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INTERNATIONAL -- THE CONFLICT

Fighting the Good Fight

The Aga Khan's millions are helping improve Pakistan

Gari Khan is renowned among his neighbors for his moving recitations of the Koran. Regularly, hundreds of fellow Muslims gather to marvel at his performances. Khan, 35, is known for something else, too: His prowess as a beekeeper. Six years ago, he and his wife, Shamin, 28, got loans and technical assistance from the Aga Khan Rural Support Program to raise honeybees. This year, the Khans' Hunza Honey company repaid its loans and raked in \$5,000 in revenues. "Our lives have been turned around," says Shamin. "Before, we were traditional people growing our crops. Now we are thinking like business people."

That's an impressive achievement when you consider where the Khans live: in the mountain village of Aliabad, in Pakistan's rugged Northern Area. In this part of the world, people are lucky to scrape together \$100 a year. Remote doesn't begin to describe the Khans' hometown, a dot in the Hunza District, one of the most inhospitable and beautiful landscapes on earth, 16 bumpy hours by road from the capital of Islamabad. Until recently, the town boasted few real businesses, infrastructure such as electricity was nonexistent, and its schools were rudimentary. In fact, Aliabad and its neighboring villages were as poor as present-day Afghanistan, just 60 kilometers north.

GRASSROOTS. Today, the grinding poverty endured for centuries is a fading memory in Aliabad and such neighboring towns as Ghulkin and Karimabad. These villages owe their prosperity to the man who helped give the Khans their start, a moderate Shia Muslim living thousands of miles away in France, 64-year old Prince Karim Aga Khan. Since the 1950s, the family of the Aga Khan, who is spiritual leader to some 15 million Ismaili Muslims worldwide, has been devoting its considerable wealth--much of it donated by the Aga Khan's flock--to good works. The Aga Khan Development Network has spent millions over the years, bringing running water and electricity to remote hamlets, teaching farmers entrepreneurial skills, and educating girls.

The successes in such villages as Aliabad are especially important at this point in history, since they have helped curb the spread of radical Islam. Elsewhere in Pakistan--and Afghanistan--poverty has driven young men into the embrace of mullahs who fill their heads with perverse religious notions, press AK-47s into their hands, and send them off to fight holy wars. "If 15 years ago I had no education, health opportunities, or community support," says Ghulkin resident Mujood Ali, "I'd be one of the terrorists, too." Instead, he runs the microcredit scheme in his village.

What makes the Aga Khan's rural development work so effective is its emphasis on grassroots participation in setting development goals, the mobilization of community savings, and the development of civil society. Moreover, it lends aid regardless of religious affiliation. While the group originally focused its Pakistan programs on the 300,000 Ismailis in the Northern Area, it has since expanded them to non-Ismailis. Its grassroots philosophy could be a model as the world seeks to rebuild a post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Of course, it helps that the Aga Khan continuously pours new funds into his programs, relying on the donations of the Ismaili diaspora. Outside observers note that the progress achieved in the Northern Area is in no way free-standing. Moreover, the Aga Khan Network is the region's largest employer, with 370 on the payroll. "If the Aga Khan Network disappeared tomorrow," says an Islamabad-based U.N. official, "there's a very high risk the whole thing would collapse."

Still, it is hard to overstate the impact that the Aga Khan Network has had in that area. The group has built more than 100 schools for girls, developed dozens of small businesses, and helped construct bridges, irrigation canals, and mini hydropower plants. Its rural support program has introduced new breeds of livestock and better seeds, enabling farmers to increase yields and produce cash crops, such as almonds and dried apricots, that they sell as far away as Britain.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the Aga Khan's contribution more profound than in the schools he builds and finances. They are often the only schools of any kind in remote areas neglected by the government. Recently, the Aga Khan Network has expanded its education program by building elite schools for especially promising students, such as the Aga Khan Girls Academy in Karimabad, the former royal capital of Hunza. Located on a steep mountainside, the school provides a stunning learning environment at 2,450 meters. The stone and concrete facility boasts chemistry labs, a library with daily newspapers flown in from Islamabad, and a computer lab where girls work with Excel and Microsoft Windows. (The community only got phone service last year, and the Internet is still not available.)

ADULT TRAINING. A recent lesson featured a discussion of the life of Mohammed, and what he meant when he talked about

jihad, or holy war. "*Jihad* is a struggle against evil. The best *jihad* is a fight with ourselves, inner struggle," says 15-year-old Hussun Nawaz. After class, Nawaz and her classmates stress the difference between their education and the dogma taught at fundamentalist *madrasahs* in other parts of the country. "They're just reciting the Koran in Arabic, a language they don't understand," says Nawaz in flawless English. "Islam preaches to fight against evil, not human life." Fatima Raza, a 16-year-old who plans to become an accountant, nods vigorously: "Nothing in the Koran says we should cover our face or wear a gown from head to foot."

While young people attend school, their elders learn basic business skills from the Aga Khan's local representatives. The training stresses better crop and animal management, and making goods such as carpets that will provide income. Local microcredit facilities, in turn, provide both an incentive to save and a source of credit in regions where banks are nonexistent. From 1982 to 2000, some \$2.2 million was lent out in the northern villages.

While the bulk of these loans goes to buy fertilizer, seeds, and tools, more recently the credit has been expanded to support enterprise. A community-owned company called Hunza Threadnet turns out embroidered caps, bags, and carpets, providing jobs for 2,400 women working in their homes. Sales this year, the company says, are expected to reach \$50,000. The beekeeping Khans are considered role models of the program. Having paid off their loans, they now plan to boost the number of bee colonies they keep by 50% next year and then start exporting honey as far afield as the Middle East.

Only a generation ago, life in Ghulkin was a daily struggle. Today, the 1,000 village residents enjoy running water, electricity, and English-language schools. About 70% are literate--well above Pakistan's national average of less than 50%. "When I was young, there was only poverty and problems," says Ainul, a woman in late middle age wearing a traditional needlework pillbox crowned by a white scarf. "Now, life is easy." Easy is a relative term, of course. But even the rough level of comfort enjoyed by Ainul and her neighbors wouldn't be possible without the help of their distant benefactor in France, who has helped locals put into practice a moderate, forward-looking Islamic vision.

By Frederik Balfour in Hunza, Pakistan

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