.

"Investigations conducted by British intelligence prove that madrasas have no role in it," Mufti Mohammad Naeem told AFP.

"It's high time that the West changed its concept of madrasa teaching and they are welcome to visit them any time."

Welcome back, Mr President

FROM PAGE 1

President's removal. Once again, the media rose to the occasion and helped serve democracy.

What we learn from this sordid experience surrounding the President's health is the extent to which our partisan politics has gone. Over the years the rivalry between our two major political parties has engulfed practically everything. Bureaucracy, police, lower judiciary and other wings of the administration, professional bodies, etc have all been slowly but surely swallowed up in this deadly game of partisan politics. Today, literally every aspect of our administration is run on partisan considerations. Appointments and promotions in almost all branches of administration is dominated by one single question: "O amader na oder?" (Is he/she ours or theirs?).

In a mindless, unthinking and self-destructive manner we are indulging in what will perhaps prove to be the single biggest impediment to our future progress--destruction of our public administration. Nothing, and we repeat, nothing, is done either on merit or seniority or on dedication to service. Everything is done on political considerations. Increasingly meritorious professionals see their door for promotion shut unless they are able to assure the ruling party of the day that he/she is their person. The least they need to prove is that they do not belong to the opposition and never have. We know of cases where dedicated service holders were forcibly retired, bypassed for promotion or made OSDs ("officer on special duty", which is a euphemism for officer on NO duty) simply because their "political pedigree" was not beyond suspicion.

The latest chapter of this sad and "mad" (our level of partisan politics

is nothing short of madness) story is that this government was about to drag the Presidency, our highest constitutional office, into the quagmire of partisan politics. By trying to change a President because he was no longer "trusted" to be able to deliver when necessary, this government clearly showed that they were quite willing to "politicise" our highest constitutional post for partisan gains.

According to ruling party sources, the reasons for deciding to go for a new President were as follows: a) he was not truly a party man; b) he could not be depended upon for acting according to party "dictates" when and if need arose; c) as an educationalist he may be averse to bending rules as necessary; d) he is too weak to withstand the pressure during the caretaker government when the present opposition will be making all sorts of demands; e) in the event that the ruling party loses power, they will have a President totally dedicated to their party interest, and who can be depended upon for creating constitutional problems for the new government if a chance should present itself.

It is true that some sort of political consideration plays a part when a majority party in a parliament nominates a President. It is also well known that a political party cannot be expected to nominate an opposition candidate for Presidency. But what we can and must expect is that a person of high national standing, exceptional academic or professional achievement and enjoying a reputation of the highest integrity and moral standing is nominated as the President. As the constitutional head he/she epitomises the best in us and represents the highest qualities of a nation. Such a person

stands tall, and with him/her the nation stands tall as a whole.

To decide to change a President mid-stream on the type of considerations as mentioned above is perhaps the worst example of partisan politics that we have seen so far. Here we must mention the vision and political sagacity that was shown by Sheikh Hasina when she made Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed the President. That was the example Khaleda Zia should have followed. Instead, much to the nation's disappointment, she made her founding secretary general the President. Then to our further disappointment, she changed him within days, with less dignity than we would offer a paid employee.

Regardless of Khaleda Zia's earlier decision to change the President, our today's story has a happy ending. Whatever may have transpired, and we now know that a lot did, President Iajuddin Ahmed is back in office. His reputation, as his

health, has taken a severe beating. The way he allowed the state machinery to play with his health and the mute spectator role he played when the Presidency was almost being dragged into dirty party politics have not gone down well with public perception of his ability to uphold the high dignity of his office. (What could he have done? Well for one thing, tell the PM firmly and clearly not to do what she was planning to do to, not so much for himself but for the sake of the Presidency, constitution, parliament system and political stability.) Can we now expect him to rise to the occasion and truly serve the nation?

We thank our lucky stars that good sense finally prevailed and that we were saved from a new political crisis. But can we get some comfort in the hope that a valuable lesson has been learnt and that we will never see any future attempt to denigrate the Presidency by turning it into a party post.

