Testimony of Dr. Samina Ahmed, South Asia Project Director, International Crisis Group, to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Hearing on "Extremist Madrasas, Ghost Schools, and U.S. Aid to Pakistan: Are We Making the Grade of 9/11 Commission Report Card?"

Islamabad, Pakistan, May 9, 2007.

I want to thank Chairman John F. Tierney for holding this important hearing and inviting me to testify on behalf of the International Crisis Group on the threats posed to regional and international security by violent sectarian and jihadi groups in Pakistan and the network of extremist madrasas on which they depend.

The Crisis Group has been in South Asia since December 2001, and has published reports directly relevant to the issues under this committee's review. We are deeply concerned about the Musharraf government's failure to dismantle jihadi and violent sectarian groups and regulate the madrasa sector that helps sustain them. We also believe that the Musharraf government deserves an "F" with respect to the 9/11 Commission call for it to make the decision to end Taliban command and control, recruiting and training centers in Pakistan. Expanding on the multiple threats posed by Islamist extremism in Pakistan, my testimony will focus on the state of Islamic radicalism in a country which, given the right international and domestic policies and political will, could play a key role in countering global terrorism.

Religious extremism in Pakistan has become the focus of international attention in the wake of the attacks of September 11. More than five years ago, Pakistan's military government, in its role as a key ally in the war on terrorism, had pledged to curb militancy and religious extremism within the country and abroad, and to set Pakistani society on a sustainable course that would lead to political pluralism and religious tolerance. Although the Musharraf government has benefited enormously from its partnership with the United States, gaining billions of dollars in U.S. assistance as well as crucial diplomatic support, it has failed on a number of scores.

The Pakistan government has yet to crack down on violent sectarian and jihadi groups and to regulate the madrasas on which they depend. Many Islamist radical groups have been banned and then allowed to operate under changed names, including a number proscribed by the U.S. as terror organizations. Nor has the government regulated and reformed the madrasa sector, which remains their main source of recruitment. It has yet to make any meaningful progress in registering madrasas, regulating their curriculum, monitoring their funding, or checking their use in spreading political and sectarian prejudices. Extremist madrasas still provide and train recruits for local, regional and international jihads. Since Pakistan's laws on terror financing also remain muddled and opaque, madrasa funding remains unaccountable. This lack of government action is undermining regional stability, promoting extremism, and preventing the spread of democratic ideals in Pakistan.

Lal Masjid: Madrasa Reform on Hold

Nothing more amply demonstrates the government's lack of political will to combat violent sectarian and jihadi groups and to regulate the madrasa sector that helps sustain them than its failure to enforce the writ of the state against a jihadi madrasa complex situated in the very heart of the federal capital, Islamabad. Since January 2007, hundreds of hard-line male and female students from the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) complex which houses Jamia Hafsa (for women) and Jamia Fareedia (for men) have taken the law into their hands to protest the demolition of illegally constructed mosques and madrasas on state land. Demanding the imposition of the Sharia (Islamic law) in Pakistan, and attempting to forcibly impose their version of radical Islam on the country's moderate majority, they have kidnapped women after accusing them of immoral conduct, occupied a state-run children's library and attacked music and video shops.

The Lal Masjid complex is led by two clerical brothers, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Ghazi Abdul Rasheed, who had been detained for harboring and abetting terrorists in 2004 but were released after Musharraf's Religious Affairs Minister Ijazul Haq took up their cause. Lal Masjid's madrasa managers still publicly support the Taliban; and encourage their students to join the anti-Western jihad in Afghanistan. The two clerical brothers have even warned Islamabad that their 10,000 men and women students would launch suicide attacks if the state attempts to forcibly suppress their Taliban-style movement.

The Lal Masjid complex is state-run and state-funded. Yet President and Army Chief Pervez Musharraf's government has not dismissed the managers of Lal Masjid's madrasas from public service, let alone enforced the law. Instead, the government has agreed to rebuild the demolished mosques on state land, with state funding. In an attempt to appease Lal Masjid's jihadis, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, the leader of Musharraf's ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-i-Azam—PML-Q) has even expressed his government's willingness to take tangible steps to enforce the Shariah.

Lal Majid's jihadis have become the focus of international attention largely because this jihadi madrasa complex is located in the heart of the federal capital. But scores of other jihadi madrasas are thriving countrywide, promoting violent sectarianism within Pakistan and training and dispatching jihadi fighters to Afghanistan and Indian-administered Kashmir.

Five years after Musharraf declared his intention to crack down on extremist madrasas and regulate the religious education sector, his reform plan is in shambles.

- The amended Societies Registration Act of 1860, the law enacted by the Musharraf government for registering and regulating madrasas is riddled with loopholes and exceptions. This law does nothing to clarify the real number of madrasas. It also fails to generate any useful information about their activities.

- Despite bans and restrictions, the enrolment of foreign students is insufficiently regulated.
- There are no meaningful financial disclosure and oversight mechanisms of funding or other financial information. The madrasa law does not provide for independent audits or include useful information about donors or details of expenditures.
- Madrasa curriculum reform, or the government's scheme of 'mainstreaming' the madrasas, focuses on adding modern, non-religious courses but excludes the violent sectarian, jihadi content of the religious curriculum from its purview.
- Madrasas and mosques still disseminate jihadi views, despite laws against hate speech, through books, newspapers, pamphlets, handbills, audiotapes and videotapes.
- Madrasas run by banned sectarian and jihadi groups operate freely countrywide and continue to provide foot soldiers to radical Islamist organizations, for the jihads in Afghanistan and Kashmir and to al-Qaeda linked terror groups.

Domestic Extremism and International Terror

The U.S. State Department's 2006 Country Report on Terrorism has called Pakistan "a major source of Islamic extremism and a safe haven for top terrorist leaders". Senior U.S. military and intelligence officials, testifying before Congress, have warned of a resurgent al-Qaeda, aligned with local groups, extending its operations from bases in Pakistan to the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. With jihadi madrasas still indoctrinating Pakistan's youth, justifying the use of indiscriminate force on religious grounds, and providing recruits for homegrown terrorist groups, many with links to al-Qaeda, there is good reason for concern.

More than five years after Musharraf promised to crack down on terrorism and to end the jihadi culture in Pakistan, jihadi and violent sectarian groups, many listed as terrorist by the United Nations and the United States and banned by his government, have been allowed to operate freely under changed names or through front organizations. These include the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), renamed the Jamaat-ud-Dawa and the Jaish-e-Mohammad which calls itself the Khadam-ul-Islam. Their leaders operate freely, issuing public calls for jihad, with the jihadi madrasas providing their organizations an endless supply of recruits. The infrastructure of these terror groups and hence their capacity to mount terrorist attacks remain intact.

The Musharraf government's successes against al-Qaeda, including its 600 arrests, appear impressive but should be weighed against its failure to eliminate Pakistan's homegrown terrorist organizations with links to transnational terrorism. In fact, the divide between homegrown terrorists and al-Qaeda is artificial at best. Both are motivated by a distorted religious ideology and rely on terror tactics.

Most al-Qaeda adherents, foreign or local, have close connections with domestic jihadi organizations. A Karachi-based al-Qaeda linked jihadi group conducted the suicide attack

that killed a U.S. diplomat in Karachi in March 2006. Links between mainstream Islamist parties, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the second largest party in the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), Musharraf's coalition partner in the Balochistan provincial government, and international terrorist networks have also come into the limelight after the arrests of a number of high profile al-Qaeda operatives from the homes of JI workers, including al-Qaeda operations chief Khalid Sheikh Mohammad in 2003.

Yet Musharraf's government remains the MMA's coalition partner in Balochistan. The military government has also worked openly with banned jihadi groups including Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the renamed LeT, in the earthquake-hit areas of Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Government inaction and the military's continued support for jihadi organizations operating in Kashmir bears major implications for Pakistani, regional and international security.

- Sectarian violence is at an all time high, even in regions such as Balochistan where such attacks were once unknown. In July 2003, an attack on a Shia mosque in Balochistan's capital, Quetta, left 54 Shias dead; a Deobandi attack on a rival Sunni group killed 47 people in Karachi in April 2006; on 27 January 2007, a suicide bomber killed at least 13 people, including the city police chief, in a sectarian attack in NWFP's capital Peshawar.
- In the absence of a robust anti-money laundering law, promised in 2002 but still to be placed before parliament, terror financing to jihadi madrasas as well as homegrown and foreign terrorist groups flows unhindered.
- With the support of their local allies, al-Qaeda has revived and reorganized its base in Pakistan.
- Pakistan-based jihadi groups including the renamed LeT still conduct terror attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir; this terror activity could disrupt the normalization of relations between the two nuclear-armed South Asian adversaries.

Madrasas, Talibanization and Compulsions of Military Rule

After almost eighth years of absolute rule, Musharraf has yet to live up to his pledges to confront and eliminate Islamic extremism. This failure owes far less to the difficulty of implementing reforms than his military government's political compulsions. Musharraf has chosen to co-opt the Islamist parties that run Pakistan's jihadi madrasas to consolidate his regime and to neutralize his moderate political opposition. Whatever measures taken thus far to contain Islamist radicalism have been largely cosmetic, and primarily aimed at easing international pressure.

In 2002, the military government rigged the national elections. Musharraf's moderate civilian opposition, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League (PML-N), which dominated politics during the democratic interlude of the 1990s were marginalized. Even during the 1990s, efforts made by elected governments to rid Pakistan of Islamic extremism were thwarted by the military, including, for instance, Bhutto's efforts to reform the madrasa sector and Sharif's

attempts to subdue violent sectarianism. Their governments were dismissed by the military well before their full terms.

Under Musharraf, with the military's support, for the very first time in Pakistan's history Islamist parties, members of the six party MMA alliance captured two of the four provincial (state) governments in Pakistan in the rigged 2002 national polls. The MMA now rules these strategically located provinces bordering on Afghanistan-- the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan, where it is a coalition partner with Musharraf's PML-Q. The Islamist parties have repaid Musharraf for his support by helping him gain a vote of confidence in parliament, which extended his presidency until 2007.

Lacking a civilian constituency, Musharraf remains dependent today on the religious parties, particularly his coalition partner in the Balochistan government, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), the pro-Taliban party, and the major partner in the MMA alliance, to counter his moderate civilian opposition. The JUI runs the largest network of Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan. Not only are most sectarian, jihadi madrasas associated with the Deobandi sect, the JUI's madrasa network also provides sanctuary, support and recruits to the Taliban and their Pakistani militant allies. The JUI-led Balochistan and NWFP governments also actively promote religious vigilantism and are responsible for the creeping Talibanization of Pakistan's predominantly Pashtun tribal belt.

The military's policy of appeasing homegrown militants in Pakistan's tribal belt has focused on peace deals that have amnestied pro-Taliban militants. The military's virtual retreat to the barracks, ceding control over this strategic region bordering on Afghanistan to the Islamist radicals, has given the Taliban a secure base of operations. Emboldened Taliban and their Pakistani allies are now targeting U.S. and Afghan troops across the border and imposing oppressive Taliban-style policing and court systems in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The implications of the military government's policies are more than evident.

- Following peace deals with the military government, using the region to regroup, reorganize and rearm, Taliban and other foreign militants, including al-Qaeda are launching increasingly severe cross-border attacks on Afghan and international military personnel, with the support and active involvement of Pakistani militants.
- Appeasement has not only allowed local militants to establish Taliban-style governance structures, but Talibanization is also spreading into NWFP's settled districts.
- Taliban-linked command and control centers also operate from Quetta in Balochistan and Peshawar in NWFP, urban centers that are fully under the control of the Pakistan military, according to every knowledgeable observer, including current Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, former NATO Commanding General James Jones, the head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency and Chief of Operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lt. General Douglas Lute who have testified on this issue before the U.S. Congress.

Upcoming Elections and US Policy Choices

In 2007, presidential elections and national elections are due in Pakistan. If these elections are free, fair and democratic, the moderate parties, which retain the largest segment of popular support, will form government, and the religious parties will be marginalized, creating an enabling climate for meaningful reform of the madrasa sector.

The choice that Pakistan faces is not between the military and the mullahs, as is generally believed in the West, including the United States. It is between genuine democracy and a mullah-military alliance that is responsible for the religious extremism that poses a threat to Pakistani, regional and international security. Real reform of the Pakistani state and polity will only be possible through the strengthening of the country's moderate parties and forces, with free and fair elections as an essential precondition and first step.

To prevent the military from once again derailing democracy and to pressure it from abandoning its policy of using Islamist proxies to promote perceived regional interests in Afghanistan and India, the United States must send a clear signal of zero tolerance, as it did in the immediate aftermath of September 11, backed by the threat of targeted military-specific sanctions.

The United States must change its policy of unconditional support for General Musharraf; instead it should insist on benchmarks for tangible reform.

The U.S. should call on the Musharraf government to:

- Effectively regulate and reform the madrasa sector, and close all jihadi madrasas and those affiliated with banned organizations.
- Dismantle the infrastructure of groups banned under Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Law, prosecute their leaders and prevent members from regrouping and reorganizing under new identities.
- Immediately enact meaningful anti-money laundering legislation and sign the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.

The United States should:

- Make military assistance conditional on Pakistan denying the Taliban sanctuary and a base of operations on its soil; and ending Taliban recruitment, training and finances.
- Make diplomatic support and levels of financial support to the Pakistan government contingent on free, fair and democratic elections in 2007.