

UNHCR welfare center in Swat helps conflict survivors find new hope to live

SWAT DISTRICT: Shahnaz, a 22-year-old war affected young lady, has recently returned home in Kanju - a small town some 6 kilometers from Swat's capital Mangora in northern Pakistan. After spending three months as an internally displaced person in Peshawar, going through many miseries in this young age, she has now found a new hope to live.

While trying to survive conflict, poverty, displacement and a throat cancer, young Shahnaz has lost her father during the war in the picturesque valley of Swat district.

Her countless woes had stirred a sense of suicidal inclination in her young mind but she is no longer suicidal as she wants to live and this is because she got treatment and counseling from one of the UN refugee agency funded welfare centres in Swat.

UNHCR and its partners have established 15 welfare centres in Swat and Lower Dir where psychologists counsel people suffering from trauma. Community meetings are used to spread the word about the centres and the help they provide. More than 30,000 vulnerable people have been helped since November. Another two centres operate in Peshawar.

"Before the war started in Swat, our living condition was quite good and I used to study in school and wanted to become a teacher and help my family. The war disturbed everything," shared Shahnaz.

"On the other side, throat cancer had badly affected my life as I have suffered a lot," she recalls. Shahnaz had seven sessions of 45 minutes at the welfare centre for over two months.

She says during the conflict, her father was killed in shelling and nobody extended help to them. 'I cannot afford to live as our neighbors pay for our rent. Even I cannot afford to manage my food like juices,"

Shahnaz, under treatment for throat cancer, says their family spent some three months in Hayatabad, Peshawar with her neighbors uncle while displaced.

"Earlier I had suicidal inclinations but after counseling, I abandon those negative thinking. Now I am enjoying the real taste of life. I am really grateful to the doctor of this welfare centre, who taught how to live," she says.

Laila Shah Nawaz, a psychologist at Kanju Welfare Centre, says when there is any disaster, whether manmade or natural disaster it has physical and psychological effects as well.

"In Swat, the people of the community are affected by the conflict and they have developed some symptoms of depression and of PTSD. There are case of OCD, PST, Phobia, anxiety, some symptoms of conversion as well while we have some cases as psychosis, skyzophrenia and others," she says.

According to the psychologist they are giving the people self hope and self-encouragement. "Because of the psychotherapy and counseling, things are improving now."

Shahnaz, for now, is being supported financially by her relatives. Her mother bought her a sewing machine to help her tailor cloths for people and support her family. In future, she wants to become a teacher to support her family but her disease has badly affected her life.

"Psycho-social counseling has been a vital support that UNHCR is providing to the people of Swat," says Mengesha Kebede, UNHCR Representative in Islamabad. "The effort is focused to help people, especially women and children, to forget the miseries of war and displacement and be able to start afresh their lives."

Some 1.3 million people from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas remain displaced in various parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the new name of North West Frontier Province. They fled homes in Bajaur, Mohmand, South Waziristan, Khyber, Kurram and Orakzai in various waves as security forces launched operations against militants in the tribal belt.

Qaiser Khan Afridi in Swat

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