

British students to change Pakistan's image



LAHORE: The 25 British students laughing over dinner at the Pearl Continental Hotel late Monday night were there because five years ago, Humayun Mughal's frustration with Pakistan's negative image peaked and he decided action was necessary.

"English people think that all Pakistani's are terrorists and want to kill them," he said. "It made me frustrated." "I came to the conclusion that if we can't have fair coverage by the press, we'll start the long route," Mr Mughal said, explaining he went through many futile attempts to encourage a more balanced media image of Pakistan.

Taking a different approach, Mr Mughal used his Akhter Education Foundation to run a competition specifically designed to encourage research and appreciation of Pakistan. The winners, six teams of students from British secondary schools, received an all-expenses paid trip to Pakistan. The 25 students were the winners of the second annual 'Experience Pakistan' competition. They were scheduled to leave for Britain on Tuesday after their eight-day tour of northern Pakistan, meetings with high-level political leaders including President Pervez Musharraf and the governors of the North West Frontier Province and Punjab, and visits to both urban and rural schools.

Joining the group for dinner, Mr Mughal said he was confident that while it may take many years, several more trips, and efforts by those who have seen the 'real' Pakistan to make the public accept a more balanced image of the country rather than the overwhelmingly negative one offered by the mainstream media, it will happen.

"It's a great multiplier. The influence of peer groups is much stronger than teachers telling you or someone else telling you (what Pakistan is like)," he said "I get satisfaction out of seeing these children changing their views. They come here as ambassadors of Britain and go back as ambassadors of Pakistan."



Chris Thatcher, one of the judges for this year's competition, agreed. "These students will be able to put aside people's misconceptions about people in Pakistan," he said. "If they go back and tell ten other people about what Pakistan is really like, that is 250 people. If that happens every year" there will be a change, Mr Thatcher said.

This year's trip to Pakistan was originally scheduled for April, but it was delayed by six months because of concern about how the Iraq conflict and instability in Afghanistan would affect Pakistan, he said. However, he and students said they did not feel threatened or fearful during their visit. On the contrary, he said, "It's probably one of the most friendly places I've been". He explained that people on the street were eager to shake hands with and exchange a few words of English with group members.

Joe Tracy, 15, whose four-member team created a website with audio supplements on Pakistani art, festivals, fashion and folklore, said he was surprised by the commitment to education Pakistani students demonstrated.

"They are able and they are doing very complex work in comparison to what English students are doing," he said, adding their confidence during presentations left the British students impressed.

He said he and other students were satisfied with the responses they received from politicians about steps to boost funding for education in Pakistan. "They said they are increasing spending on schools and education" and provided facts and figures to back up their claims, he said.

Mr Tracy said he was leaving with a mental image of Pakistan as a beautiful country with friendly people. Explaining how he will respond to questions about his trip, he said, "I'll say what an amazing country this is and how people have perceptions so wrong about it."