

Pakistan's Days of Rage Leave Cloud of Uncertainty

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Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

In Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, markets and restaurants re-opened and shoppers and traffic returned. Much of the city had been shuttered since Thursday night.

KARACHI, Pakistan — The highway that leads from Benazir Bhutto's ancestral village to this, her hometown, is one long road of ruin. Here and there along a stretch of 200 miles lie twisted hulks of tractor-trailers, their contents spilling out on the highway, casualties of the riots that broke out after Ms. Bhutto's assassination last Thursday.

On New Year's Eve, as the last light of 2007 fell from the sky, piles of coal still smoldered on the pavement. Rotten oranges littered the road. A consignment of pickup trucks that the United States had bought for Pakistani law enforcement officials fighting militants had been picked clean; brakes, steering wheels, batteries had been carted away.

The truck drivers, most of them ethnic Pashtuns from the faraway tribal areas of the northwest, waited in vain for rescue here in the southern ethnic Sindh heartland. One of them had his left ear caked with blood; the mobs had pelted him with stones and then burned his coal truck, costing him his only source of income.

The road was a perfect emblem of the mood of this country, as it ushered in a new year under a thick shroud woven of rage and uncertainty.

“You don’t know what the next day is going to bring,” is how Sheena Hadi, 27, put it on New Year’s morning here in Karachi. “We are in a gray area right now.”

The gray pervades everything here, from the big, abstract questions about where the country is headed to the smallest, most mundane details of life.

Shops in Karachi, the city worst hit by the post-assassination violence, had been shuttered since Thursday evening. They opened for a few hours on Monday, only to close again amid rumors of another assassination. Those proved false, but under the present circumstances, when anything seemed possible, panic spread quickly, and residents scurried inside.

And so, as 2008 dawned and shops and restaurants opened, Seema Ahmed stepped out to do what she had never done in her 40 years in Karachi: stock up on food grains, in the event of another upheaval. Munizeh Sanai, a radio disc jockey, made sure to wear flat shoes in case she had to make a run for her life. And the family of Shoaib Umer, stranded here after its train home to Lahore was canceled Monday, spent the afternoon at the mausoleum of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, eating oranges.

The unknown had forced people to rethink their personal and professional calendars.

Ms. Hadi, a former teacher in Brooklyn who returned home four years ago to work for a reproductive health organization, said she had no idea whether the streets would be calm enough for her to go to work the next day. She feared for what she called “a complete breakdown in security,” and was faced with a quandary: How to balance her craving for safety somewhere else with her loyalty to this country?

Hasan Zaidi, 38, a filmmaker, said he did not know when he could start shooting his picture. “It’s a thriller, actually, but maybe it should’ve been a farce,” he said. Already, he had postponed a film festival that he organizes in November every year, canceled an annual New Year’s Eve ball and decided not to go ahead with his daughter’s birthday party next weekend. There was no telling what could happen between now and then. She would be turning 2, and he hoped she would not feel the difference.

Sumaila Palla, 23, went shopping in search of an outfit to wear to her college graduation party in two weeks. “Hopefully,” she said of the timing of her party, and then shrugged it off as normal. “People who live here, they’re accustomed,” she said. “They’ve succumbed.”

Down the street, in a cafe that had opened for the first time in four days, a pair of entrepreneurs, laptops open, were busy at work on a marketing plan for an anti-littering campaign in Karachi. It was a strange enterprise at a time when the city was littered with hollowed, charred cars.

But Tooba Zarif Husain, 26, and Salman Yaqoob Raja, 25, were unbowed. They said they hoped things would return to normal in a few months, once the elections were over. Theirs were rare voices of confidence in the ability of President Pervez Musharraf to restore order.

“It is the history of Karachi that things go up and down, but people have a short memory,” Mr. Raja said brightly. “They forget and get on with their lives.”

By midafternoon, in the buzzing aisles of a supermarket called Agha, Bushra Zaidi was filling her cart with ingredients for enchiladas and Waldorf salad. Ms. Zaidi, the host of a cooking show on television, said her recording schedule had been thrown off by the violence of last week. She would have to tape 30 shows in five days.

In the same aisle, Sherry Rehman, a spokeswoman for Ms. Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party, was stocking up on rations to take back to Naudero, where senior party officials have huddled in Ms. Bhutto’s country house since her death. Her cart was piled high with dried cherries and candles, mint tea and Pakistani pickles. She was looking for hairspray.

The party’s central executive committee was to meet Wednesday evening in Naudero to discuss how to proceed on elections. It had pressed for holding the balloting next Tuesday, as scheduled, but government officials said the elections would be postponed till February. A new date is expected to be announced Wednesday.

As evening drew close and the sky turned golden, on the eighth floor of a Karachi office tower Munizeh Sanai, the disc jockey, put on her headphones and readied herself for her daily show, “The Rush Hour” on City FM 89.

“Hello, hello everybody,” she crooned fast and sweet. “Strap on that seat belt, put on a smile, let me drive you home.”

Ms. Sanai, 26, deliberated about what music would feel right tonight. “I want to keep it mellow but happy,” she said. “People deserve a break.”

She opened with a song by Belle and Sebastian, called “The Blues Are Still Blue.”

For the last four days, it had been impossible to talk about anything but the assassination and the countless conspiracy theories it had spawned, and the subsequent ascension of Ms. Bhutto’s 19-year-old son as the titular head of her party. “Do I really live in a place where politicians are that ridiculous?” she wondered aloud, as she picked out songs. “Yes, I do.”

Ms. Sanai, who came home after graduating from Bennington College in Vermont, said she had already grown weary of trying to explain it to friends abroad.

Text messages came into the station. Someone wanted Led Zeppelin. “Hey M, we will get through this,” said another. “Please don’t stop the music.”

She played “Don’t Stop the Music,” by Rihanna, a track from the latest Robbie Williams album and “The Waiting” by Tom Petty. Someone requested a song by Frou Frou called “Let Go.” Someone else wrote: “Happy New Year. Please Play ‘Long Road to Ruin.’”

She shook her head. “That’s not nice,” she said off the air. “That’s not positive. No. It’s loud. I’m not playing it.”

The assassination coincided with one of the biggest rituals in her own life: her best friend’s wedding, a multi-day event that began Tuesday evening. Ms. Sanai had selected a medley of songs to which a dance had been choreographed. Security had been increased. Earlier in the day she had tried on the outfit she had chosen for the wedding, stared at the mirror and wondered whether it was the most sensible choice. “Can I run if I need to?” she asked.

Salman Masood contributed reporting.

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