

## **How to fight disease with news reports**

by: Margriet Wesselink

This is the story of how a Pakistani father saved the lives of hundreds of sick children, while losing his own 10-year old son. News reports from the Pakistani Tribal News Network (TNN) played a crucial part in raising the alarm to local authorities about a measles outbreak.

After reaching out to a local journalist about an outbreak of measles in the remote Khyber tribal district near the Afghan border, Umar Din and his community members finally gained national attention. Their distress call became loud enough to reach the Pakistani government, which responded by sending the urgently needed help.

“Reporting in the conflict-affected tribal areas can be a matter of life and death,” managing editor of Tribal News Network (TNN), Said Nazir, confirms. TNN is a partner of Free Press Unlimited and helps ensure the dissemination of local stories in this part of northwestern Pakistan, a region plagued by terrorism and conflict, where mainstream media are not present.

Gathering news here is not an easy task. For most journalists the region is virtually inaccessible. The outside world hears little reliable news about the region and people living here have few trustworthy sources of information, the mainstream media usually overlook issues in the tribal territories.

### **Fighting the news blackout**

The reporters of local radio- and online news outlet TNN, however, know their way around. This means they can stay safe while fighting the news blackout. Said Nazir: “Our reporters are well-known in their communities and whenever something happens, they are approached by the inhabitants.”

August 5, 2016. The cry of a devastated father reaches a TNN reporter in the Bar Qamber Khail area of Bara sub-division in Khyber Agency. The disease has just taken the life of Umar Din’s little boy, Mubashir (10). Din’s alert led TNN to the infected area. There, parents told the journalist the many other children in the district were suffering from measles, but the FATA Secretariat (Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a semi-autonomous tribal region in northwestern Pakistan, governed by Pakistan’s federal government –ed.) was not taking steps to stop the spread of the illness.

### **Health authorities prodded into action**

The community needed a louder voice to get the attention of the authorities. “We broadcasted the parents urgent plea to the government to send a special health team. The report was taken up by eleven partner stations and appeared on our website in three languages: Pashtu, Urdu and English,” Nazir says. “As a result, FATA’s Directorate of Health took action.”

A mass measles campaign followed in ten villages in Bar Qamber Khail, with a total population of approximately 6,000 people. Around 1,400 children have since been vaccinated and according to health officials the outbreak is now under control.

### **What is Tribal News Network?**

Tribal News Network (TNN) is a local news service for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Tribal Areas of Pakistan. It covers issues that affect local people, such as health and

education. Since it began broadcasting in 2013, TNN has built a sound reputation, bridging the gap between the government and local communities by producing reliable news for a region where journalists often work at risk to their lives. Free Press Unlimited supports TNN in the production of news bulletins (radio and online) and provides training to improve the skills of editors and reporters.