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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Raped, Kidnapped and Silenced

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

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No wonder the Pakistan government can't catch Osama bin Laden. It is too busy harassing, detaining - and now kidnapping - a gang-rape victim for daring to protest and for planning a visit to the United States.



Nicholas D. Kristof/The New York Times
Mukhtaran Bibi in September 2004.

Last fall I wrote about Mukhtaran Bibi, a woman who was sentenced by a tribal council in Pakistan to be gang-raped because of an infraction supposedly committed by her brother. Four men raped Ms. Mukhtaran, then village leaders forced her to walk home nearly naked in front of a jeering crowd of 300.

Ms. Mukhtaran was supposed to have committed suicide. Instead, with the backing of a local Islamic leader, she fought back and testified against her persecutors. Six were convicted.

Then Ms. Mukhtaran, who believed that the best way to overcome such abuses was through better education, used her compensation money to start two schools in her village, one for boys

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For more information about Mukhtaran Bibi, see www.4anaa.org/projects/mukhtaran-mai.htm. That's on the website 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

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Corps is working with Ms. Mukhtaran in administering the funds that Times readers sent for her.

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and the other for girls. She went out of her way to enroll the children of her attackers in the schools, showing that she bore no grudges.

Readers of my column sent in more than \$133,000 for her. Mercy Corps, a U.S. aid organization, has helped her administer the money, and she has expanded the

schools, started a shelter for abused women and bought a van that is used as an ambulance for the area. She has also emerged as a ferocious spokeswoman against honor killings, rapes and acid attacks on women. (If you want to help her, please don't send checks to me but to Mercy Corps, with "Mukhtaran Bibi" in the memo line: 3015 S.W. First, Portland, Ore. 97201.)

A group of Pakistani-Americans invited Ms. Mukhtaran to visit the U.S. starting this Saturday (see www.4anaa.org). Then a few days ago, the Pakistani government went berserk.

On Thursday, the authorities put Ms. Mukhtaran under house arrest - to stop her from speaking out. In phone conversations in the last few days, she said that when she tried to step outside, police pointed their guns at her. To silence her, the police cut off her land line.

After she had been detained, a court ordered her attackers released, putting her life in jeopardy. That happened on a Friday afternoon, when the courts do not normally operate, and apparently was a warning to Ms. Mukhtaran to shut up. Instead, Ms. Mukhtaran continued her protests by cellphone. But at dawn yesterday the police hustled her off, and there's been no word from her since. Her cellphone doesn't answer.

Asma Jahangir, a Pakistani lawyer who is head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said she had learned that Ms. Mukhtaran was taken to Islamabad, furiously berated and told that President Pervez Musharraf was very angry with her. She was led sobbing to detention at a secret location. She is barred from contacting anyone, including her lawyer.

"She's in their custody, in illegal custody," Ms. Jahangir said. "They have gone completely crazy."

Even if Ms. Mukhtaran were released, airports have been alerted to bar her from leaving the country. According to Dawn, a Karachi newspaper, the government took this step, "fearing that she might malign Pakistan's image."

Excuse me, but Ms. Mukhtaran, a symbol of courage and altruism, is the best hope for Pakistan's image. The threat to Pakistan's image comes from President Musharraf for all this thuggish behavior.

I've been sympathetic to Mr. Musharraf till now, despite his nuclear negligence, partly because he's cooperated in the war on terrorism and partly because he has done a good job nurturing Pakistan's economic growth, which in the long run is probably the best way to fight fundamentalism. So even when Mr. Musharraf denied me visas all this year, to block me from visiting Ms. Mukhtaran again and writing a follow-up column, I bit my tongue.

But now President Musharraf has gone nuts.

"This is all because they think they have the support of the U.S. and can get away with murder," Ms. Jahangir said. Indeed, on Friday, just as all this was happening, President Bush received Pakistan's foreign minister in the White House and praised President Musharraf's "bold leadership."

So, Mr. Bush, how about asking Mr. Musharraf to focus on finding Osama, instead of kidnapping rape victims who speak out? And invite Ms. Mukhtaran to the Oval Office - to show that Americans stand not only with generals who seize power, but also with ordinary people of extraordinary courage.

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