

October 10, 2012 | NY Times | Opinion
Her 'Crime' Was Loving Schools | By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Twice the Taliban threw warning letters into the home of Malala Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistan girl who is one of the world's most persuasive advocates for girls' education. They told her to stop her advocacy — or else.

She refused to back down, stepped up her campaign and even started a fund to help impoverished Pakistani girls get an education. So, on Tuesday, masked gunmen approached her school bus and asked for her by name. Then they shot her in the head and neck.

"Let this be a lesson," a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, Ehsanullah Ehsan, said afterward. He added that if she survives, the Taliban would again try to kill her.

Surgeons have removed a bullet from Malala, and she remains unconscious in critical condition in a hospital in Peshawar. A close family friend, Fazal Moula Zahid, told me that doctors are hopeful that there has been no brain damage and that she will ultimately return to school.

"After recovery, she will continue to get an education," Fazal said. "She will never, never drop out of school. She will go to the last."

"Please thank all your people who are supporting us and who stand with us in this war," he added. "You energize us."

The day before Malala was shot, far away in Indonesia, another 14-year-old girl seeking an education suffered from a different kind of misogyny. Sex traffickers had reached out to this girl through Facebook, then detained her and raped her for a week. They released her after her disappearance made the local news.

When her private junior high school got wind of what happened, it told her she had "tarnished the school's image," according to an account from Indonesia's National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. The school publicly expelled her — in front of hundreds of classmates — for having been raped.

These events coincide with the first international Day of the Girl on Thursday, and they remind us that the global struggle for gender equality is the paramount moral struggle of this century, equivalent to the campaigns against slavery in the 19th century and against totalitarianism in the 20th century.

Here in the United States, it's easy to dismiss such incidents as distant barbarities, but we have a blind spot for our own injustices — like sex trafficking. Across America, teenage girls are trafficked by pimps on Web sites like Backpage.com, and then far too often they are treated by police as criminals rather than victims. These girls aren't just expelled from school; they're arrested.

Jerry Sandusky's sex abuse of boys provoked outrage. But similar abuse is routine for trafficked girls across America, and local authorities often shrug with indifference in the same way some people at Penn State evidently did.

We also don't appreciate the way incidents like the attack on Tuesday in Pakistan represent a broad argument about whether girls deserve human rights and equality of education. Malala was a leader of the camp that said "yes." After earlier aspiring to be a doctor, more recently she said she wanted to be a politician — modeled on President Obama, one of her heroes — to advance the cause of girls' education.

Pakistan is a country that has historically suffered from timid and ineffectual leadership, unwilling to stand up to militants. Instead, true leadership emerged from a courageous 14-year-old girl.

On the other side are the Taliban, who understand the stakes perfectly. They shot Malala because girls' education threatens everything that they stand for. The greatest risk for violent extremists in Pakistan isn't American drones. It's educated girls.

"This is not just Malala's war," a 19-year-old female student in Peshawar told me. "It is a war between two ideologies, between the light of education and darkness."

She said she was happy to be quoted by name. But after what happened to Malala, I don't dare put her at risk.

For those wanting to honor Malala's courage, there are excellent organizations building schools in Pakistan, such as Developments in Literacy (dil.org) and The Citizens Foundation (tcfusa.org). I've seen their schools and how they transform girls — and communities.

One of my greatest frustrations when I travel to Pakistan is that I routinely spot extremist madrassas, or schools, financed by medieval misogynists from Saudi Arabia or elsewhere. They provide meals, free tuition and sometimes scholarships to lure boys — because their donors understand perfectly that education shapes countries.

In contrast, American aid is mainly about supporting the Pakistani Army. We have tripled aid to Pakistani education to \$170 million annually, and that's terrific. But that's less than one-tenth of our security aid to Pakistan.

In Malala's most recent e-mail to a Times colleague, Adam Ellick, she wrote: "I want an access to the world of knowledge." The Taliban clearly understands the transformative power of girls' education.

Do we?



Comments:

Javed Hassan | Karachi

Malala represents what the Taliban fear most - the social transformation that educated and liberated women can bring. Empowered mother, sisters and wives are the most powerful agents of moderation and progress in any society. In order to enable the many Malalas to raise their voice and attain their dreams, the civilised world must persuade Pakistani lawmakers to provide constitutional protection to such women. A line must be drawn and the state must be seen not to buckle when faced with orthodoxy and obscurantism. If Pakistani leaders fear doing so, world powers must force them to it. Aid from the US and other countries should be linked to abrogation of discriminatory laws. Life and liberty without any equivocation must be placed at the centre of the constitution.

Malala symbolizes hope. Her bravery stands in stark contrast to the pusillanimity of leadership and elite. It is time they either willingly bring about the required changes to the constitution or are forced to do so. Her example should not go to waste!

Jonathan Marshall
Bangkok, Thailand

The return of the repressed, prehistoric tribal sensibility that we call the "Taliban" is directly attributable to the fact that the people of the region are facing the same unrelenting, existential threats that their ancestors faced thousands of years ago. And modern warfare has set these people back even further. We have quite literally blown them back to the stone-age.

We have paid the price for this, but more importantly, the dying embers of modernity in the region (such as young women like Malala Yousafzi) are paying an even heavier price. We talk about the courage and bravery of our soldiers, but their heroism is nothing compared to that of the young women who are fighting against bullets and oppression with words and ideas rather than bombs. We owe it to Malala, and the thousands like her, to put down our destructive weapons immediately and join her fight and follow her example. Only progressive ideas can defeat regressive and prehistoric ideologies, and we need to put our full weight and treasure behind shining light on the darkness that the "Taliban" represents. We can't wait for the Taliban to surrender. Ideologies don't surrender or sign treaties. They can only be expunged and marginalized and driven back into the inner recesses of caves by better and brighter and more hopeful world views. We owe it to Malala to help her rebuild her country and regain her human dignity by being similarly courageous in the face of bullets and terror.

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Bob Prentiss
San Francisco

As disgusting as the Taliban's actions appear to a modern democracy, please don't attribute their stone-age actions to us. Sectarian hatreds and oppression of the opposite sex had been going on long before a bunch of Freemasons decided to create something worth constantly renewing, recreating and fighting for-ordered liberty with rights guaranteed under law. Those who must live under the iron hand of the Taliban should be so fortunate.