

Outstanding in her field

Human Rights
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WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

SIXTY-FIVE years after the All India Muslim League formalized its separatist demand in the shape of the Pakistan Resolution, the anniversary of that historic occasion was marked — by no means for the first time — under murky circumstances.

Although it could plausibly be argued that throughout Pakistan's nearly 58 years of existence there haven't been very many genuine causes for a national celebration, in the present case the immediate cause for dismay does not ostensibly arise directly from the perennial dilemma over the absence or paucity of democracy. The presidential wardrobe, too, appears to be in the clear.

The latest cloud on the national horizon assumed an ominous form at the weekend with the bomb blast at a Shia shrine in Balochistan, adding a sectarian dimension to the mounting violence in that troubled province. This act of terrorism may well be unrelated to the ongoing conflict between Baloch tribesmen and the army, but it clearly adds to the region's — and the nation's — woes.

One can only hope that yet another bout of fratricide won't ensue. A flurry of initiatives has meanwhile been launched to tackle the more complex issue of the wider strife in Balochistan — the apparent consequence of administrative ineptitude as well as rigid feudal traditions. Whereas long-standing complaints pertaining to the denial of provincial rights are by no means entirely spurious, the argument that tribal sardars are wary of any economic development that may erode their power isn't altogether disingenuous either.

At the same time, it is difficult to get away from the suspicion that there is more to the situation than meets the eye, with none of the protagonists willing, for one reason or another, to come clean. Balochistan has, of course, been down this road before — and one of the salient lessons of the confrontations in the Ayub and Bhutto eras is that it is never a good idea to pit the army against tribesmen.

allegation of a cover-up is far from implausible.

In stark contrast, the president and the prime minister have both been taking a keen interest in the case of a considerably more prominent rape victim — partly because Mukhtaran Mai is determined not to be ignored.

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society that lends her an aura of sublimity. Mukhtaran Mai refused to give her depraved tormentors the satisfaction of watching her turn into just another gruesome statistic. She mustered up the courage to fight back, setting a worthy example for all victims of violence and oppression.

The nauseating details of what she went through are too well

wants to see them hanged, and even those of us who oppose the death penalty in principle can appreciate her vehemence without necessarily condoning it.

Had Mukhtaran Mai merely been dauntless, that would have sufficed to set her apart from most victims of rape and other forms of violence against women. But there is more to her than that: she has also exhibited a great deal of wisdom, not least in using the presidential grant she received in 2002 to set up two schools — one for girls, the other for boys — in her village. She recognizes education as a necessary condition for dragging large tracts of our nation out of the dark ages. If only Pakistani governments over the decades had been blessed with a comparable vision.

When Mukhtaran Mai's schools began to run out of funds, a timely article by Nicholas Kristof in *The New York Times* last year brought in a small flood of American donations. Her international profile now veers close to celebrity status — a Google search for her name brings up 80,000 or so website references worldwide. Within Pakistan, women's rights groups and activists have rallied to her cause.

These positives must, however, be weighed against the shame of being part of a society where village councils can sentence a woman to be gang-raped, where everyday injustice takes vile and vicious forms, where differences of caste or creed often translate into wanton cruelty — and where rapists and various other serial violators of basic human rights more often than not get away with their crimes.

Mukhtaran Mai is more than worthy of the respect, honour and awe that has flowed her way. But let us not fool ourselves into suspecting that the extraordinarily inspirational example she has set means the battle — for women's equality, for human rights and dignity — is all but won. At many levels it has been waged for many long years, yet in some ways it has only just begun.

Lest we forget: 25 years ago this day, El Salvador's Catholic archbishop Oscar Romero, in his weekly homily, spoke directly to

The Dera Bugti district reputedly has one of the lowest standards of living in Pakistan. This does not reflect too well on Akbar Bugti. The extent to which the Baloch are denied the benefits that could flow from the mineral wealth that their land boasts is indeed appalling, and there is certainly some merit in Baloch nationalists' complaints about exploitation and Punjab's hegemony. But can it possibly make any sense to view their subjugation in isolation from the feudal burden on their shoulders?

One thing that Balochistan undoubtedly could do with a lot more of is schools. The power of education to positively transform communities is all but unparalleled, and perhaps this is an aspect to which genuine nationalists — as opposed to those who pose as patrons of provincial rights primarily in order to preserve their privileges — ought to pay more attention. After all, those being persuaded to risk their lives should at least have a clear idea of what they are struggling for.

Beyond that, it must be hoped that the widely feared escalation in the conflict between the tribesmen and Pakistani army or paramilitary contingents can be avoided. After all, both sides must be aware that whatever their disputes, they cannot be resolved militarily.

It is intriguing, meanwhile, to note that the confrontation took a sharp turn for the worse after a company doctor was raped at the Sui gas plant in Dera Bugti, allegedly by a junior army officer. And the available evidence suggests that the Bugti sardar's

known to require repetition at length: the spurious (and, for all that, relatively innocuous) charge against her 12-year-old brother, who had in fact himself been sodomized by the accusers; the panchayat's thoroughly obscene verdict; its shameless execution by a bunch of contemptible brutes; the crowd of villagers who stood by and did nothing.

Having survived this dreadful ordeal, there were two traditional options left to the victim: to live out the rest of her days in shame, or to cut short her misery with a dose of poison. Suicide is said to be common among rape victims, and in most cases the perpetrators, who should by rights be tried for murder, often face no charges at all. After a show of support and sympathy by a proportion of her fellow villagers — including the local imam — Mukhtaran Mai decided to reject both those options. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, she decided to channel her anguish into anger — and a quest for justice. In such circumstances, appeals to the authorities can sometimes lead to adverse consequences. But Mukhtaran Mai's case was heard by an anti-terrorism tribunal, and six of the 14 men in the dock, including the four who raped her, were sentenced to death in 2002.

Judicial confusion recently led to four of the convicts briefly going free, but they are now again behind bars, and the Supreme Court is expected to hear Mukhtaran Mai's appeal against their acquittal by the Multan Bench of the Lahore High Court. She has said she

his nation's soldiers. "In the name of God," he said, "in the name of these suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: Stop the repression."

This was a period when that Central American nation, under military rule that bore Washington's stamp of approval, had unleashed right-wing paramilitary death squads against the pro-democracy opposition. The regional exertions of the US were at the time directed chiefly towards undermining the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. El Salvador, as far as it was concerned, was in safe hands; the daily death toll mattered little, particularly since it invariably included a few pinks and comms.

Romero didn't quite fall in that category, but his crusade for peace and against officially sponsored human rights violations won him no plaudits in Washington. In early 1980, he had written a letter to President Jimmy Carter, saying: "If you are really Christian, please stop sending military aid to the military here, because they use it only to kill my people." The letter went unanswered.

The day after his appeal to the armed forces, a sniper's bullet felled the archbishop as he celebrated Mass. The US pretended nothing much had happened; in the years that followed, it stepped up its support for the Salvadoran junta. A quarter-century later, Romero's killers remain unpunished.

E-mail: mahirali1@gmail.com