

Private school solution to public menace

More students are enrolling in private schools in Pakistan, which are seen as an antidote to a decrepit government education system. The US is also investing billions of dollars in the country's private schools to erode extremism, writes NAHAL TOOSI

THE schoolhouse in Qutbal is so tiny that dozens of pupils have to sit outdoors. They're lucky if their teachers have more than a basic education. And the chanting of math equations and Quranic verses gets so loud that the children have a hard time hearing themselves.

Yet the pupils love the Islamia Model School, one of thousands of private schools popping up in Pakistan. Unlike at area public schools, Islamia's seven teachers show up regularly to work. Unlike at religious schools, its curriculum extends well beyond Islam.

Plus, it has desks and chairs, no small thing to the many poor families who enrol their children here.

Pakistan is seeing a surge in private schools, a trend some find hopeful in a country where the government education sys-



Pupils prepare for the start of classes at a private school in Qutba, Pakistan. — AP picture

tem is decrepit and the other alternative is religious schools, known here as madrasah, which offer little education beyond memorising the Quran and are seen as one source of militancy.

The United States, for one, said it planned to invest in private schools as part of a multi-billion-dollar aid package designed to erode extremism in the nuclear-armed country battered by Taliban attacks.

T.M. Qureshi, an Education Ministry official, said: "The quality of education in the public sector is deteriorating day by day. When there's a vacuum of quality, someone will fill it."

According to Unesco figures, Pakistan spends 2.9 per cent of its gross domestic product on education, slightly less than India's 3.2 per cent and well below the US' 5.2 per cent.

One reason education had historically been a low priority for Pakistani governments, experts said, was that the governing elite could afford to send their children to the best private schools or to academies abroad. Another, the experts said, was the feudal structures in the rural areas that gave landowners an incentive to keep farm workers uneducated and submissive.

Only around half of Pakistani adults can read, schools often

lack basic amenities like water, teachers get away with absences and the bureaucracy is cumbersome.

But since the mid-1990s, small, inexpensive private schools, once an urban phenomenon, have been sprouting in earnest in the poorer countryside, offering relatively affordable tuition, according to a World Bank report last year.

Between 2000 and 2005, their number grew from 32,000 to 47,000, the report said.

More recent Pakistani government statistics put the figure at more than 58,000. Around one-third of Pakistan's 33 million students attend a range of private schools, far more than the 1.6 million in the 12,000 madrasahs.

Still, analysts cautioned that insurgent movements emerged for reasons well beyond a glut of youth with little secular education.

"It's better to have private schools than madrasah," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, an academic and outspoken critic of the country's education policies.

"On the other hand, a lot of these private schools teach a high amount of religious content. It's not a full solution."

The Islamia Model School in Qutbal, a town of 5,000 about 40km outside the capital, Is-

lamabad, opened its doors in 2004, and now taught 98 children to fifth grade, said owner and headmaster Mohammad Yaqoob Khan, a 52-year-old retired government teacher. Around half the pupils are girls.

Students pay an average of US\$1.50 (RM5) a month in tuition fee. The subjects include Islamic studies, Maths, reading and writing, and English, the lingua franca from British colonial times that is still the key to career advancement.

Islamia didn't have enough room to add more grades, so older students eventually had to turn to the higher-level government schools or find other private schools, Khan said.

He said the government system was frustrating because there was little accountability and parents felt they have no voice in their children's education.

"We feel that we have influence in private schools. The parents visit here and ask about their children."

It was a similar story across the town at the Pakistan Public School, which is actually a private school with more than 300 boys and girls and charges nearly twice as much on average as Islamia.

But mothers collecting their children after working for

hours in the fields said the private option was worth it.

"The government schools' standards are poor," said Tanveer Bibi, who has two children in the school.

The resources and quality of the private schools in Pakistan vary widely, even within a town.

At the Pakistan Public School, teachers could earn more than US\$25 a month, owner Mushtaq Ahmad Khan said.

Islamia pays its teachers less than US\$10 a month. "It's pocket change," one Islamia teacher said.

A sliver of Washington's planned aid package would go into private schools, said an official with the US Agency for International Development. The official declined to elaborate, saying the planning was in the works.

Qureshi, the Education Ministry official, said he feared that outside donors could end up investing in a sector that had little oversight and often uneven results. Plus, it could spur the already lackadaisical government to do even less.

He said: "The private schools are not doing service in the true sense; they are commercial. If they are strengthened, the public sector will grow weaker." — AP