

By Mahmood Iqbal

The sight of the elderly woman trudging out of the nursery ward at a major public hospital sent shivers down my spine. She was carrying a baby in her arms followed by another young woman, who self-consciously kept adjusting her shawl, trying to conceal her budding womanhood from onlookers.

I overheard them whimpering as they sat on a bench to wrap the baby in a piece of white cloth. “We kept imploring [the doctors] for hours, but nobody bothered to attend to my child,” the young mother moaned as tears rolled down her pale cheeks. “It makes no [difference] to them whether you die or survive.”

This is Peshawar. It is the capital of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province, a city of no more than three million people, one third of whom are Afghans. The Mutahidda Majlis-i-Amal, a conglomerate of religious parties, has held power in Peshwar since 2002 and claims to champion the cause of humanity.

Initially, I had planned to dig up some high profile story involving the government’s shocking negligence in dealing with corruption to file as my Reporter’s Notebook. However, the pleading looks of the young mother moved me to focus my attention here, on how corruption brings misery to everyday life.

Hospitals in Pakistan are a bleak example of mismanagement, corruption, and, above all, flagrant violations of regulations. As usual, a sickening stench greeted me in the hospital’s overcrowded corridors. Inside the wards, patients outnumbered the beds. Some rested on benches, while other patients set up their own makeshift beds in the poorly lit corners. And, not surprisingly, no senior doctors were available.

“Even in the intensive care unit, I had to run to the medicine shops on the main street and bring simple analgesics for my mother. Can a heart attack wait for you to bring medicines for the patient before it strikes?” said one of my journalist colleagues, whose mother died of cardiac arrest in the same hospital in July.

Similar to all other social and public institutions in Pakistan, the health and education systems are rife with corruption, as well as unsanitary conditions.

“Wherever institutions are weak, corrupt officials are more scared of media than the discipline and regulations of their office,” said Mohammed Riaz, a senior journalist at the Dawn, Pakistan’s leading newspaper. “The media, too, no doubt, is infested with corruption to its core, but it is still effective to expose the corrupt practices of civil and military bureaucracy.”

The government has been touting reforms in the education sector, however, not all strata of the society want to see changes to the status quo.

“The first casualty of the haphazard reforms program was the examination system. Before the reforms, examinations used to be held according to a schedule, but now even institutions fail to know the exact date of examinations,” a senior professor at the Peshawar University said.

Senior educators complain that the initiative to bring about changes in the curricula has also proven futile. “The bogey of reforms has derailed whatever flawed system already existed,” one said.

A culture of secrecy in the government, a deepening unrest among the people, a mounting wave of militancy, rising incidents of kidnapping and assassinations and, most recently, the increasing wave of Talibanization, have all but chilled the already hostile atmosphere in the country.

The recovery of the handcuffed body of kidnapped tribal journalist Hayatullah Khan on June 16, 2006, reinforced the conviction that both official and unofficial regulations exist within the country to restrict the freedom of the press.

No one more welcomed the public outcry against this cold-blooded killing than photojournalist Mukesh Rupeta and his colleague, who had been secretly detained by government intelligence officers in Jacobabad, Sindh for three months.

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf, who is also the chief of the army, came to power by removing the elected government of Nawaz Sharif in 1999. He suspended the constitution and began enforcing the Provisional Constitutional

Order to proclaim his rule and to run the affairs of the country. Subsequently, the Superior Judiciary—under the much-abused doctrine of necessity—legitimized the Musharraf's action.

The overall situation during the past seven years has been marked by violence in the tribal belt of Waziristan, Balochistan and elsewhere in the country. In Waziristan, about 80,000 regular troops are working to eliminate an estimated 300 foreign militants hiding in the area and to restore the rule of law to the volatile region.

In December 2005, the government launched a string of operations against renegade tribal chief Akbar Khan Bugti in Balochistan. Bugti had initiated an armed struggle against the security forces. The reasons for this uprising, according to the Balochi leaders, were the lack of autonomy for Balochistan, unfair access to natural resources and the repressive presence of the army in the province.

An unspecified number of innocent people, among them women and children, have perished in these operations, which has badly hurt the credibility of the armed forces.

Pakistan is a country of contradictions. It has enormous natural, as well as human resources, but it is poverty-stricken. Its people are intelligent, warm, hospitable and kind, but they are steeped in corruption.

Pakistan's leading anti-corruption agency, the National Accountability Bureau, has pinpointed the major causes of corruption in the society. These include, among others, flagrant abuse of power, non-compliance with the law, absence of an effective anti-corruption mechanism, political leaders' incompetence, lack of transparency in the government's decision-making process, cumbersome procedures in the executive system and weaknesses in the judicial system. All of these have hindered the development of proper ethical and business standards for the public and private sectors.

The inefficiency of the official machinery was exposed when a powerful earthquake rattled large parts of South Asia on October 8, 2005. The quake flattened thousands of houses in Pakistan, killing at least 70,000 people. More than three million people were rendered homeless.

Despite a huge response by the Pakistanis and the international community to rush relief goods to the areas, survivors complained they had not received any assistance. They sneered at the official aid distribution channels and relied more on the assistance provided by religious and humanitarian organizations.

“During the whole relief operation, excessive use of helicopters was made, but despite that, stranded people had no shelter or food,” said an official in the Provincial Earthquake Rehabilitation Authority, who requested anonymity.

“But, on most of the flights, civil and military bureaucrats would have frequent aerial views of the unprecedented destruction,” he said. “It was evident from the start of the chopper service that the government could not sustain it for a long time.”

With the general elections scheduled for 2007, the opposition parties are flexing their muscles. They are maneuvering to bring a no-confidence vote against the prime minister, who has faced much political fallout since the Supreme Court scrapped the sale of Pakistan Steel Mills after malpractice in the deal was exposed. The court directed that the Council of Common Interests (CCI) be re-instituted to investigate the issue.

Perhaps it should not have bothered. The CCI, in its first meeting after being resurrected, gave a go-ahead decision for the privatization of the steel company, malpractice notwithstanding. The genuine reservations of the stakeholders were barely considered.

Mismanagement, indiscipline and corruption. From the dimly lit hospital wards to the highest council chambers, the story is sadly familiar. It is yet to be seen whether there is light at the end of this tunnel.