

Terrified Whispers in Pakistan

by Fatima Bhutto



Mohammad Iqbal / AP Photo

As reliable information in Pakistan dries up, ours has become a fearful populace addicted to rumors and whispers about who is targeted next.

There are stories being whispered in Pakistan these days, and their veracity is hard to gauge. No one knows what is real anymore in this country that seems hell-bent on self-destruction. In fact, our chief industry now seems to be the manufacture of fear, and everyone's on the assembly line. The combination of ever-present violence and lack of reliable information has made us a country of debilitating Chinese whispers.

They say the terrorists are planning a Beslan-style siege—they'll target primary schools, they'll take hostages, they will kill the young.

Whisper: Balochistan is next on the U.S. hit list for a fresh round of drone bombings. Could Pakistan's army finagle a peace prize out of agreeing to attack their own country? Could they share it with the Pentagon?

Whisper: A local pundit tallied up the days and weeks that Richard "AfPak" Holbrooke has spent in Pakistan, and claims the American diplomat has spent more time here than President Zardari, whose personal security strategy is to be as far away from Pakistan as possible.

Whisper: Terror hasn't been abated. It's only grown. A gutsy attack and hostage-taking at the general headquarters of the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi brought us new boogeymen. Baitullah Mehsud? The dead-undead Pakistan Taliban leader? He's so last summer. Now we have someone named Dr. Osman. He leads the Amjad Farouqi terror group. The what? I know, change is difficult. Try to keep up.

Whisper: Schools across Sindh have been shut for a week. Schools in the nation's power province of the Punjab have been shut indefinitely. All military academies, cadet colleges, and training schools have been closed down. Police teams have defused bombs in girls' schools

across the Northeast Frontier Province. They say the terrorists (we change their name so often we can't guess who is leading who anymore) are planning a Beslan-style siege—they'll target primary schools, they'll take hostages, they will kill the young.

- Shirin R. Tahir-Kheli: Obama's Pakistan Problem Whisper: Pakistan's foreign minister, the bumbling Shah Mahmood Qureshi's son, works as a legislative fellow in the office of Senator John Kerry. Is it true? Does he even have a son? Is it a coincidence that the foreign minister's son works with the man who is pushing through the namesake Kerry-Lugar Bill, which would pump money into Pakistan (for developmental aid, of course!) in exchange for added U.S. influence in Pakistan's political affairs, its army, and its "pro-democracy agenda," whatever that is? The Pakistani peoples' commitment to democracy and pro-Americanism is strong, but our leaders' commitments to nepotism will always be stronger.

Pakistan's chronology lends itself to a state of national confusion. First there was the selection of a notorious criminal as a dictator's presidential replacement. Then there was the hysterical *paso doble* of imposing Sharia law in the Swat Valley before, weeks later, sending in the armed forces to "clean out" the valley of fundamentalists only recently celebrated through the Orwellian peace deal. Then there were the 3 million internally displaced Pakistanis—no one talks about them anymore. As the Pakistan army, buoyed by their benefactors in Washington, launches a new offensive in Waziristan (because the first one went so well), we are too busy creating a new displaced-persons population to give a moment's thought to the dispossessed of Swat.

The carnage at the Islamic University of Islamabad, which left four dead and 18 wounded in two coordinated attacks on the campus, is moving off our front pages to make way for new atrocities: Two soldiers killed in a gunfight in the nation's capital, a breaking-news icon on television told us Thursday morning.

What happens to a Pakistan that can no longer defend itself from its own people? This is not a whisper. This is not an is-it-or-isn't-it-true rumor. This is a warning. Mass graves were unearthed in the Swat Valley this fall. The 150 bodies, bearing gunshot wounds, are purported to be the corpses of suspected militants. Security officials deny that extrajudicial murders were carried out; human-rights groups disagree.

This is what life in Pakistan has become. We've been made into scavengers, hungry for signs of who may be targeted next.

Fatima Bhutto is a graduate of Columbia University and the School of Oriental and African Studies. She is working on a book to be published by Jonathan Cape in 2010. Fatima lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.