

An Interview with Mukhtar Mai:
“The Bravest Woman on Earth”

The United Nations
Dag Hammerskjold Auditorium
Friday, January 20, 2006
2PM

2PM – Welcome – Dr. Hanifa Mezoui , Chief of the United Nations NGO Section DESA

2:05PM - Welcome and Introduction of Soledad O'Brien – Dr. Joseph Salim

2:10PM – Introduction of the film ‘Shame’ by Mohammed Naqvi of Manan Pictures.

‘Shame’ is a moving account of the tremendous injustice suffered by Mukhtaran Bibi in her native Pakistan.

2:20PM – Slide presentation of Mukhtar’s achievements following on from this injustice. Presented by Dr. Amna Buttar.

2:30PM – Interview with Soledad O'Brien and Mukhtaran Mai (Dr. Amna Buttar to provide translation for Mukhtaran Mai) Mukhtaran would like to give a brief statement at the beginning of the interview.

Biographies:

Mukhtar Mai

Emerging as a rape survivor to becoming an international spokesperson on women's rights in Pakistan, Mukhtar Mai (also referred to as 'Mukhtaran Bibi') has been called the 'Bravest Woman on Earth' and 'Pakistan's Rosa Parks'. A review of her remarkable journey over the past few years illustrates why she has been referred to as such. In 2002, Mai was gang raped on the orders of a *panchayat* or tribal court, in retribution for an offense allegedly committed by her younger brother. Defying social stigma and the culture of shame surrounding rape victims in Pakistan, Mai not only spoke out about her rape, but in a valiant move, took her rapists to court.

This act was unprecedented for a woman of her background in Pakistan - a country where rape survivors are more often treated as the criminal rather than the victim.

In Pakistan, the barriers to justice for women are endless. Tribal courts, as in Mai's case, routinely mete out cruel and inhumane punishments against women. From honor killings to acid throwings to gang rapes, women in Pakistan pay with their lives and bodies for alleged crimes violating their family's so-called 'honor'. To make matters worse, under Pakistan's rape laws, a woman must provide the testimony of four pious Muslim men to prove that she was raped. If she cannot do so, she risks being charged with '*zina*' or adultery, an act punishable by stoning.

In a remarkable effort to challenge a system designed to deny a woman justice, Mai has been fighting an uphill legal battle for the past three years. She is now appealing her case before the Pakistani Supreme Court following a lower court's release of five of the acquitted men charged of the crime.

Mukhtar Mai, who never attended school as a child, is from the village of Meerwala in the province of Punjab, one of the poorest and most remote areas of Pakistan. While such attacks on women in rural Pakistan are not uncommon, what makes her case so exceptional is her will to live and not bury her head in shame following the harrowing atrocities committed upon her. In fact, since surviving the gang rape, Mai has become a proponent for women's rights in her village. She has used the compensation money received to open schools for girls and boys in Meerwala and enrolled in school herself.

Continuing her impressive journey to assist women in need, Mai has also opened a shelter for abused women. Today, she remains firmly committed to improving the lives of young girls in her village and believes that the oppression of women can only be realized through their education. Mai says that helping other girls and women gives her a reason to live and her schools are indeed a testament to her courage.

In a country where violence against women is sanctioned by the legal system, Mukhtar Mai's struggle against illiteracy, judicial discrimination and societal bias against victims of rape is truly remarkable. Her story of survival and the resilience of the human spirit speaks to women all around the world and will be celebrated to generations to come. She has also received the Fatima Jinnah gold medal from Pakistani Government in 2005, and Glamour women of the year award in 11.2005 and International Women's Health Coalition is honoring her in their annual gala in January 2006.

Amna Buttar

Dr Amna Buttar is the President and co-founder Asian-American Network Against Abuse of Human Rights (ANAA) as well as an Associate Professor of Medicine and geriatrics at The University of Wisconsin.

She founded ANAA in June 2002 with Dr Zafar Iqbal, initially, called the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America (APPNA) which later became ANAA as an organization and were fiscally sponsored by Develop In Peace in 2004. We have no paid staff at this time, and are dependent entirely on voluntary contributions of member's time. We are the first ever US based Pakistani Human Right Advocacy group. Currently ANAA has a Board of Directors with 5 members and another forty plus volunteers that are organizing activities in various parts of the USA. Friends of ANAA groups are in New York City, Houston, Texas, Washington DC, Miami, Florida, Madison, Wisconsin, and Las Vegas, Nevada.

She has worked on numerous cases involving victims of gang-rape in Pakistan and has brought many of these cases to the attention of the international community and world media. She has been campaigning endlessly against the Hudood and Zina Ordinances enforced in 1979, fail to consider rape a crime unless a rape victim can produce "four

adult male Muslim eye-witnesses” who “witnessed the act of penetration”. If a rape victim is unable to produce these witnesses she stands to be convicted for fornication or adultery. Over 90% of women in Pakistani jails are serving sentences under these Ordinances. Furthermore, the police themselves malign the victim and make no efforts to collect evidence, arrange medical examinations, or apprehend perpetrators. ANAA has started a campaign to increase awareness regarding this misuse of Islam as well as abuse of human rights, and are collecting data in 11 prisons of Pakistan to document plight of Pakistani women imprisoned under Zina and Hudood Ordinance.

A graduate of Fatima Jinnah medical College in Lahore, Pakistan, she completed her training in the US. She has appeared as president of ANAA to congress Human Rights Caucus regarding human rights’ violations against women of Pakistan especially the case of Mukhtar Mai in November 2005, and has appeared extensively on both television and radio promoting the cause of this noble charity.

Draft Questions –

1. In June 2002 you underwent what can only be described as the most horrific form of punishment and public humiliation perpetrated against you because of a fabricated crime your family committed. You were expected to commit suicide and yet did not and have gone on to tell the world about the continual and degrading treatment of women in parts of Pakistan. Firstly, how have you found the inner strength to rebuild your life and what drives you forward to continue what you are doing?
2. Can you please explain what a young girl from your area of Pakistan can expect from her life? What will she be expected to do, and is she in any way given any freedom of choice?
3. How prevalent is the ordeal you underwent and are steps being made to prevent it, or is it too deeply entrenched in local customs and belief?
4. You received a sum of money from the President of Pakistan, which you have used to build schools in Meerwala. How are those schools doing and how have they been embraced by the local community?
5. As your situation became headline news around the world, it appeared that change may be forthcoming. President Musharraf was involved and the perpetrators were found guilty in court. Those men have now been freed on appeal. Has anything

really changed now the eyes of the international media have turned away from Meerwala?

6. Do you see any hope that rural areas of Pakistan, and indeed other areas, can break away from the panchayat legal system and the ‘honour’ killings and rapes this judicial body deem appropriate punishment for apparently insignificant (and often fabricated) crimes. If so what can be done locally and what can be achieved by the international community?
7. You are here in New York to discuss your current work in improving healthcare and education in Meerwala. Can you tell us a bit more about this work, and what you hope to achieve from this trip?
8. Is it reasonable, or indeed practical, for the international community to bring pressure to bear on the Pakistani government to ensure that a recognised legal system is initiated in Meerwala (and similar areas) to replace the current tribal judiciary, which can only be seen as a complete abuse of human rights? If such steps were taken, how would this be viewed by the people of the region – overdue salvation or unwanted interference?
9. What message of hope can you give to other women from all parts of the globe and all walks of life who like yourself have suffered, or continue to suffer, discrimination and abuse?
10. Despite initially supporting you after your ordeal, the Pakistani government have adopted a stance of ‘covering up’ and denying the existence of such problems by preventing you from leaving the country? How does this make you feel, and what can be done to bring about change in Pakistan if this is the attitude of the government?
11. I understand you are a woman of faith. In the aftermath of the recent years has that faith been tested and has it survived?

3PM – Moderated questions from the audience (cards to be collected and handed to Soledad)

3:15PM – Conclusion – Soledad O’Brien with brief thank you from Dr. Joseph Salim

If you feel the event should run longer please conclude by 3:30PM.