

By Mahmood Iqbal

“In Pakistan, corruption has attained phenomenal proportions,” said Mohammad Khurshid, a senior journalist with The Statement, a daily newspaper in Peshawar. “You taste it at every turn and feel it at every step. It is mushrooming by the day.”

Khurshid, who is from the Bajaur Agency of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), explained: “Corruption has taken deep roots. It’s pervasive at all levels, and is more so at the lower strata of the society. Every person living in FATA has to pay formal and informal payments to the government’s functionaries or intermediaries even to get basic necessities in the area, and a hungry man thinks about nothing but food.”

Another journalist from FATA, Nasir Dawar, who works for Aaj TV channel, explained a sack of wheat flour sells for 890 rupees (US\$15) in the market. “A permit of 110 rupees (US\$2) is issued for each sack as its entry fee in FATA, besides other charges. Once it reaches there, it is sold for at least 1,200 rupees (US\$20), depending on the market demand. At least 35 rupees (US\$0.57) of the permit price goes to the Water and Power Development Authority for electricity charges, but, interestingly, not many people have electricity in their homes or even in their areas. They pay for what they never consume,” Dawar said.

Safiullah Gul, a reporter with Geo TV in Karachi, said the state of the health care and education systems the country’s south is dismal. “There are cartels in the medical profession in Karachi, who are pretty well-known just for minting money, but the poor have no other option (than to pay). They get robbed, and they know the money will not get them the required service.”

Take gynecologists, for example. A pregnant woman is lucky if she delivers in a hospital without undergoing a caesarian operation. “The doctors won’t wait more than 10 minutes, because in normal deliveries they lose at least 30,000 rupees (US\$495). The would-be parents are pressured into surgery even for normal deliveries, and the newborn is mired in debt even before it opens its eyes,” Gul said. “A caesarian operation costs more than 40,000 rupees (US\$660), while a natural birth costs between 8,000 to 10,000 rupees (US\$132-US\$165), depending on the case. So, a man who earns less than 5,000 rupees (US\$82) a month at the most must either work endlessly or look for some easy ways to make money.”

Corruption is omnipresent in Pakistan. “You feel corruption first thing in the morning when you go buy milk from a shop,” Gul said. “Everybody except for the privileged few pay for what they never get,” he said. “Nobody is bothered by what sells on the street, or what is happening across the country’s biggest city. The situation in rural and peripheral areas presents an even worse picture.”

In the southern Sindh and Balochistan provinces, heavy rains and floods in July and August took a heavy toll on educational facilities. At least 1,800 school buildings were damaged, washed away, or were being used as shelters by families rendered homeless in the two provinces. This means that at least 70,000 children will not have schools to attend when schools reopen in mid-August, Gul said, citing a recent UNICEF study on the floods in the two provinces.

The overall scenario in Pakistan is a bleak picture of the country’s social fabric falling apart. Mounting incidents of violence during the past year, and more so in the recent months, have wrecked the nerves of the nation and filled the people with fear.

“People are scared to go to offices, where they have to pay informal payments or bribe corrupt officials, or even seek some favor to get a legal work done because those in charge would hate to see it stopped,” said Mohammad Riaz, a senior journalist at the Dawn newspaper in Peshawar.

From January 2007 to August 2007, at least 1,100 people reportedly died in more than 570 violent incidents, including militants’ attacks, suicide bombings, sectarian clashes, operational attacks and ethnic and political clashes throughout the country. This includes at least 40 suicide attacks.

The most unbelievable and dramatic uprising — after the events of the Red Mosque of Islamabad — took place in August 2007 in the tribal town of Darra Adamkhel, on the Indus Highway that links Peshawar with the southern port city of Karachi. Local militants occupied the entire town, which is famous for gun-manufacturing and narcotics, in order to carry out an operation against an alleged kidnapper.

After the road blockade was lifted and traffic resumed, thousands of commuters who remained stranded either in Peshawar or Kohat city for two days could see fleeting glimpses of small groups of masked militants formidably armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and

rocket launchers. Thick columns of smoke billowed from the kidnapper's houses, who himself was killed in a fierce gun battle during the town siege. No government officials or security forces were visible. The air was somber and a growing fear possessed the people.

On a hot day in July, 6-year-old Amir sought his father's consent to skip his evening Quran lessons at the village seminary. "Baba, I will not go to the madrassah today. The television shows footage of the Islamabad mosque where the children are held hostage," Amir said. "Our cleric also gets harsh and beats children. I want to skip the lesson today."

But the government and its ministers are pretty much occupied with garnering public support for their leaders in the next general elections, scheduled for the end of 2007 or early 2008. A new generation is in the making, but will their fate be set by the failures of the current one?