

Pakistan: Becoming confident over the years

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Organization **Sach Struggle for Change**
Location **Islamabad, Pakistan**



“What happened to me...is like a film that is constantly running through my mind. When I close my eyes, I can see it over and over again,” says 27-year-old Haider,* an Afghan refugee and torture victim now settled in Islamabad. Haider’s shyness makes it difficult for him to open up. He smiles nervously and his legs tremble uncontrollably as he tells his story.

One night in 1996, while living in Kabul, Haider was dragged from his house by representatives of the Taliban and held prisoner on the grounds that he was Tajik and an alleged communist. After nearly two months of severe beatings and torture, he was taken to a hospital in Kabul from which he escaped to Pakistan.

Haider is not alone. Thousands of Afghans living in Pakistani refugee camps were tortured during the civil war that followed the communist coup in 1978. There were reports of torture committed by and against the Tajiks and Uzbeks, the Pashtuns and the Hazaras. At one time, over three million Afghan refugees who had fled the violence were living in camps in Pakistan.

After the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent defeat of the Taliban regime, allegations emerged that torture had been committed by the occupying forces and elements within the Afghan Northern Alliance. While most Afghan victims living in Pakistan have had time to recover from their physical wounds, their emotional scars remain.

Today, Haider and others are recovering as a result of the assistance they have received from Sach Struggle for Change. In 1994, this Islamabad-based organization began working for the rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of torture. Each year, Sach receives funding from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture to continue its work. “This funding is very important to us because it is specifically for torture victims and it is secure money every year which helps us to run our rehabilitation programme,” says Khalida Salimi, the Executive Director and founder of Sach.

Khalida notes, “our first interaction with torture victims is always from the medical point of view. Our doctors assess the victims and then recommend counselling and

* Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

physiotherapy along with a psychiatric evaluation. We currently have a team of four doctors, three counsellors, one physiotherapist and a Chinese traditional healer who work together on each case ...throughout the rehabilitation process.” As the work is emotionally taxing, Sach has recently initiated staff training called “Care for caregivers” which provides practical advice on how to diffuse stress.

Rabia Fazal, the physiotherapist at Sach, works with victims who suffer from unhealed wounds, infections, swollen joints, chronic pain, muscle numbness and damaged kidneys as a result of torture. In Haider’s case, beatings would begin at 11 each night and would last until dawn or until he was unconscious. “They would ask me questions like, ‘Why are you a Tajik?’ or ask me to give them names and addresses of other Tajiks. I had no reply for them so the beatings continued,” says Haider. After 50 days in captivity, the Taliban sent him to the hospital. “I thought I was going to die, but I was conscious enough to give the doctor my father’s phone number.” Haider’s father paid the doctor and secured his son’s release. With his feet bundled in bandages, Haider and [his wife] Farah were immediately put on a bus for Peshawar in north-west Pakistan.

“When he came to us, Haider would walk on his toes, since it was too painful for him to place his soles on the floor. There was numbness in his calves, his muscles were weak and his kidneys were damaged,” says Rabia. Initially, he was hospitalized for kidney problems. Haider was also taught to walk again and he learned yoga for relaxation.

For expert psychiatric evaluation, Sach refers its clients to Dr. Rizwan Taj, the head of the psychiatric department at a nearby hospital, who offers his services to Sach’s clients at no cost. Haider has received extensive treatment from Sach since 2000 and is generally well adjusted. Yet, he continues to have flashbacks and requires counselling from time to time. He has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. “Just last week, Haider came to me in tears. He still has a lot of fears. As an Afghan refugee living in Pakistan, he feels a lot of insecurity,” explains Shazia Azhar, who has worked as a counsellor with Sach for several years.



Haider fears for his life in Kabul and there have also been two attacks on his life in Islamabad. Haider says his only hope is to resettle his family abroad. The UNHCR, however, has rejected his application. He is appealing their decision. “I’m scared. If something happens to me, what will happen to my children? They are afraid for me and pray that their father will be OK. I just want a better life for them now,” says Haider. “Even though my application was rejected, I am still happy for others when they are resettled abroad. I even go to the airport to see them off,” says Haider.

Haider lives in a small, rented apartment on the outskirts of Islamabad with his wife, Farah, their nine-year-old daughter and three young sons. Haider is the sole breadwinner, but does not like to be away from the apartment for long. He is only comfortable when he is at home with his wife and children. Haider speaks Pashto, Tajik, Persian and Urdu and is now employed as an interpreter at Sach. “We got him this job...to help him reintegrate into society. He is very good at his job and has become confident over the years. Meeting other torture victims is also good therapy for him because he says that he no longer feels so isolated when he hears others’ stories,” says Shazia. “Whenever a new torture victim arrives, he identifies with their emotional distress and really helps them to relax and open up and to share their experiences with us.” Haider adds, “when I see others in pain, I want to help them. I don’t want them to go through what I’ve been through.”

Close to 48 per cent of torture victims who seek treatment at Sach are Afghan nationals. Sach has opened satellite centres in refugee camps located in Haripur, Jalozai and Dera Ismail Khan in the North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. Although there is relative calm in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime is no longer in power, many refugees refuse to return to their home country despite increasing pressure from the Government of Pakistan. “The situation is not good in Afghanistan. We are much safer here in Pakistan,” says 50- year-old Ahmed Shah, who lives in Camp No. 6 in Haripur, a two-hour drive from Islamabad.

A cheerful man with twinkling eyes, Ahmed has lived in Pakistan for nearly 20 years and has built up a thriving handicrafts business in the local bazaar. In 1979, when Ahmed was living in the mountains near Kabul, he was arrested by the communist regime and accused of belonging to the Mujahideen. He was imprisoned for nearly seven years in Kabul and was regularly beaten with wooden sticks and iron rods. Once released, Ahmed moved to Pakistan with his wife and eight children. Today, he works as a volunteer with Sach which helped him build up his business through training in handicrafts and a small grant of PKR 8,000 (approximately \$133 USD) to buy raw materials. “I am very happy living in Haripur now. The doctors here at Sach’s office give us free medicine and look after us. We are very grateful to them.”

Ahmed’s 30-year-old nephew, Abdullah, recently arrived in Pakistan and is receiving treatment at the Haripur satellite centre. An ethnic Tajik, he was tortured in Afghanistan by the Taliban when they occupied the town of Mazaar-i-Sharif in 1997. He was arrested and then beaten for more than a month while imprisoned in a Kandahar jail. He has been diagnosed with kidney failure and his mother has offered to donate one of her kidneys to him. Sach is trying to raise the money for the operation.



“We have links with different doctors and hospitals in the area and they give us discounted rates for operations and treatments,” explains Shazia, who visits the Haripur camp regularly. “Ahmed Shah has really developed into a community leader. He has done well for himself and his large family. Our philosophy is that instead of giving the refugees fish, why not teach them to fish for themselves. Aside from the counselling and medical check-ups and physiotherapy, we provide the refugees with educational training and income generation training. Ahmed learned these handicrafts skills at our workshop and went on to start his own business, which is very successful.”

Most refugees living in Haripur are successful entrepreneurs and have developed thriving carpet-weaving and handicraft businesses. Although they visit Afghanistan regularly, most have no desire to return permanently. There are 20 camps in Haripur, where more than 30,000 Afghans live. Their homes are simple mud structures built around central courtyards. There is no proper sanitation system, yet they have access to clean drinking water through water pumps. Their biggest fear is being caught without their legal documents by local police.



Human rights reports allege that abuse of suspects in police custody is a systematic problem in Pakistan. One particularly harrowing story involves 14-year-old Samina, who is from a small rural community in Toba Tek Singh in central Punjab, and was a victim of domestic violence and police torture. From the age of seven, Samina was raped by her stepfather. At the age of nine, she ran away from home. When the police found her, she was taken into custody and repeatedly raped by police. This is alleged to be a common practice in Pakistan, where women in police custody without connections or resources are reportedly often raped. “It’s about power and control. The police feel the victim is completely helpless and in their hands and they can do as they like,” explains Khalida.

A local journalist visiting the police station noticed the little girl behind bars and published an article about her. Public outcry led the police to contact Sach which gave her shelter and assistance. Samina bravely told her story to the judge, who granted Sach protective custody. Her mother filed a habeas corpus petition to have her daughter released into her custody but the judge ruled that she should not be returned to the home where she had been repeatedly raped by her stepfather.



Today, Samina lives in a Sach shelter in Islamabad, and has begun to attend school. This painfully shy young girl appears frightened. She has suffered from bed-wetting, nightmares and feelings of isolation. “She does not like to talk about what happened to her and only confides in her counsellor,” says Khalida, who has taken charge of Samina. “Now, she just wants to forget the entire experience and not bring it up anymore. She is looking towards the future instead.” She was recently admitted to a

private school after intensive lessons allowed her to catch up with children of her age. Samina smiles when asked about her school. She says that when she grows up, she wants to become a lawyer.

There is hope for the future, however, as police stations in Lahore and Islamabad are improving their practices and their treatment of inmates. Sach is currently involved in efforts to train the police in appropriate methods of investigation. The response has been positive.

Sach is also working in prisons in Pakistan, where torture is alleged to be commonplace. “There are reports of beatings, humiliation, prostitution, verbal abuse and sleep deprivation. These are widespread practices,” confirms Khalida. Sach sends teams of doctors and lawyers to large prisons like Kot Lakhpat jail in Lahore and Adiala prison in Rawalpindi. “There is constant abuse of power in prisons and jails. The problem is that the basic rights of an individual are not protected.”

The Government of Pakistan has not yet ratified CAT. “Sach has been lobbying the Government to ratify the Convention,” explains Khalida. “We have organized several seminars and invited Government ministers. We have also started a media campaign to highlight this issue and are consulting with lawyers. We are hopeful that ratification will happen soon.”

Despite the efforts of organizations like Sach, victims of torture struggle to live normal lives. While Samina is unable to articulate her experiences, Haider offers us a glimpse of his suffering. “I think today, I am only 20 per cent alive. The other 80 per cent of me is dead. I don’t know why this had to happen to me. There was no justice in it,” he says through his tears. “I’m still scared...I still find it hard to sleep at night.” Shazia places a supportive hand on his shoulder.