

The National

Education in Pakistan 'in a shambles'

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Young students gather to pray and sing the national anthem in the assembly at the TCF Primary School in Karachi. Asim Hafeez / The National

KARACHI // There are tens of thousands of schools across Pakistan where there are no students, no teachers and in many cases, no buildings, yet thousands of dollars are spent each year on their “upkeep”.

The ghost schools, as they are more commonly known, have become an emblematic symptom of Pakistan’s failing education system, suffering from a lack of commitment by successive governments.

The lack of determination to tackle Pakistan’s vast education deficit comes as pro-Taliban militants are taking their fight to the schools of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where they have bombed girls schools, and are using them as fertile grounds for recruitment.

A five-year plan by Gen Pervez Musharraf, the former military officer and president, to reform the curricula of Pakistan’s madrassas, or religious seminaries, and bring them under state control, ended “in shambles”, according to a report by the International Crisis Group, a research and policy think tank.

But many are of the view that although the madrassas, which offer free education, pose a threat to Pakistan, it is the rundown state of secular education that is the real danger.

“Madrassas are a problem but a much smaller problem than mainstream education because of the sheer numbers involved,” said Prof Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physicist from Quaid i Azam University in Islamabad.

The education system, left to atrophy for 30 years, is crippled by every possible ill: crumbling classrooms, poor teaching materials, untrained and truant teachers and endemic corruption.

Pakistan has more than 150,000 public education institutions serving more than 21 million students

and a huge private sector that serves another 12 million.

Yet, according to a Unesco report, the government only spends 2.4 per cent of its GDP on education against the Unesco-recommended norm of a minimum of four per cent. Some 3,500 schools do not have a building; of those that do, 4,000 are classed as “dangerous”; 29,000 schools have no electricity; 14,000 have no drinking water; 22,000 do not have a toilet; 4,000 consist of a single classroom; and fewer than 100 secondary schools have science labs.

Officially, 53 per cent of Pakistanis are literate. Others say the figure is nearer 30 per cent. Literacy, often defined as no more than the ability to write one’s name, is as low as three per cent among women in some rural areas.

The exact figure of ghost schools is unknown but Gen Musharraf estimated there were 30,000 in 2006.

“There is an allocation of money for which can be found no evidence of buildings, teachers or schools,” said Abdul Hameed Nayyar, a respected academic and educationalist.

“It shows the order of corruption in the country and particularly in the educational bureaucracy,” he said.

Pakistan is among the top 12 recipients of funding for educational aid but little of it trickles down to teachers and pupils.

A Unesco report last year found that Pakistan has the lowest Gender Parity Index in the region, that is, there are more boys than girls in schools compared with any other country, including Afghanistan. Only 22 per cent of girls, compared to 47 per cent boys, complete primary schooling.

But some seeds of hope have been sewed, mostly by non-governmental groups who are setting up primary schools such as one in Machar, or mosquito, colony, one of Karachi’s 500 slum communities. The slum is built on a vast rubbish tip that now constitutes “reclaimed land” in the port city. The school, built and run by the Pakistani educational charity, The Citizens Foundation (TCF), is an oasis of cleanliness and efficiency amid the neighbourhood’s squalor.

During a recent visit to the school, rows of neat khaki-uniformed school children scribbled furiously at their desks.

Many of Machar’s 180 schoolchildren have been raised in abject poverty, in families where child labour and malnourishment are the norm.

Set up in 1995 by six businessmen, TCF runs 530 school units in 63 areas in Pakistan, all of which are in slum or rural areas. It teaches 65,000 children, has trained and employs 3,500 teachers and raises its 530 million rupee (Dh24.7m) annual operational cost through corporate and private donations.

Its director, Ahsan Saleem, said that he and his five fellow founding members were “nauseated” by the large number of children begging in the street.

They set up the foundation after a dinner party conversation about the lamentable state of Pakistan.

The foundation’s mantra is “to do education on a war footing”. Its target is to build 1,000 schools by 2010 that would educate 350,000-400,000 pupils.

The founding members continue to foot the bill for 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the expense of building a school, which on average costs seven million rupees each.

Expatriate Pakistanis in the UAE pay for the annual running costs of about 40 TCF schools.

But there is a constant battle to provide the basics. "Many of our children at Machar are involved in peeling shrimps or do some odd job to help supplement the family's income. They get up at 5am to work," said Tasnim Jaffer, a senior volunteer working with TCF.

"There is no homework as most of our children are working children," she added.

The children, aged from four to early teens, earn 10 rupees for cleaning a basket of 200-300 shrimps and can make up to 50 rupees per day.

TCF schoolchildren pay between 10 rupees to 175 rupees each month for primary education and between 20 rupees and 250 rupees for secondary education, depending on their family's income.

In some exceptional cases, such as for orphans, they pay no fee. But the foundation charges a token amount to foster commitment among pupils. Even young shrimp peelers pay for their own schooling.

The fees pay for teaching, uniforms, books and a weekly dietary supplement of biscuits and milk.

The TCF education starts with a solid grounding in all the core subjects but also makes sure that personal hygiene is ingrained in a child.

"Our emphasis is not on rote learning but on an entire upbringing. You cannot imagine the pressure put on us from parents to take their children.

"What we are doing is opening their minds to a better standard of living," Mrs. Jaffer said.

TCF students, who have the benefit of fully equipped science laboratories, have won scholarships to further education and several are now studying engineering and medicine at university.