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PAKISTAN AND ITS CRISES: A JOURNALIST'S VIEW

Dr. Farzana Shaikh

Associate Fellow, Asia Programme, Chatham House

Qatrina Hussain

Director, Current Affairs, Express News

Mustafa Qadri

Journalist, The Guardian, Radio Australia, The Diplomat

Beena Sarwar

Special Projects (Aman Ki Asha), The News International; India-Pakistan peace activist

Rahimullah Yusufzai

Executive Editor, Peshawar, The News

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Introduction: Dr. Farzana Shaikh

Good evening and welcome all of you. My name is Farzana Shaikh and I'm an associate fellow here at Chatham House. So ladies and gentlemen it gives me very great pleasure today to have in our midst a team of Pakistan's finest journalists who have all made their mark as some of the most astute, perceptive and independent-minded commentators of this complex country. Our guests – television anchor Qatrina Hussain, freelance columnist Mustafa Qadri, newspaper editor Rahimullah Yusufzai and documentary filmmaker Beena Sarwar – have set themselves a formidable challenge for they aim to wrestle with and hopefully resolve for us today that most phony question that plagues us all: Does Pakistan have an image problem and, if so, why? Does the country's unenviable reputation as the most dangerous place in the world stem from ill-founded perceptions encouraged by a hostile media abroad or is it, in fact, rooted in the realities of present day Pakistan? It is precisely this gap between perceptions and realities with regard to Pakistan that will set the agenda for today's meeting and that will be addressed by each of our speakers before, of course, we broaden this discussion to encourage questions from the floor. So without any further ado, let me hand over to Mustafa Qadri on my left.

Mustafa Qadri:

I suppose, Farzana, you have thrown down the gauntlet to us. Everyone wants to know what's happening in Pakistan, I suppose. We will try our best to demystify Pakistan. I'm an independent journalist based in Pakistan and I write for a number of agencies including *The Guardian*, *The Australian* and Radio National Australia. I've also organized this event and two other events later in the week. The thought behind that was in a way simple, in a way not so obvious. At the moment, there is so much interest in Pakistan and it's very common to have events discussing Pakistan with experts on the country in London and other international capitals, but one thing I find that is quite sparse is an event where thoughtful Pakistanis and only thoughtful Pakistanis talk about their country. That's basically why I

organized this event today. When I set about to do this task, I thought we needed to have really professional – the best journalists available in Pakistan, people who are the best in their field, veteran journalists and people who really report from the front line. That's why we have Qatrina, Beena and Rahimullah with us today. So I hope I can get all of this right. I'll just give you a very brief introduction to who they are.

Qatrina Hussain is one of the most eloquent voices on Pakistan in television. Her *Sayasi Log* current affairs program is required viewing for anyone interested in Pakistan's domestic or international happenings. She has interviewed British Foreign Secretary William Hague, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Of course, she's interviewed most of Pakistan's senior politicians and analysts. Tonight, she will be briefly talking to you about avoiding the narrative that plagues on militants' strengths. She'll basically unpack the idea that the current discourse actually promotes what the militants' agenda is and, in a way, stops us and Pakistan from finding a solution.

We also have with us Beena Sarwar. She's an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker who has recorded extensively on human rights, gender and the democracy movement in Pakistan. She's currently involved in a peace initiative between two of the largest media companies in India and Pakistan. Beena is also renowned for having some of the freshest insights into the subcontinent's oldest problems. She'll be talking briefly about prospects for peace between India and Pakistan, particularly with respect to the work between the two media companies in India and Pakistan.

And lastly, but not least, we have Rahimullah Yusufzai. For thirty years, he has been on the pulse of what's been happening between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was the first to report on the Taliban movement in Kandahar and interviewed Taliban Chief Mullah Omar and Al Qaeda head Osama Bin Laden on several occasions. He is basically the go-to man of international media, trying to understand and to report on one of the most mysterious insurgencies in modern history.

I think it's fair to say that journalists both from abroad and also in Pakistan are in the forefront of trying to understand the country. I think it's also fair to say that Pakistan's media is the most powerful institution in the country. At its best, it keeps the powerful accountable and gives a voice to the voiceless. At its worst, it has been accused of fear mongering and rebel rousing. I hope tonight we can unpack these contradictions and avoid the easy and usual stereotypes. Again, I thank you all and I thank Chatham House for having us.

Dr Farzana Shaikh:

I think we will all now to turn to Qatrina to set the ball rolling.

Qatrina Hussain:

Good evening and thank you so much for taking the time out to come and hear our views and share and exchange some ideas. My biggest concern these days as I continue to live and work in Pakistan is that whenever I talk to people who have never visited Pakistan or know very little about it, is the fact that everything they really know about that country is shaped by militancy, my terrorism and violence. If you ask anyone to free associate and you say the word 'Pakistan', they are going to say terrorist. It's jihad central. It's all those other words that are put out there. The problem with that is that there are 118 million people living in that country and you could put any number you want on the number of terrorists – you want half a million, one million – that's still a fraction of the number of people who live in that country. Yet, that fraction, that minority has become the voice of the entire country. I'm not saying at this point that there is no terrorism attacks in Pakistan. You see it in your newspapers every day. We live with it. We go through it every day. We deal with it. Our lives are shaped by it in many ways. But what is concerning me increasingly is that as I talk to younger Pakistanis, teenagers, people are in their early twenties, I begin to see a very conservative, reactionary attitude developing in the educated, younger – I hate the word – elite of Pakistan which didn't exist when I was a teenager. That was a long time ago. I realize that. But its changing and Pakistan is changing in ways that are scary and difficult to understand even for those of us who live there.

Part of the problem that I'm seeing is that this concept of Pakistan being the world's terror capital, the perception that Pakistan is the terrorism-exporting capital of the world – All of which has some validity. We all know that [inaudible] Shahzad came to Pakistan and got training there. We know the 7/7 bombers came to Pakistan and there are links, yes, but that is not the entire country. By painting the entire country with the same brush, you are in effect pushing people into coming very defiant and defensive about who they are and what they stand for. I have young teenagers coming to me and talking to me about their Muslim identity and I'm going, "Huh?" It was something we took for granted when we were growing up. It was, you know, we believe we are Muslims, so big deal. Today, this extreme increase where my friend's teenage daughters are now wearing hijab and their mother's don't and never did. So it's a sort of reaction to what they are seeing as a challenge perhaps to them. Now these are ideas, these are thoughts. I'm exploring this. I'm not saying that this is definitive and this is fact. But that is something that I think we need to be concerned about. We need to think about how we perceive a country and how we portray it so the perception shouldn't become the reality and that's what, in many ways, I think is happening.

After that, the frustrations of living in a country where the economic crisis is extreme. With the floods that have ripped through the country this year – and I cannot begin to describe to you in a minute or two what absolute devastation and destruction we have witnessed. Entire villages wiped out. Miles and miles and miles of crop land of standing water. Beautiful lush green and burnt [inaudible] at the base because they are rotting in the water. Two growing seasons [inaudible], rehabilitation and relocation of 20 million people in a country that had 48 percent food insecurity before the floods. So you can imagine the challenge that we are facing and when I say we, this is each and every one of us who lives there because everybody got together and worked as hard as they could and everything and the world has helped. I mean, I would thank every single person who has helped and we still need all the help we can get. Now, compound that with the fact that we've had a power shortage in the country for two to three years that has been so extreme that it has absolutely devastated Pakistan's

biggest revenue earner which is textiles and cotton fabrics. In fact, factories have shut down so unemployment is on the rise. Inflation is spiralling -- basic food, potatoes and onions and everything has doubled in price over a period of two months.

So we are talking about a country that is going through paroxysms of desperation, of frustration, of anger and that anger I fear could result in a backlash. Not just against the state and the representatives of the state but everybody who has and those who do not have. I for one will not blame in the least because we have pushed them and we continue to push them into places where they simply cannot recover. I'd be happy to go into more detail. I'm just trying to give you a broad strokes opinion over here and I'm assuming all of you here are reasonably aware of what Pakistan is but Pakistan's media, as Farzana mentioned, one of the things that you hear about – you see bearded men, you see veiled women. You don't see Pakistan's amazing music scene. You don't see Pakistan's amazing dance and fashion. Pakistan's Fashion Week has started and it is pretty riveting stuff for those of us. Ok, I'm not saying that fashion, for example, represents all of us. I just think that London Fashion Week doesn't represent everybody who lives in Britain. It is the other extreme that just simply doesn't get seen and the huge bulk in between – the kid who goes to work in the bank, the girl who works as a receptionist, a farmer who is worried about the crop. Who is listening to them? Do they matter? The more we ignore them, the more we create a vacuum which is being filled by militancy. Compounded with failure with governance, we are looking at a Pakistan that could conceivably be more dangerous two to five years from now than it currently is. I'll leave it there and I'll take questions in a minute.

Dr Farzana Shaikh:

Thank you, Qatrina. Beena, your turn.

Beena Sarwar:

All that Qatrina said, all that tonight's guests will be saying, there is just so much about Pakistan – it's just a very limited time. I've been

asked to speak about the India, Pakistan situation which is something that I'm working on.

So I'll just tell you a very little bit about that, just a little bit about the initiative that I'm working on so that you have an idea of what it is. It's called *Aman ki Asha* which means the Book for Peace and it is a campaign for peace between the two largest media groups of India and Pakistan – the Jang Group of Pakistan and The Times of India. This is the first time that two media groups in both countries have joined hands for any campaign. On January 1, when the campaign was launched, there was an editorial on the front page of the Jung publications as well as the News, as well as the Times of India, that was written jointly. This was the first time ever in the history of India and Pakistan that they had a joint editorial on the front page. *The Times of India* carried a front page editorial that said 'Love Pakistan' and they carried a series of articles and so on. So it started with this bang and it was preceded with a poll that was conducted in December asking difficult questions about India and Pakistan -- about what people said about things like the Kashmir issue and the relations between the two countries and all that.

There were surprising findings. For example, many of the people in India, the people polled – I forget the exact figure, but it was about 60 percent perhaps who said that the Indian government should engage with Pakistan on Kashmir to discuss the issue. Everybody was surprised because the feeling that you get or the perception you get in the media and everywhere else is that nobody in India wants to discuss Kashmir and they certainly don't want to involve Pakistan. So there were many surprising findings in that survey.

About India and Pakistan, I think most of you would probably know what the problems are between the two countries. Just very briefly to recap, is that we fought three full-fledged wars. We fought one war-like situation that was called the Kargil which was right after the nuclear testing, but we have continued to stay in a state of hostilities. We have continued to stay in a warlike situation because of which we have war economies. We have economies that are geared towards militarism, [inaudible] and basically shoring up the army. The food and security

that Katrina mentioned is put by the wayside and security is seen only as what is security vis-a-vis India. That is now changing slowly.

There is a discourse within both countries -- and I think *Aman ki Asha* has got something to do with that -- where we are saying security is not just about border security. It's not just about securing your borders. You have to have things like employment and food security and education and all of that. The hostile relations that India and Pakistan have mean that as the country next door to Pakistan, as Pakistan's big neighbourhood, with these floods that have devastated the country, one-fifth of the country is still underwater even as the floodwaters are receding. But one-fifth of the country from the north to the south, this huge area of land, is under water still.

We have received so many queries from India. People wanting to know, "How can we help? What can we do?" They want to send food. They want to send medicine. They want to send doctors. People want to come and help. But because of the relationship that we have, the Pakistan government is not allowing that, is not tapping into that resource and the aid that India offered was accepted after some bickering. It was finally accepted but they said it would go through the UN and all of that. So the relationship between India and Pakistan colours even a humanitarian crisis as big as the flood which is the biggest catastrophe ever to hit Pakistan and probably any other countries in the world. The situation between India and Pakistan is such that we don't have tourist visas between the two countries. I cannot visit India as a tourist. Nobody can come from India to visit as a tourist in Pakistan so that we don't know about each other.

So the misconceptions, the perception that Katrina talked about, the image of Pakistan -- you think terrorism. But next door to Pakistan, right there in India, people turn around -- When we went in May for an economic conference and we went to the Women's Press Club and we were sitting there, there were several of us and many of us were women. A journalist in the human rights press said, "I'm surprised to see so many women in your delegation. I thought that you guys were all in purdah." And you know we just burst out laughing. These are people, they are like our alter egos. India and Pakistan -- it's like two

sides of the same coin. We have our militants, yes, but there is what they call the [inaudible] in India. Terrorism is terrorism. It doesn't have a colour, you know, green, red, yellow, whatever. It is criminalized. It's criminal behaviour and it's been blamed on religion or whatever but it really basically just that – it's criminal behaviour which needs to be dealt with through a law and order situation. India and Pakistan could cooperate and really make a lot of headway on the issue of terrorism because that is the one major sticking points that we have during talks with India and Pakistan. They always talk about terrorism, but they aren't willing to concede that we have suffered more under quote, unquote terrorism than any other country in the world. We have lost thousands of lives, not just military but also civilian. As long as India keeps us at arm's length and does exactly what the West is doing which is, you know, "You are not doing enough. Do more," instead of cooperating with us, helping to strengthen our democratic political processes, then unless that happens, we are not going to make any real headway in that situation.

So in a nutshell, the real threat to Pakistan comes not from India which is where our entire, our conditioning all these years has been – That India is the enemy, textbooks, media, everything has been geared towards portraying India as an enemy. The economy, the military, everything. We have to face the real threat within which is not just the militancy and the jihadis, but also all the things that are allowing that to flourish which include food and security and unemployment and lack of education and all of that. IN a way, I think that if Pakistan and India were to behave as normal neighbours and live in peace, we could really make a lot of headway in really taking care of all of these issues. So I'll end there. There's so much more to say, but hopefully a lot of it will come out in the discussion afterwards.

Dr Farzana Shaikh:

Thank you, Beena. Rahimullah, now you will tell us about that real threat within.

Rahimullah Yusufzai:

Yes, I think I will talk about the identity of Pakistan because, as a reporter, I have been covering this area for so many years. My space is becoming limited. I could go to every place. I could interview Osama Bin Laden twice. I could meet Mullah Omar. I could travel in all the tribal areas in Afghanistan, but now I can't do that. If I leave Peshawar where I am based and I go to Khyber Tribal area which is the link with Afghanistan, I would think twice just because it is so dangerous to do actual reporting. You are depending on secondary resources. You can't do primary, honest work reporting any more -- it's so difficult -- which means you won't know the real situation.

The reality is so terrible and insane, but I tell you that the people who live in the tribal areas, in Khyber and [inaudible], you have heard about Waziristan -- it is always in the news. But if you go to Waziristan -- and I have been there very often, not to Waziristan proper -- the people are just normal people, just like us. And myself, a Pashtun, I belong to Mardan, near Peshawar. In Waziristan and all the tribal areas, there have been polls and people have been asked about their biggest concerns and they say, we want to educate our children. We want to have better roads. We want to have electricity. I tell you, they don't like militants, they don't like Taliban. If some people are still supporting them, it is out of fear because the government has let them down. The government is not there to try to help the people, just because maybe people are being held hostage in these places. If they get a choice, I'm sure they would not support Taliban. They would support the government. The government has to actually do something more.

It has been a story of neglect. For 63 years, these tribal areas have been neglected and I tell you, this is the most underdeveloped area of Pakistan in every respect. You ask the people in the tribal areas, the tribal elders, the common people, they will tell you, the few all-girls schools -- in the past, they would oppose girls' schools. Now, if the governor, if the [inaudible] and if the builder goes to tribal areas, one of the main demands is that we want girls schools. We want roads -- in the past, they would say that if the government builds roads, then the roads will bring the government. The government will come and we will lose our independence. Now, people want roads. They want

development, but the government has failed them. That's why there are problems.

I think we need to have help the tribal people to come out of the situation. That is very important and it cannot be done in isolation. There has to be a lot of inputs for everybody. It's not only the Pakistan government. The whole world needs to help the tribal people – about 6 million people, 6 million people who are being held hostage. This area as you know has become the centre of militants, of terrorists. They operate across the border from us in Afghanistan and it is a sanctuary now for many people who could easily cross the border. So that's the real problem there, but I tell you that in the whole province you have a people formally not a frontier province. People are fed up of violence. People are fed up of militants, but people are also angry with the government. We already had 1.6 million misplaced people in my province, but it was before the floods. Now we have more people displaced and all of these people need help to go back to their villages and their homes. Even those people who were displaced earlier, last year in March and April during the military operation in Swat and [inaudible], those people have gone back, most of them, but they are not being helped yet with the damages to their houses and properties. We are only paid one instalment of 35,000 rupees as an emergency help but they haven't been supported to rebuild their houses or rebuild their lives or rebuild their livelihoods. That is to be done, but that needs resources which Pakistan does not have and then we have these other people who bring displaced by floods in Peshawar and in Swat and in other parts of the province.

So we have these acute problems. I don't see that the Pakistan government has even the capacity or even the will to try and help these people. The world community has been of some help, but it is not enough. We have many issues of credibility of the government of that is one reason why there is not enough help but I think that if the people are left alone and they are not helped, then they will be many problems with which Pakistan will not be able to cope. We have an insurgency in Baluchistan, we have five military operations and even now, the Balouch people are the people who are fighting the state. They are not willing now to negotiate with the government of Pakistan.

The Pakistan government has been involved in talks, there have been reforms, there have been incentives but the Balouch people are not buying that. So we have problems in Baluchistan, insurgency in the north of the Balouchi borders and the tribal areas and we have now this flood which has misplaced so many people.

I think that Pakistan is in a very bad situation and we have not been able to resolve our problems with India. We have problems, issues, we have political instability. We have lack of trust in Pakistan, also, in the government that is an opportunity for the military to fill the vacuum. The military's image was really, really bad because of Musharraf but now the military's image has improved a lot because of the military operations against militants and also because of the military's relief work in the floods. So I am afraid that if the government falters, the government is not able to do enough, then I think that there will be an opportunity for the military to take over any time. But I think the military at this stage is not in any mood to take over because there are so many problems which even the military will not be able to cope with. So we expect the civilian government – the government must improve its performance, but in the end, I'll just say people in Pakistan, I must say, 70 million or even more, they are just normal people. We have militancy. We have all these issues with terrorism. But in fact the huge majority, they want peace. They want security. They want good governance.

