
Op-Ed Columnist
The 11-Year-Old Wife

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Published: June 21, 2005

When Pakistan's prime minister visits next month, President Bush will presumably use the occasion to repeat his praise for President Pervez Musharraf as a bold leader "dedicated in the protection of his own people." Then they will sit down and discuss Mr. Bush's plan to sell Pakistan F-16 fighter jets capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

But here's a suggestion: How about the White House dropping word that before the prime minister arrives, he first return the passport of Mukhtaran Bibi, the rape victim turned human-rights campaigner, so that she can visit the United States?

Despite Mr. Bush's praise, General Musharraf shows more commitment to his F-16's than to his people. Now he's paying the price. Visiting New Zealand the last few days, he was battered by questions about why he persecuted a rape victim, forcing him to cancel interviews.

Pakistani newspapers savaged him for harming Pakistan's image. And the blogosphere has taken up Ms. Mukhtaran's case, with more than 100 blogs stirring netizens to send blizzards of e-mails to Pakistani consulates or to join protests planned for Wednesday and Thursday at Pakistani offices in New York and Washington.

Yet it's crucial to remember that Ms. Mukhtaran is only a window into a much larger problem - the neglect by General Musharraf's government of the plight of women and girls.

Early this year, for example, a doctor named Shazia Khalid reported that she had been gang-raped in a government-owned natural-gas plant. Instead of treating her medically, officials drugged her into unconsciousness for three days to keep her quiet and then shipped her to a psychiatric hospital.

When she persisted in trying to report the rape, she was held under house arrest in Karachi. The police suggested that since she had cash, she must have been working as a prostitute. Dr. Shazia's husband has stood by her, but his grandfather was quoted as suggesting that Dr. Shazia had disgraced the family and should be killed.

On average, a woman is raped every two hours in Pakistan, and two women a day die in honor killings.

While Ms. Mukhtaran and Dr. Shazia have attracted international support, most victims in Pakistan are on their own. Earlier this year, for example, police reported that a village council had punished a man for having an affair by ordering his 2-year-old niece to be given in marriage to a 40-year-old man.

In another case this year, an 11-year-girl named Nazan was rescued from her husband's family, which beat her, broke her arm and strung her from the ceiling because she didn't work hard enough.

Then there are Pakistan's hudood laws, which have been used to imprison thousands of women who report rapes. If rape victims cannot provide four male witnesses to the crime, they risk being whipped for adultery, since they acknowledge illicit sex and cannot prove rape.

When a group of middle-class Pakistani women demonstrated last month for equal rights in Lahore, police clubbed them and dragged them to police stations. They particularly targeted Asma Jahangir, a U.N. special rapporteur who is also the head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

Ms. Jahangir says the directions to the police about her, coming from an intelligence official close to General Musharraf, were: "Teach the [expletive] a lesson. Strip her in public." Sure enough, the police ripped her shirt off and tried to pull her trousers off. If that's how General Musharraf's government treats one of the country's most distinguished lawyers, imagine what happens to a peasant challenging injustice.

I've heard from Pakistanis who, while horrified by honor killings and rapes, are embarrassed that it is the barbarism in Pakistan that gets headlines abroad. A word to those people: I understand your defensiveness, for we Americans feel the same about Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. But rooting out brutality is a better strategy than covering it up, and any nation should be proud to produce someone like Ms. Mukhtaran.

So while meeting the Pakistani prime minister, Mr. Bush could discuss not only F-16's, but also repeal of the hudood laws. And Mr. Bush could invite Ms. Mukhtaran to the Oval Office as well, both to hail a genuine Pakistani hero and to spotlight the goals of ordinary Pakistanis - not fighter aircraft but simple justice.

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Resources

For more information about some of these issues, including the planned demonstrations outside Pakistani offices this week, see www.4anaa.org/projects/mukhtaran-mai.htm. That's on the Web site of the Asian-American Network Against Abuse of Women, run by a group of Pakistani doctors, and it's also the group that is arranging her visit to the U.S. To help Mukhtaran, don't send checks to me. Instead, you can find out about contributing at www.mercycorps.org.

To find out more about repealing hudood ordinances, go to the Lawyers for Human Rights & Legal Aid Web site and equalitynow.org. There is also a blogosphere's campaign for Mukhtaran.
