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PAKISTAN: Looking to Women to Preserve the Peace

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KARACHI, Aug 14 (IPS) - "The idea is to ensure that a May 12 never happens again," said Nasir Aslam Zahid, former judge and one of the members of the Women's Commission for Peace (WCP) formed in time for Tuesday when Pakistan celebrates its 60th year of independence.

Though launched by the prominent advocacy group, Women's Action Forum, the WCP includes eminent doctors, members of civil society, the legal fraternity, journalists and ordinary 'peaceful' citizens to "counter violence through peace" and as a reaction to the May 12 ethnic violence that rocked Karachi.

"I think the urban middle-class of Karachi has a lot of strength and together with the civil society, we can demonstrate that dialogue, as opposed to violence should always be the recourse," said Tasneem Siddiqui, a member and a prominent development scientist.

With 'Puramn (Peaceful) Karachi' as its slogan, illustrated aptly by the Jehangir Kothari Parade, one of Karachi's most popular landmarks, the commission is rooting for tolerance. "Where differences crop up, tolerance for a diversity of views and identities should be encouraged," said a statement.

"Intolerance, hate and extremism that have gripped the city are eroding civil society, political, democratic and state institutions. If this issue is not addressed the electoral process, which is only a mode towards democracy, rule of law, rights and duties vis-a-vis the state and the citizen would attain irrelevancy," it stated further.

"We fear, if we don't act now, with elections around the corner, violence will erupt with the impact manifold and hard to contain," said Siddiqui and Zahid.

The May 12 feud left 45 people dead and over 150 injured when the Chief Justice of Pakistan (then suspended by President Pervez Musharraf) arrived in the city to address a lawyers' convention at the Sindh High Court.

"We just have a one point agenda, which is also our vision and that is peace," explained Kausar S. Khan, another member. "Peace is our goal as well as our strategy."

"Peace becomes the ultimate yardstick for assessing anything and everything. This is not to say that this task would be easy, but the very effort to maintain peace would hopefully make people a little more reflective of what they are doing," said Khan, adding that it would help guide human behaviour, especially in "skewed power-relations".

"We want to turn the clock back to the time when it was a dynamic, living and multi-cultural city," said Siddiqui, pointing out that since the past 20 years the city has been in the grip of intermittent violence with loss of precious lives. "Karachi is so prone to violence and strikes... the loss is irredeemable. During a strike it is the daily wage earners who are the worst affected. If they don't work for two days, the third day there will be no food for their children."

"It's everyone's city, and everyone has a right to live here in peace," said Zahid, referring to the May 12 carnage when the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the ruling political party in Sindh, declared that the city was owned by the Mohajirs (Urdu-speaking settlers who had flocked to Karachi from northern India following the 1947 partition of India along religious lines) and that no one else would be allowed to hold a rally in the city.

With stalwart male members like Justice Zahid and Tasneem Siddiqui as founding members, the question uppermost in many minds is why call it a women's commission?

"Women are less prone to gun-toting violent behaviour, less involved in power-grabbing politics and also suffer the most when a male member of the family dies as we saw happened on May 12," said Nasreen Siddiqui, the commission's convenor who feels the impact of violence on women and children is manifold.

At another level, she said, women's voices are better heard, given greater credence when they go to negotiate peace, even when it means communicating with the perpetrators of violence.

"Women (and of course many men) are more vested in peace than those who are vested in grabbing power. I think the word women will help keep WCP conscious of its own origin," Khan rejoined.

But are there not enough such committees and commissions saying the same thing? Nasreen Siddiqui thinks otherwise. "There are non governmental organisations (NGOs) working for human rights but there are none working in a direct way, dedicated to promoting peace," she asserted.

A case is now pending against the administration with regard to the treatment meted out to lawyers, judges, litigants and other officers of the High Court when they tried to attend on the morning of May 12. The court has also initiated a contempt case against the chief minister of Sindh.

Of the 35 questions posed by the amicus curiae Qazi Faez Isa, assisting the court, were the following: Who is responsible for law and order in the city? What are the responsibilities of the police and the rangers? Were the police disarmed on May 12; if yes, on whose orders? Were they standing as helpless bystanders when people were being killed and the city burnt; if yes, on whose orders? Who placed the trailers and tankers on the roads and how many? Who removed them and on whose orders? Was emergency declared at hospitals? Did the government do anything vis-a-vis the injured persons? What is the status of complaints filed with police in connection with May 12? As a first step the commission aims at initiating a dialogue with various political parties to adopt a democratic process and include peace in its manifesto while ensuring that its workers do not carry and use arms. "And not just political parties but we will hold dialogue with any other group in the city that WCP considers is a risk to peace in the city," added Khan.

"We must make Karachi weapon-free," stressed Justice Majida Razvi, a commission member, referring again to the May 12 events when young Karachians were seen brandishing sophisticated automatic weapons.

(END/2007)