

# **Pakistan: NWFP's Mad Mullahs are public a health hazard**

Saturday 24 February 2007, by [Dawn \(Pakistan\)](#), [Khaleej Times](#), [The News \(Pakistan\)](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2007).

## Contents

- [DEBILITATING SCAREMONGERING](#)
- [MURDERED FOR FIGHTING POLIO](#)
- [FIGHTING POLIO ON TWO FRONTS](#)

## DEBILITATING SCAREMONGERING

**Khaleej Times Online, 16 February 2007**

### EDITORIAL

THE news that parents disallowed approximately 24,000 children in northern Pakistan to be administered polio vaccines last month on hard-line religious grounds is disturbing and needs immediate attention.

The refusal seems to stem from some radical clerics' propaganda that the vaccine is an American plot to sterilise Pakistan's coming generations. In addition to highlighting these clerics' hold and influence in some of Pakistan's far-flung areas, this development should also prompt a serious investigation into other realities influencing this malaise.

A clear pattern reveals itself upon close examination. It comes as little surprise that both the rise in recorded polio cases as well as the support for the clerics' stance are concentrated in the frontier province. And there too, the higher percentage is in the bordering areas with Afghanistan, the troublesome area widely blamed for harbouring Taleban remnants and abetting terrorist activity.

As Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has repeatedly implied, the only credible cure for indoctrination instilled hatred and ignorance can

come from targeting the root, basic causes of the problem. These are the very places where careful and deliberate indoctrination was carried out, backed by domestic and international agencies, to produce warrior-cleric prototypes which proved successful in generating the storm that flushed the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

The haste with which the US abandoned the region once its purpose was served left a discomfoting vacuum inside Afghanistan which automatically became these experimental jihadists' next target. And to ensure they survive and thrive, they set up institutions within themselves that guarantee self-perpetuation of their extremist dogma.

The West's attention didn't return to this area till the venom they gave root to eventually came to haunt them in their own home. And as their fearsome-to-all military might continues to fail in delivering the death blow, they are finding out a complex web of international proportions that has already been put in place by these apparently little-knowing self-styled clerics. Notably, they have evolved into a complex, uncompromising entity, with little scope or appreciation for modern enlightenment.

The polio-vaccination-refusal is just one aspect of their detrimental, regressive philosophy. To counter it, the authorities need to seriously put together knowledge-based educational programmes. They must also realise that their recent approach of subduing these extremist people has only added fuel to their debilitating scaremongering fire.

---

## **MURDERED FOR FIGHTING POLIO**

**The News, February 17, 2007**

Editorial

It started as another of those "conspiracy theories" — in this case the firm belief among clerics in Bajaur Agency that the drops of polio vaccine given to infants were actually part of a western plot to reduce the population of Muslims.

On Friday it ended up with the meticulously planned murder of a surgeon promoting an anti-polio campaign. Dr Abdul Ghani Khan was returning to the agency's headquarter, Khaar, when his official vehicle in which he and a group of health workers were travelling was blown up by an improvised explosive device; ironically, the same IED used by the Iraqi resistance against US occupation forces. Three of his colleagues were wounded in the blast. Dr Abdul Ghani seems to have been an activist against a disease that mostly strikes young children (Franklin D Roosevelt was one of the rare cases of adults contracting polio). The doctor's only fault seems to have been to try and convince the agency's residents to participate in the government's anti-polio vaccination campaign, for the sake and future of their children. However, this seemed to have been too much for the obscurantists and extremists in the area who obviously saw what the good doctor was doing as something that necessitated the taking of his life.

The ludicrousness of this paranoia is borne by the fact that in the past few years, because of these drops, the number of polio cases has gone down dramatically in Pakistan, one of only about half-a-dozen countries in Asia and Africa where the disease hasn't been wiped out. Equally dramatic, of course, has been the rise in the country's population. At the time of the secession of East Pakistan, the combined population of the wings was about 100 million; 35 years later what was then West Pakistan is bursting at its seams with more than 150 million people. But that's what the conservative elements want anyway. "A person is born with one stomach," they point out, despite the rampant unemployment "and two hands to earn with".

Thank goodness, "the west" — the World Health Organisation, to be specific — eradicated smallpox 30 years ago around the globe. At that time Pakistan was incomparably open-minded and tolerant, and far more peaceful, in relation to what it is these days, because the influence of the clerics had been minimal. If smallpox were still a threat now, doctors like Dr Ghani would have been accused by the fanatics of injecting "family-planning medicine" into people's arms — at the behest of the west. As for the west, how

did it eliminate polio in its own countries if not through the same vaccine that is supposedly poisoning our infants? Whichever way one looks at it, the Bajaur clerics' attitude towards polio is laughable. Incidentally, Khaar, the Agency's chief town, is the very place where barbers have been recently banned from shaving men. But it's a grave matter now, with members of the fanatical fringe murdering and maiming healers doing their duty. The government will have to take effective action to trace the murderers of Dr Abdul Ghani. But first it should make the safety of those conducting the new campaign absolutely certain.

---

## **FIGHTING POLIO ON TWO FRONTS**

**Dawn, 23 February 2007**

Editorial

THE MMA government in the NWFP has to step in and stop certain clerics' drivel on the polio vaccination or run the risk of facing a serious health crisis they may find difficult to deal with. Already their inaction has cost lives — 39 polio cases were reported last year in the province. But the incidence of the disease cannot be brought down without dealing with the vicious campaign of falsehood and canard being carried out by a section of the clerics bent on frustrating the anti-polio drive. Having access to illegal radio stations to spew their venom, such elements are determined to go to any extent to stop the spread of what they call the "infidel vaccine". The killing of a doctor earlier this week in Bajaur is proof of their viciousness. And now a cleric in a village in Swat is preaching that Islam prohibits finding a cure for a disease before its outbreak in the form of an epidemic and that those who die in an outbreak are martyrs. Such ludicrous claims have produced expected results: during an anti-polio campaign on Wednesday and Thursday in Swat, some refused to have their children vaccinated. It is difficult to reason with such illiterate fanatics but the government will have to find a way to win

over support in favour of an enlightened view of things. As it is, health officials in certain areas have postponed the anti-polio campaign for security reasons after the doctor's death in Bajaur. If put off indefinitely, this could have disastrous effects.

The authorities cannot allow clerics to hijack a public campaign and jeopardise children's health and well-being in the process. They have a responsibility to contain the polio virus and must press ahead with the goal of a polio-free Pakistan. Each time a polio case is detected, it is a reminder of the government's failure to implement a comprehensive strategy to wipe out the disease. A more effective approach is needed to achieve the goal.

---

**P.S.**

\* Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | February 24, 2007 | Dispatch No. 2365 - Year 9.