

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF)
“Peacemaking in the Midst of Turbulence: The South Asian Challenge”
December 11, 2007

This month's forum discussed political and religious trends, in particular the recent developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The CPRF focused on the precarious political situation in Pakistan, and the activities of the panelists' organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including their cooperation with governments and other stakeholders in the region. Special attention was given to factors, agents and processes contributing to efforts of building a better future characterized by sustainable peace. The panelists included: Farhana Ali, Associate International Policy Analyst at RAND; Douglas Johnston, President of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD); and Alan Kronstadt, Asian Affairs Specialist at the Congressional Research Service (CRS). As is custom with the CPRF, the three presentations were followed by a round of questions and answers. The discussion was facilitated by William Zartman of the Conflict Management Program/SAIS of the Johns Hopkins University.

The first presentation was described as “setting the stage for discussion about Pakistan.” It was said that the current situation in South Asia contains many challenges, and that the situation in Pakistan is especially complex. Some high-ranking sources were quoted as having made statements “diametrically opposed” to those of the Pakistani government about the situation in the country. The same sources were said to have pointed to the international community's lack of information about the reality regarding human rights “on the ground”. The “truth” about Pakistan was described as an essentially contested issue, and at the same time an important one. The situation in Pakistan was defined as a state of war - a combination of international issues (with India) and the internal insurgency. Some of the indicators, it was said, were the fact that the number of suicide bombings was increasing, reaching regions where it had not been happening earlier; the armed insurgency and fluid political circumstances; and, finally, warnings by many experts. The security in Pakistan is deteriorating, it was added, with the government in disarray. Political figures that were mentioned apart from the current president were Bhutto and Sharif, both of whom can mobilize popular support. However, Bhutto was said to be a somewhat polarizing figure due to her relation with the US. In addition it was said that the Islamic coalition is possibly splitting, and that the judiciary is affected by the fact that key judges and lawyers remain repressed. As for the civil society, it was defined as the primary proximate target of the insurgency.

In reference to the US policy it was said that its association with undemocratic processes and actions only harms the US and points to the failure of, as well as the need for reevaluation of the US policy. Several aspects and approaches were briefly discussed, as well as some possible outcomes. However, it was pointed out that the earlier approach, which was characterized by direct budget support to the government of Pakistan, has suffered serious criticism, and is now being changed into financial support directed at projects. It was suggested that the aid be used wisely and carefully in future, as well as that antagonizing statements which alienate the population be avoided.

The next issue raised by the forum was that of internal reforms in *madrasas* in Pakistan in the context of promoting religious tolerance. Special attention was given to girls' madrasas, and the importance of education of girls/women was highlighted. It was said that women play a very

important role in the society in the context of social networks and bonds. In this sense their education in the madrasas was said to bear high importance, as well as have a “liberating” effect on them. The special place that madrasas hold in the society and education was underlined - they relate to tradition, religion, and influence. Although the Pakistani society was described as rooted in secular and moderate tradition, it was pointed out that secular education is largely viewed with some reservations. Madrasas, on the other hand, it was said, have become an important social institution.

Finally, it was mentioned that socio-economic environment plays a significant role in the recruitment of extremists’ groups. It was also underlined that no one strategy can change the extremist mindset or promote religious tolerance. In this sense, it was recommended that the approach be long-term oriented and varied, with special attention given to gender issues. Also, the emphasis should be on de-radicalization, it was said, with different approaches for different regions and cities.

In the context of reform of religious schools’ curricula, the importance of “ownership” – the notion that changes are coming from within - was stressed in particular. This can be made possible, it was said, only with the help of credible local partners – by involving indigenous actors of authority one shows respect and builds trust. However, working with governments was also said to be important, even unavoidable. Also, it was mentioned the “reforms” are better referred to as “enhancements” in the local madrasas where this work is being done. Due to the “religious nature of the situation,” the importance of “good theology” and the potential of faith based diplomacy for the South Asian region were highlighted.

The forum highlighted some important issues, such as the role of education in the region, in particular in reference to building a future of peace. Current projects and programs related to education in the area have been discussed, and the need was underlined to continue and expand this important work.