

Students' plight in madressahs

By Nasser Yousaf *Madressah*

NEARLY 800 of the approximately 250,000 students in madressahs in the NWFP are enrolled in a spacious seminary in the Peshawar cantonment. The grand old seminary stands adjacent to the compound of the Catholic Church that also houses the Presentation Convent School for Girls.

The leader of the seminary, a highly respected man of letters, was assassinated a couple of years ago while on his way to solemnise a marriage in the holy month of Ramazan. The soft-spoken scholar had a way of settling thorny religious and social issues to the satisfaction of all concerned. However, the slain leader's stance on suicide attacks had not gone down well with the perpetrators.

In the good old days, the people of Peshawar would proudly flaunt the juxtaposition of the cross and the crescent on the Mall as proof of the exemplary tolerance prevalent in Pakhtun society. The proof is still incontrovertible as far as the precincts of the two institutions are concerned. But guns doing the talking elsewhere have since forced church bells to ring behind closely guarded iron gates.

Meanwhile, the number of faithful attending the prayers in the mosque-cum-seminary is rising by the day. The evening prayer in particular which turns into a congregation is predominantly attended by students whose ages range from five years to the late 20s. Their full strength can be reckoned only after the prayer is over and the students start rushing out of the huge gates of the massive hall. They all seem to be boarders, most of them powerfully built and tall, some marching briskly, others languidly, in the direction of their dormitories. Those who stay behind in the hall dedicate themselves to the large editions of Islamic jurisprudence, *hadith* and *tafseer* lying on low wooden tables.

The examinations in the seminary are in progress and lists of roll numbers are conspicuously displayed in the lobbies and corridors. The lists outline instructions, not dissimilar to those in the conventional school system in Pakistan, warning the candidates against the use of unfair means. For some this could

years will not enable them to serve in hospitals, factories, banks, shipping, workshops, laboratories, soldiery, government offices and so on.

How will the state and society provide for this force of thousands of able-bodied youngsters and their extended families, is the million-dollar question that no one would like to be asked. Asking such sensitive questions may attract the ire and fury of those who would rather have these students used as cannon fodder in case an eccentric cartoonist lets his pencil draw silly lines.

It is a colossal tragedy that a large segment of our sturdy and brainy youth have been left to wither away due to the whims of their affected saviours who would otherwise not compromise on their own intake of imported water. There are approximately 2,500 madressahs in the NWFP; nearly half of them unregistered. Living conditions in most of them are simply deplorable. There are 206 madressahs with about 15,000 students in the thinly populated Chitral district alone.

Whereas life in a madressah is one of denial and fortitude, life beyond it is clouded in despondency and gloom. In the small madressahs students are forced to eke out a living by going from house to house to collect leftover food. "*Maulvi sahib* sends us to the bazaar for collecting food", is how a student once responded when approached by a surveyor. When Qari Roohullah, himself a Grade-16 *khatib* in the auqaf department before he became minister for religious affairs during the Musharraf regime, was questioned about such incidents, he replied that beggary was prohibited but the paucity of resources was the bane of madressahs.

Probably the former minister was not probed about how the madressah students fended for themselves in practical life. Their real-life experience rarely extends beyond dependence on donations, services performed on the occasion of marriages and funerals and waiting for *fitrana* and hides and skins during Muslim festivals.

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on numbers are conspicuously displayed in the lobbies and corridors. The lists outline instructions, not dissimilar to those in the conventional school system in Pakistan, warning the candidates against the use of unfair means. For some this could be the final test in the painstaking academic exercise before passing out as *fazils*. The convocation ceremony called *dastar bandi* will soon be held in the same seminary attracting busloads of students and parents from far-off areas. There will be celebrations on the roads and students with garlands will be seen hastily boarding the waiting buses.

The journey will take graduates to the real world; the world where no jobs save those sparse posts of teachers of religion are an option albeit a fiercely competitive one. The long academic session stretching beyond 16

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had launched a programme of reforming the madressah syllabi. He failed to do so due to his incompetent advisers and pressure from the advocates of the madressah system. Success on this front would have provided Musharraf with the much-needed defence in these times of relentless humiliation. The madressah system needs to be tackled on humanitarian grounds and must for a good purpose be cleansed of all internal and external influences. Empowering madressah students with other skills is necessary in order to ward off events that spell catastrophe. ■