

Peshawar school victims bring message of hope, courage

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: The ball spun and went straight to the wickets, although there were no wickets.

The batsman, an American high school child, was holding a baseball bat, which was inadequate for the game of cricket.

This time he watched the ball carefully and hit it hard.

"Six," shouted his Pakistani partner. "Home run," said an American child watching the game.

Twelve of these children were from the Army Public School, Peshawar, where terrorists killed 132 children and 13 others on Dec 16, 2014.

Basketball, cricket, a game called HORSE, jet-lag and food were the highlights of the evening with the survivors of one of the world's worst terrorist attacks on schools.

What nobody wanted to talk about was the tragedy itself.

"We do not wish to remind them of what they experienced on that terrible day. We want to move ahead," said their chemistry teacher Tehmina Hassan, one of the two accompanying the students on their visit to the United

States.

The visit, arranged by the US Embassy in Islamabad and organised by Meridian International Centre, Washington, is a learning experience for both, the APS students from Peshawar and for those they meet in America.

"Very brave, very, very brave," said Jonathan, a high school student from Maryland at a reception the organisers held at a home in Bethesda, Maryland.

He and other American students thought the Peshawar kids were dealing with their tragedy "very bravely and with a lot of grace".

Although such tragedies also happen at American schools, this was the first time they were meeting a group of students who were targeted for going to school.

At Meridian's Senior Vice President Bonnie Glick's driveway, the ball spun again, touched the bat and went straight into the hands of a fielder.

"No schools, no education, no books except what the perpetrators of the Dec 16 massacre prescribe," said a Pakistani guest while explaining to an American why the Taliban

attacked the school.

"Do you know what's the first verse of the Holy Quran," he asked his host and then recited the verse: "Read in the name of your Lord who created ... read, your Lord is the most generous ... He who taught you by the pen ... taught the man what he knew not."

After a healthy dose of halal American food, brought from

Muslim shops, the students moved to the backyard where they were to play the game called HORSE.

The students were divided into two groups, six from the first year and six from the second year of college, i.e. the 11th and 12th grade of a high school in the United States.

"I love cricket and music," said Hammad Afridi.

"I love reading," said another as a teacher approached.

Others laughed after she left. "You can change your statement now," said one.

"After the attack, we gave the students the option to move to other schools but all stayed," said Mrs Hassan, the chemistry teacher.

"They all said they wanted to show the attack-

ers that nothing could prevent them from seeking education, not even a death threat."

The teacher moved to another group and as it happens in some conversations, there was a silence. And when the silence became unbearable, one of the students spoke.

"I was in the 10th grade then. When the firing started, we all hit the ground," said Ali Mashal. "One bullet hit me in the shoulder but I managed to crawl out. I also injured my head while jumping a wall."

He stopped. We were all silent.

"Akelpun (loneliness)," he used only one word when asked how he felt when he returned to school after it reopened.

"Eight students were killed in my class. Some of them were close friends," he said. "Rafique and Yasin were the closest. Rafique was with me since prep and Yasin since the 6th grade."