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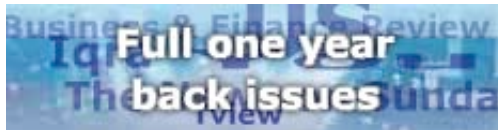
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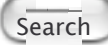
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The Mukhtaran Mai case

It is ironic that, even as her alleged tormentors were freed, the woman who has become a symbol of courage and the rights of Pakistani women was barred from proceeding abroad presumably for fear that she would tarnish the "soft image" that is being developed for the country.

On Friday, Mukhtaran Mai learnt that she had been placed on the Exit Control List (ECL - instituted to prevent political opponents and the corrupt from fleeing abroad), preventing her from leaving the country on Saturday to attend a lecture tour in the USA that various human rights organisations there had invited her to. The organisations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Asian-American Network Against Abuse of human rights (ANAA) have linked her placement on the ECL with this tour, for which she was to visit various cities, speak at symposia and meet representatives of other human rights and women's rights organisations.

Meanwhile, a three-member review board of the Lahore High Court on Friday refused a Punjab government request for extension in the period of detention of thirteen men accused of raping Mukhtaran Mai in Muzaffargarh in June 2002. The court asked them to submit surety bonds of Rs 50,000 each to secure their release. A fourteenth accused in the case is serving his jail term -- commuted from death penalty into life imprisonment by a division bench of the Lahore High Court in Multan on March 3 this year.

The thirteen accused that have been set free by review board of the LHC include the five acquitted by the Multan bench. They were being detained under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance in April, as a result of a request by Mukhtaran Mai, who had said she felt threatened by their release.

The LHC board says there is not sufficient ground to establish the detainees' potential as a threat to public peace and warrant extension in the detention period.

When back in March this year the Multan Bench of the LHC acquitted

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the five accused in the case, the news shocked Mukhtaran and those who stood by her, not for the sake of proving their credentials as enlightened people, but because they believed that there was sufficient evidence available to suggest that she had been wronged.

Various explanations were given about how the Multan Bench decision came about. One potent explanation was that even in this instance where the government had ostensibly thrown its weight behind the complainant, the police had failed to provide the prosecution with damning evidence. This despite the fact that various accounts of the incident indicated that no less than 150 people were present there when Mukhtaran Mai was publicly humiliated in a jirga-sanctioned punishment, meant as revenge against her young brother's alleged illicit relations with a woman from another tribe.

Have these accounts been heard or were they made up by a group of people who had nothing better to do than invent a victim for their misguided activism? And how was the government itself misled into believing that here was a cause that it should pursue?

It is introspection time for government. It must review the system that routinely works against people, and sometimes against the government itself. Meanwhile, not allowing Mukhtaran to proceed abroad will only further damage the country's reputation. A soft image has to be based on hard facts.

Unwillingness, not demands

Citizens are to demand, the government is to deliver. If, however, those wielding power at the highest level start doing only what the citizens should, the question arises: who are they asking to do what they themselves should be doing?

What Punjab Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi said to new provincial Inspector General of Police Major (retired) Ziaul Hassan on Friday sounds more like a charter of demands by a forum of citizens than the reassuring orders issued by a provincial chief executive.

In what could be the wish list of anyone now living in Punjab, Pervaiz Elahi demanded an end to thana culture through the strengthening of police reforms. Calling for an improvement in the law and order situation in the province by speeding up action against thieves, cattle rustlers and those involved in heinous crimes, he said the police officials should improve their attitude towards people, whose complaints should be instantly heeded to.

This tone is not exclusive to Pervaiz Elahi, though. We have heard President Pervez Musharraf demand a check against rising inflation, we have listened to Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz asking for an end to extremism and we have read about everyone who is anyone in the current set up demanding the initiation of this development project or that.

All this serves very well to tell people that even those at the helm of affairs do not have the powers to solve their problems. Seen in another way, this shows how the task of the government has changed from standing up and delivering to wishful thinking and day-dreaming.

Those facing the consequences of this official helplessness or unwillingness to take on the problems of security and law and order had better act on their own. Self help is always a good idea even when

the issue is the provision of security, which is in fact, like so many other things, the government's responsibility.

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