

# The National

## War calls back princess to a long-ago homeland

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ISLAMABAD // When Zebunisa Jilani talks of her visits to the camps set up for the millions of people fleeing violence in Pakistan's Swat valley, there is anger and sadness in her voice.

For the story of Swat is the story of her life.

Had Swat continued to remain a princely state, Mrs Jilani would have settled down in the scenic valley as one of the royal princesses. But in 1969, more than two decades after the division of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India, Swat agreed to become part of Pakistan.

Since then, the valley has been governed by the federation of Pakistan while the original rulers of Swat – the Wali family – were stripped of any royal privileges but allowed to keep their honorific.

Although Mrs Jilani, 56, lives in the United States with her husband, an MIT graduate, and their two children, on hearing about the situation in Swat, she felt compelled to return to see how she could help.

"Swat runs in my blood," she said, pushing stray strands of grey hair out of her face. "When I saw the pictures, read the headlines and heard the stories, I knew I had to come and help. I just had to."

The childhood home Mrs Jilani remembers fondly is currently the battleground for what has turned into a protracted struggle between the Taliban and the Pakistan military. As girls' schools, sufistic shrines and marketplaces in Swat were repeatedly bombed, Mrs Jilani watched aghast as the towns she knew so intimately were reduced to rubble.

"It was so different when I was growing up," she said, sitting in a modest apartment in Islamabad taking a break from the hectic schedule she has carved for herself since arriving in Pakistan a couple of weeks ago. "Swat was a place of prosperity, progress and pleasure."

As the granddaughter of Miagul Abdul Haq Jehanzeb, the last reigning Wali of Swat, she lived with her grandmother and mother in the women's section of the Wali's palace. Her grandfather's lifestyle was heavily influenced by the British. "We had to get dressed up every morning and again in the afternoon for tea," she said, laughing at the memory. "It was so quaint but my grandfather was adamant and at the time, no one would dare challenge him."

Though the beautifully furnished but modest apartment in Islamabad where Mrs Jilani is currently living is a far cry from the palace she grew up in, she is still fortunate compared to the estimated three million refugees who have fled the fighting in Swat and surrounding areas.

Most are now enduring Pakistan's sweltering summer either in tents or living in cramped quarters with friends or relatives. Only 200,000, however, have been lucky enough to find space in the camps, according to figures by the Red Cross.

The mass exodus has been described by the United Nations as the "world's most dramatic displacement crisis since the Rwandan genocide of 1994".



A Pakistani man holds his granddaughter, who is suffering from dehydration and a fever, in the Chota Lahore relief camp in Swabi. Paula Bronstein / Getty Images



Returning from a three-day trip to the camps in mid-May, Antonio Guterres, the head of the UN's refugee agency, described the displacement crisis as "one of the most dramatic of recent times". In a statement issued by the UN agency he said, relief workers were "struggling to keep up with the size and speed of the displacement".

Though the US has already pledged US\$110 million (Dh403.7m) in aid to the refugees, and President Barack Obama is pushing to send another \$200m, for now a vast majority remain without food, clean drinking water and clothes, while children do not have access to schools or medical care.



Zebunisa Jilani, next to a portrait of her grandfather Miagul Abdul Haq Jehanzeb, the last Wali of Swat. **Muzammil Pasha for The National**

It was such stories that propelled Mrs Jilani back to Pakistan. After carrying out a listening tour she has focused her efforts on improving access to health and education in the camps, primarily in Chaddar and Mardan, in the North West Frontier Province, where the majority of Swatis fled to.

She has already established two mobile health units which provide the displaced with free medicine and health care and is trying to set up a school.

But for many of those living in the camps, the immediate struggle is for survival. Mrs Jilani recalls how she came across two young boys scavenging through the rubbish at one of the camps and asked them if they were interested in going to school.

One of the boys replied: "At this point in time, we just want to eat and live. School comes later."

In keeping with her grandfather's philosophy, she is trying to only hire Swati nurses and doctors, many of them sourced from other refugee camps.

"He always believed that the way to prosperity was for Swatis to encourage Swatis: that's what I wish to do."

Although she often wears a chaddor so that she can go unnoticed in the camps, she was recognised once by a woman whose mother used to work as a maid in her grandfather's house. Her own home had been destroyed by a missile. Over and over the young woman wailed: "Why, why did your family abandon us? Why did you hand us over to the Pakistani government? Why? Now we have nowhere to go."

Mrs Jilani said she was shocked by the despair exhibited by Swatis in the camps. During her childhood, Swatis were always so optimistic and hospitable.

Ulema Fida Muhammed Khan, a judge in the Federal Sharia Court said under Wali rule, the valley was completely peaceful because justice was speedily and efficiently discharged.

"Let's say for example that one guy was driving a tractor, slammed into someone's buffalo and killed it," he said. "All the aggrieved party would have to do is show up in the Wali's court and complain: the Wali would gather witnesses and if the crime was proved, he would order the guilty party to buy the victim a new buffalo."

It was the Taliban's promise for speedy justice which propelled them to popularity in Swat, and compelled the government to negotiate a deal with them which would allow the imposition of Sharia law. The agreement fell through when the Taliban reneged on the deal.

Mrs Jilani's uncle would have been ruler of Swat had the valley not become integrated into greater Pakistan. The 81-year-old Miangul Aurangzeb is still respectfully addressed as Wali of Swat, even though he now spends most of his time in Islamabad, where he lives in a two-storey house adorned by photographs of his meetings with dignitaries such as John F Kennedy and others.

"Disgusting" is how he describes the Taliban and the government's handling of the situation.

"I wish my country was better run. I wish there was no corruption and that we had speedy justice."

As moderate Muslims who comfortably wear both eastern and western dress, speak fluent English and love e-mail, both Mrs Jilani and Mr Aurangzeb represent a future Swat could have had if the Wali system had not been disintegrated.

Would the valley have been better off under them? Mrs Jilani looks thoughtful as she replies:

"If we were still in charge, we would have been very sincere to Swat. Pakistan had an opportunity to improve on such a marvellous system but failed. But I don't know – I don't know how it would have worked out within the larger framework of Pakistan's government."

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