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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Free Woman

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

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After the Pakistani government tired of kidnapping Mukhtaran Bibi, holding her hostage and lying about it, I finally got a call through to her.

Pakistani officials had just freed Ms. Mukhtaran and returned her to her village. She was exhausted, scared, relieved, giddy and sometimes giggly - and also deeply thankful to all the Pakistanis and Americans who spoke up for her.



Nicholas D. Kristof

Ms. Mukhtaran learning Urdu in the fourth grade classroom.

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"I'm so thankful to everyone that they keep a woman like me in mind," she said fervently. Told that lots of people around the world think she's a hero, she laughed and responded: "God is great. If some people think I'm a hero, it's only because of all those people who give me support."

President Pervez Musharraf's government is still lying about Ms. Mukhtaran, saying that she is now free to travel to the U.S. Well, it's true that government officials removed her name from the blacklist of those barred from leaving Pakistan but at the same



Nicholas D. Kristof

Ms. Mukhtaran with other students in front of the school named for her.

Pakistan, but at the same time they confiscated Ms. Mukhtaran's passport.

Let me back up. Ms. Mukhtaran is the indomitable peasant whom I first wrote about in September after visiting her in her village. Three years ago, a village council was upset at her brother, and sentenced her to be gang-raped. After four men raped her, she was forced to walk home nearly naked before a

jeering crowd.

She then defied tradition by testifying against her attackers, sending them to prison, and she used compensation money to start elementary schools in her village. She herself is now enrolled in the fourth grade; a measure of her passion for education is that the day after the government released her, she was back in class.

Ms. Mukhtaran is using donations (through www.mercycorps.org) to start an ambulance service and a women's shelter, and she is also campaigning against honor killings, rapes and acid attacks that disfigure women. But President Musharraf, defensive about Pakistan's image, regards brutality as something to cover up rather than uproot.

So when Pakistani officials learned that Ms. Mukhtaran planned to visit the U.S. this month, they detained her and apparently tried to intimidate her by ordering the release of those convicted for her rape. This wasn't a mistake by low-level officials.

Mr. Musharraf admitted to reporters on Friday that he had ordered Ms. Mukhtaran placed on the blacklist. And although Pakistan had claimed that Ms. Mukhtaran had decided on her own not to go to the U.S. because her mother was sick (actually, she wasn't), the president in effect acknowledged that that was one more lie. "She was told not to go" to the U.S., Mr. Musharraf said, according to The Associated Press.

"I don't want to project a bad image of Pakistan." he explained.

I sympathize. From Karachi to the Khyber Pass, Pakistan is one of the most hospitable countries I've ever visited. So, President Musharraf, if you want to improve Pakistan's image, here's some advice: just prosecute rapists with the same zeal with which you persecute rape victims.

Ms. Mukhtaran says she can't talk about what happened after the government kidnapped her. But this is what seems to have unfolded: In Islamabad, government officials ferociously berated her for being unpatriotic and warned that they could punish her family and friends. In particular, they threatened to have the father of a friend fired from his job.

Fittingly, the government is facing its own pressures. Government officials have denounced Pakistani aid groups for helping Ms. Mukhtaran, and Mr. Musharraf added that they were "as bad as the Islamic extremists." So now the aid groups are threatening to pull out of their partnership with the government.

Mr. Musharraf has helped in the war on terrorism and has managed Pakistan's economy well. But in my last column, I reluctantly concluded that he is "nuts," prompting a debate in Pakistan about whether this diagnosis was insolent or accurate. After Mr. Musharraf's latest remarks, I rest my case.

On Friday, Ms. Mukhtaran told me that one of the prime minister's aides had just called to offer to take her to the United States. It seems Mr. Musharraf wants to defuse the crisis by allowing Ms. Mukhtaran a tightly chaperoned tour of the U.S., controlled every step of her way.

"I said, 'No,' " she said. "I only want to go of my own free will."

Hats off to this incredible woman. President Musharraf may have ousted rivals and overthrown a civilian government, but he has now met his match - a peasant woman with a heart of gold and a will of steel.

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Resources

For more information about Mukhtaran Bibi, 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. In addition, see www.mercycorps.org. Mercy Corps is working with Ms. Mukhtaran in administering the funds that Times readers sent for her.

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