

# Alive and well

*Kashmir 24.05* Chris Cork *News*

**T**here is a roaring gale and driving rain, no flights in the foreseeable future, the clouds are almost down to rooftop level, the road is cut by landslides more often than a loaf of pitti and the cold of winter has yet to leave these northern lands. Blossom is flying from the trees and plastering the windscreens of vehicles as they struggle up the gradients on the KKH and people huddle out of the blasts of wind wrapped in blankets up to their eyes. And in amongst all this meteorological excitement there appears a bus. A bus full to bursting with foreign visitors, their pockets brimming with hard currency and their cameras raised in expectation of getting a glimpse of some of the most awe-inspiring scenery in the world. Whatever else may be happening in Gilgit tourism is alive and well and very much open for business in Hunza and Nagar, two statelets in the valley systems to the north of the town and jewel in the crown of Pakistan's international tourist trade. A jewel which is currently shining with less brilliance than it might.

The Northern Areas is currently in the process of strangling itself with its own entrails, and Gilgit, de-facto capital of the region and hub for trade, tourism and every other kind of activity, is very much closed. The army and paramilitary forces are conducting an operation in an effort to rid the area of guns and terrorists — a task akin to de-lousing a yak in terms of likelihood of success. The town is surrounded by checkpoints, all vehicles and persons are searched as they come and go, house-to-house searches occur daily, all banking services are suspended and phone communications cut and there is an atmosphere of fear and tension across the majority of the urbanised part of Northern Areas.

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Yet the urbanised areas are but a tiny fraction of the vast and imposing geography of these parts, and there are large populations and communities that live outside Gilgit whose lives have to go on whatever the difficulties elsewhere may be. They work the land, staff the health centres, deliver goods and services and struggle to keep body and soul together in an environment that is challenging even without the added ingredient of 'tension'.

The NGOs, well-adapted to local conditions, are taking a pragmatic approach, and the centre of gravity for the operations of many is moving to outlying areas, far from the troubles and in parts not shaken by sectarian strife or terrorism. The paralysis that grips Gilgit is an inconvenience but not necessarily a crippling impediment. A four-day seminar on women in politics was successfully held in Skardu recently, fifteen local women were trained as Traditional Birth Attendants in Nagar in the last month, eight blacksmiths attended a seven-day course in the construction of fuel efficient stoves and in the next few days a new Information Technology Resource Centre will open in Nagar — where the first Internet connection was established on February 22 this year. The local health centres continue to provide a quality service staffed by brave and resourceful women. Agencies continue to plan for the future and ensure that the troubles around them now will not interrupt either current operations or the overall development goals of the region. Trade and business, ever flexible and inventive in the face of difficulty, have likewise responded and begun to re-locate out of the town. The banks may be shut but the business of business never stops.

The Northern Areas is not Gilgit, and Gilgit is not the Northern Areas. Resolution of the issues that bedevil this part of Pakistan, that is not strictly speaking a part of Pakistan are years, possibly decades, away; and linkage to the wider Kashmir conundrum is a dead hand on the controls. The lack of credible representation at the Centre and a chronic failure by successive governments to even address, never mind solve, these issues is little short of a national disgrace.

Despite all this, much of the Northern Areas is alive and well, open for business and would be delighted to see visitors coming up the road again. The advice is — go round Gilgit, it's not very pretty anyway, come north and enjoy a warm welcome and traditional hospitality. You won't be disappointed.