

From a world away, she's on a mission

By **BARBARA KARKABI**
Houston Chronicle

For Pakistani journalist and filmmaker Beena Sarwar, a visit to Houston involves both the personal and political.

She's here to visit her sister, Sehbar Sarwar, co-director of Voices Breaking Boundaries, a forum for writers, poets and performers of all ethnicities.

That's the personal part.

But the sisters never stray far from cultural and political issues — it's a family thing. Because of that, her short visit includes a talk tonight on "dissenting voices" in Pakistan, as well as three of her short documentaries.

"What I would like to do is talk about the fact that the reality of Pakistan is a lot different from what the (U.S.) media shows," Sarwar said. "When people visit, they seem to expect women covered head to toe in burqas on the street and men in turbans and long beards with guns."

In fact, she said, the real Pakistan has many working women and what she calls the "dissent or dis-

See **PAKISTAN** on Page 3E.



Andrew Innerarity / Chronicle

Journalist Beena Sarwar decries "the creeping Talibanization of Pakistan."

Pakistan

Continued from Page 1E.

senting voices" — calling for peace and democracy. Islamic fundamentalists, she said, are a small, though vocal minority.

"The more women are aware of their rights, working and dressing differently, the more those who are opposed come out against it," Sarwar said. The clash between the two extremes is great, and that causes violence. It's a push-and-pull situation."

It is also what the 41-year-old calls "the creeping Talibanization of Pakistan," an issue she has written about in newspapers.

Popular with Houston's Pakistani community and available through satellite, Geo TV — launched two years ago — is Pakistan's first 24-hour news channel. As a private cable channel, issues such as violence against women, government corruption

and the struggles between India and Pakistan are reported more openly than on government-run Pakistani TV.

"We have taken up issues that otherwise haven't been touched and would never be shown on state TV," she said. "That includes reports I did on women in prison (often falsely accused by their families because they have asked for their rights) and forced marriages."

Because of her Houston connection, Beena's been heard on KPFT-FM (90.1) Pacifica radio in both news reports from Pakistan and talk shows. Last summer her documentary on a Kathak-style dancer was shown by VBB at the Aurora Picture Show.

Naheed: A Portrait, tells the story of Naheed Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman banned from dancing in the late '70s under then-President Zia ul-Haq. At that time, all women were banned from dancing in public, Sarwar said. Siddiqui lives in England and returns to Pakistan to perform.

"The film is about her personal struggle, but in dancing she is also making a political statement," said Sarwar, on leave from Geo to focus on writing projects, including a book on Pakistani dissidents. "Things have changed and she can now perform. But that's irrelevant because the danger is now from extremists who might attack the auditorium where she is performing."

Her other two documentary shorts are: *Hina*. It is the story of a young girl, 17, the first in her family and neighborhood to attend college. The other is a report she did for Geo on *Women in Prison*.

Her father, a doctor, was involved in Pakistan's first student movement in the early '50s and spent a year in jail. Her mother, a teacher, was part of a teacher's strike that included a hunger strike.

"We were little, and it was considered scandalous for a woman to be on the street in a strike," Sarwar said. "But my point is that my parents are not the only

ones. There are many other like-minded people and whose families were not nepotistic or taking advantage of their position. They were acting on principle and acting for justice."

Sarwar will speak tonight at 8 p.m. in a program sponsored by People for Progressive Radio and VBB at the Artery, 5401 Jackson. For information, call 713-524-7821.