Monday, Jun. 09, 2003

To Have & Have Not

By Tim McGirk / Karachi

M.R. sits in a room that is empty save for a few chairs, a drained tequila bottle and back issues of *Handguns for Sport and Defense* magazine strewn across the floor. In his early 40s, M.R. (who only allowed his initials to be published) has the calm self-assurance of a skilled artisan; a mason or a carpenter, perhaps, a tradesman who is good with his hands. He is known—and feared—for those giant hands and his sweet, clear voice. "He'll be smiling and talking, and the next thing, he's breaking his victim's neck," a colleague says admiringly. "It was his specialty." M.R. is a hit man. And he kills with those sledgehammer hands.

Nowadays M.R. has moved up the Murder Inc. corporate ladder. He subcontracts his work out to a stable of killers, dozens of younger men who prefer a handgun to M.R.'s more intimate way of death by close embrace. He drags on a cigarette, and explains that some of his boys will offer a prayer for their victim, while others try to erase the murders from their conscience with hashish or sex. "Nobody is a born killer," he says.

Maybe not. But murder is depressingly familiar in Karachi; there were 555 cases last year, the most of any city in Pakistan. M.R.'s rates are 50,000-100,000 rupees ($880-$1,760) a hit—unless it involves a "prominent figure," which ups the bill to a million rupees. His boys also do a profitable sideline in intimidation; a Black & Decker drill applied to the kneecap has a wonderful way of loosening tongues and wallets, he says.

This Week in TIME

LATEST COVER STORY
The Coming Age of Arthritis
June 16, 2003 Issue
Past Issues

ASIA
- Saving Japan: The Class of '89
- Karachi: Asia's Danger City
- S. Korea: Spy Service Reform
- Burma: The Junta Turns Deadly

HEALTH
- China: Doctors' Ethical Dilemma

ARTS
- Movies: Enter *The Animatrix*

Karachi, a port city of 14 million on the Pakistani coast, where the Pab mountain range and the Sindh

Desert gather into a brick-and dust-hued urban sprawl before tumbling into the Arabian Sea. It's the battlefield in which an assassin like M.R. thrives. In Karachi you have ethnic feuds: gangs of Indian migrants versus the Pathans, Baluchis and Sindhis; you have extremists from rival Sunni and Shi'ite sects battling each other (lately, radical Sunnis are gunning down Shi'ite doctors and lawyers at random); and, of course, there are the radical Islamic groups that shelter al-Qaeda fugitives and are, according to Karachi police officers, helping them plan their next terrorist strikes. In April, a Yemeni national Waleed Mohammed bin Attash and several Pakistanis were caught during various raids in Karachi with more than 600 kilos of explosives. "This place is under siege," says Anwer Mooraj, a Pakistani writer.

Books: *Truth or Dare*
Books: Clichés of Thailand

NOTEBOOK
Pakistan: Shari'a Law Threat
S. Korea: Leaving the DMZ
China: Crackdown on Tycoons
Bangladesh: Dirty Bomb Danger
India: Rampaging Elephants
Milestones
Verbatim

TRAVEL
Thailand: Umphang's Bloody Past

CNN.com: Top Headlines

Breaking that siege is almost impossible in the face of endemic and systemic corruption. A few sordid examples: in certain colleges, teachers demand payoffs from students wanting to pass exams; some cops earn extra money by selling their bullets; and gangs, operating under the auspices of crooked bureaucrats, police and army-ranger elements, siphon off water before it reaches the taps of most Karachi apartment buildings and sell it in the city from tanker trucks, according to municipal workers. An industrialist who says he refused to bribe health inspectors saw his tiremaking plant shut down when they invoked a little-observed 19th century British law requiring factory walls to be whitewashed. On the Karachi Stock Exchange, insider trading is commonplace and conflict of interest is rife. Some of the exchange's board members are also leading brokers, and they are able to change regulations overnight to bankrupt an outsider trying to deal in a company's shares. Brokers sometimes vanish with their investors' portfolios, and no investor has ever won a case against a crooked dealer.

In the courts, it is common for a defense lawyer to pay off witnesses, the judge and even the prosecutor to obtain a favorable verdict for his client. In the end, some would-be litigants find it is cheaper, and more effective, simply to hire a hit man. "Karachi today," says Tariq Amin, a fashion stylist and prominent social commentator, "is like Chicago in the days of Al Capone mixed in with the Middle Ages."

In other words, it's a dangerous mess. And with terrorism breeding in enclaves across the city, Karachi has the potential to spread its menace not only throughout Pakistan but far beyond its frontiers. Several of the top al-Qaeda agents captured by Pakistani officials and the FBI had holed up in Karachi, and many—maybe

even Osama bin Laden himself—may still be lurking there, officials say.

How did Karachi become a megalopolis of mayhem? In 1947, when Britain spilt the Raj into India and Pakistan, modern Karachi, more than any other city, was a by-product of this upheaval. Before partition, its inhabitants included Hindus, Parsis, Muslim traders, Goans, and Sheedis, descendants of African slaves shipped over in chains during the 18th century. An illustration of Karachi's surviving cultural diversity: at a one-room shrine that has more to do with African tribalism than Islam, women flock to see Mushkan, a male Sheedi medium in white, womanly robes. When he goes into a trance, he says he communicates with his jinni in Arabic, Urdu and Swahili. Karachi's demons, it seems, are cosmopolitan.

At partition, most of Karachi's 440,000 population of Hindus had left and were replaced by 1.2 million Mohajirs, or Indian migrants. They had followed the dream of Pakistan's founding father, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, to create a nation for Muslims. But the Mohajirs were in for a rude shock. Many of the local Punjabis, Sindhis and Pathans regarded them as unwanted trespassers. They still do, except nowadays the Mohajirs have earned wary respect by carrying out vicious ethnic warfare in Karachi throughout the early 1990s. The Pathans and the Sindhis retaliated but the Mohajirs matched them murder for murder, operating torture cells. Today Karachi is in the grips of the Mohajir godfather, Altaf Hussain, a fugitive in Britain charged with more than 100 counts of murder, sabotage and arson, who continues to rule the city from afar.

Like so much of Central Asia, contemporary Karachi is also a product of the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and the jihad declared by much of the Muslim world in response. To fund their campaign against the Russian occupiers, Afghan warlords used Pakistan as a transshipment point for heroin and Karachi as a major point of export. Paid for in part by those narco-dollars were the vast shipments of small arms and Stinger missiles passing the other way through Karachi before being loaded onto trucks bound for Peshawar and eventually camels headed for Afghanistan's interior. Those drugs and the guns left a toxic residue that would become, for Karachi, a permanent blight. Karachi, like Pakistan itself, also suffers from an identity crisis. Aside from Israel (though Pakistanis hate to be reminded of this), Pakistan is the only modern nation forged primarily out of faith. The problem plaguing Pakistan remains that its founders never agreed whether it should be a relaxed country whose citizens happen to be Muslims or an austere Islamic state adhering to Shari'a law. This ambiguity is responsible for the ongoing tug-of-war between the country's religious extremists and Westernized moderates; Karachi embodies these contradictions. As sociologist Arif Hassan of the nongovernmental organization Urban Resource Center puts it, "For Karachi's youth, there are two choices: go to America or join the jihad."

These ideological fault lines translate at ground level into real, geographical divisions. The poor, who tend to be more fundamentalist, live mostly in dust-blown shanties on the outskirts of town. There, they clan together, Pathans with Pathans, Baluchis with Baluchis, seeking to replicate their tribal life from their homelands. In some ghettos the clergymen have banned television, women wear burqas and the only education on offer for youngsters is the mesmeric recitation of the Koran at local madrasahs. Crimes are

punished by elders inside the community according to Koranic law, and the police never hear about the transgressions or the rough justice.

The rich and influential live in the Defence and Clifton suburbs, in the latter along a wide, crescent shore, in faux Grecian- or Californian-style mansions. Every few years their walls grow taller—concrete evidence of the rising tide of instability that engulfs Karachi. The latest fad among the very wealthy is to have a lion cub or a Siberian crane (an endangered species), which clacks loudly when a stranger approaches, roaming in the garden. In a country where more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line, many of the wealthy believe in enhancing their status by importing Filipina maids. The spoiled kids hang out at Karachi's single mall, listen to heavy metal, and some of them form gangs with cry-tough names such as 9mm, Kryptonite and Outsiders. Every so often, they'll rumble over a girl and arrange for their bodyguards to trade a few punches in the KFC parking lot. There are no burqas here: the girls wear tight jeans; their mothers prefer designer *salwar kameez* of watered silk and diamant— Chanel sunglasses.

Here, Islamic prohibitions are the distant constraints of life in the colorless slums. "What do you want?" asks stylist Amin, who looks like a brawny pirate. He has two silver rings in one ear and dark eyebrows arched like two hissing cats. He picks up his cell phone and jokingly plays the part of a low-life genie: "A Russian hooker who looks like Pamela Anderson? Ecstasy? A bottle of Black Label? An AK-47, or a 40-carat diamond? It's all here—just a phone call away." In his sleek, black outfits and his silver bracelets, Amin is a familiar figure at Karachi's private parties and rave clubs, which never advertise or display signs and are set back from the street in high-walled compounds beyond the hearing of mullahs or cops looking to shake down a few rich kids. Ecstasy and ketamine are the drugs of choice. Back home in their mansions, the —lite space out in other ways, too: staring for hours at the TV. "What we have is the satellite television culture," says artist Unvar Shafi Khan. Amin agrees. "It's never about individuality. Women in their 40s say, 'Make me look like *Dynasty* [a 1980s soap opera],' and their daughters want their hair styled like the girls' in Friends," says Amin.

Bombs may be detonating, journalists beheaded or neighbors kidnapped, but for the people of Clifton and Defence, this violence seldom penetrates their cocoon. They simply build their garden walls a few meters higher or buy another lion cub, this one in darker brown, perhaps, to match that Gucci purse. They're blithely unaware, for example, that when Qari Shafiqur Rehman, a Koranic teacher with burning eyes and a coal-black beard, walks by a McDonald's and sees these affluent Karachiites chowing down their Happy Meals, he feels "a deep rage" rising within himself. Rehman also belongs to Sipah-e-Sabah, an outlawed extremist group associated with a string of killings and bombings across the city, so his fury should be taken seriously.

Occasionally, reality does intrude into this TV-inspired and narcotics-fueled never-never-land of Karachi's pampered —lite. After Islamic terrorists exploded a car bomb outside the U.S. consulate last year, members strolling on the flower-banked lawn at the colonial-era Sind Club nearby found the severed arm of a woman, with lacquered fingernails and bangles, which had been blown over the wall. The woman was one of the 12

fatalities, and 43 others were wounded in the consulate attack. Club president, Hussain Haroon, whose family owns the English-language *Dawn* newspaper and has been prominent in Karachi for more than 150 years, says glumly, " With the Sind Club, I feel like I'm protecting an island in a sea of anarchy."

Yet no matter how imperiled a Karachiite might feel, calling the cops is seldom an option. Too often, the lawmen are part of the problem. "You have to realize," says a land developer, "that police stations have no money, not even to change a light bulb or put gas in their cars." As a result, he says, police stations become "revenue-generating centers" and catching thieves and murderers is a secondary occupation. Police earn money by shaking down prostitution and gambling rings, and they will often demand a bribe even to register a complaint for burglary. A constable's monthly wage is only $69; a typical middle-class salary in Karachi is $2,000 a year. Some policemen also perform special favors for politicians and influential businessmen. Wiretapping a pol's rivals is a big moneyspinner. An assassin (TIME agreed not to publish his name) claims that cops knew he was under contract with a political party. He says he was treated like a "VVIP" whenever he visited a police station. "The police wouldn't dare touch us." He had to laugh when the police took credit, four-and-a-half years ago, for one of his own kills. "He was a hit man, too, sent down from Lahore by a rival political party to get me," the assassin recalls. Except that the assassin tracked the newcomer down first, gunning him down at a crowded intersection. He adds, "The cops don't arrest the criminals; they only arrest the weakest." This allegation is echoed by a top police officer. He explains that often when a murder occurs, "We'll grab somebody—anybody—and beat him until he confesses and even starts blaming his own mother."

Naturally, when the cops were confronted with real, bad guys—terrorists who last year committed a rash of bombings and the kidnapping of American journalist Daniel Pearl—this squeeze-them-until-they-squeal approach got them nowhere. Agents from the FBI brought in for the Pearl case and the U.S. consulate bombing were also less than impressed by such techniques, according to a Western diplomat. A police officer admits that at first his men were also afraid of the extremists, who had informers inside the police force. They were also well equipped, he says, with guns smuggled across the lawless frontier with Afghanistan and money from Arab donors. "We have over 800 madrasahs in Karachi, and many of them are nurseries for terrorism," the officer claims.

The Americans found a useful ally in Jameel Yusuf, head of the Citizen-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC). An energetic, well-heeled businessman, Yusuf formed the committee in the early 1990s when Karachi was stricken by several kidnappings and murders a day. "It was turning into a city of death," he says. By setting up a data bank and electronic surveillance of criminals, Yusuf and a few honest cops managed to bust many of the major kidnapping gangs. These criminals were often linked to cells of sectarian killers and terrorists. "They all steal cars and buy and sell illegal weapons," Yusuf says.

With the FBI's help in monitoring cell-phone calls and e-mails, Yusuf was able to throw an electronic net over the Karachi neighborhoods where terrorists and some of Pearl's kidnappers lurked. "Al-Qaeda isn't like a social club," he says. "They don't have a posted membership list." What he did find was a link between

al-Qaeda and two virulent Sunni sectarian groups—Lashkar Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Mohammad—which had trained in Afghan camps alongside Osama bin Laden's holy warriors. The two groups, in turn, were mixed up in the Karachi underworld. Often, says Yusuf, it was the criminals who rented the hideouts used by al-Qaeda members, sent their coded messages from Internet cafés and helped them vanish into the city's maze of slums.

Yusuf's close ties to the Americans proved to be his undoing. On March 22 he was removed as CPLC chief. "The rumor was I worked for the CIA," says Yusuf. "That's a laugh. The Americans won't even let me have a visa after all the help I gave them." Because of terrorist threats, Yusuf travels with an extra car of bodyguards and lives in an ultra-secure penthouse as he struggles to win back his old job. He has enough money to leave Karachi, but he likes the place. "Any other city with 14 million people and so many bad governments would have collapsed long ago," he laughs.

A handful of other Karachiites have also refused to give up on their city. Abdul Sattar Edhi, a saintly ex-shopkeeper who goes around after the nightly bout of violence to collect the dead and give them a decent burial, also declines to flee. And that's a good thing for Karachi: his charity foundation now runs orphanages, mental institutions, clinics and ambulance services. Ardeshir Cowasjee, an irascible millionaire who wears silk pajamas and writes a weekly column for *Dawn* in which he tracks corruption to the highest places, vows to stay put, as does sociologist and city planner Arif Hassan who campaigns to save the few remaining buildings from Karachi's regal colonial past. Roland De Souza, whose organization SHERRI fights against illegal land developers whom he says are often in cahoots with city nabobs and some military officers, also insists he will always call Karachi his home. They, along with many other die-hard citizens, find that Karachi possesses a dynamism missing in other Pakistani cities. It's what lures 3,000 newcomers a day to Karachi, even if it means shoveling rotten fish on the wharf for $8 per 12-hour shift and bedding down with the ubiquitous rats on a stretch of pavement.

Karachi is a city of predators, says M.R., the assassin. He complains he barely makes a profit after he has paid off the cops, government contacts and his political protectors. His cell phone chimes. After taking the call, he says almost apologetically, "I have dozens of boys working for me. I try to make sure they each get a 'job' at least once every two months." Then he stubs out his cigarette and slips out of the apartment, trailing two armed thugs for protection. Karachi isn't safe at night, not even for a killer with connections.