

The Mukhtaran Mai fiasco

By Omar R. Quraishi

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WHOEVER came up with the bright idea that stopping Mukhtaran Mai from proceeding to the US to attend a conference organized by an association of Pakistani-American professionals would help protect Pakistan's international image should be taken to task by the government. After all, the end result has been just the opposite, and the country's image abroad has been sullied all the same.

The reprehensible course of events during which first Mukhtaran's movements were restricted to her home in Meerwala, then her name was placed on the infamous Exit Control List, followed by the release of the men who allegedly raped her and, finally, her apparently forced travel to Islamabad to meet the prime minister's adviser on women's affairs — all seem to suggest a whole band of government functionaries competing with each in making a hash of a simple matter. It was a case of paranoia getting the better of judgment discretion. Ironically, at least in this case, it was action by some top government functionaries in the first place which did help make life slightly easier for Mukhtaran, at least initially, when her case came to light and when the Lahore High Court had announced that since no case could be proved against her alleged rapists, they should all be set free.

around Mukhtaran Mai was for her own good and that her movements had not been restricted and that she was free to travel anywhere — although newspapers were carrying reports suggesting otherwise.

The conduct of the adviser to the prime minister on women's development, Nelofer Bakhtiar, was equally petulant and unconvincing. She told parliament that a few NGOs were making a big deal out of the whole affair, implying that such NGOs depended heavily on foreign donations and were, therefore, playing to their benefactors' tune. Such ill-advised remarks had little to do with the valid queries that the opposition benches had raised in the National Assembly. They wanted to know why a woman who had been gang-raped on the orders of a panchayat, been placed on the

quoted him as saying on June 15 at a press briefing: "We conveyed our views about these restrictions to the senior levels of the Pakistani government... We have also advised Pakistani officials that she was invited to the United States by a Pakistani organization based in the US".

Apart from the *New York Times'* influential readership, which got to read Mr Kristof's column and the newspaper's own stinging comment on the matter, papers around the world carried reports of the outrageous manner in which Mukhtaran Mai had been prevented from flying out to the US and the limits imposed on her free movement even within Pakistan.

On June 16, several international media outlets carried the news that the travel ban on Mukhtaran had been lifted and almost all of them said that this had been done

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after the US government exerted pressure on Pakistan. These included the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Independent*, the *Indian Express*, the *Telegraph* (India), *The Age* (Australia), Reuters, BBC News, ABC News, CBC News (Canada), Sify News (India) and AKI (Italy), to name a few.

Even local newspapers in the US carried the report meaning that the result of the mishandling is that the rest of the world thinks that justice in Pakistan is so perverted that a gang-rape victim is forbidden to move freely within or outside the country while her rapists are free and face no such restrictions. Those who know how things work

Clearly, a much better approach would have been to allow her to travel to the US because what could be a better role model for women anywhere than the one from rural Pakistan, who was subjected to gang rape, then has to deal with feudal lords and a hostile police in her village, face the stigma that a society like Pakistan's places on rape victims, and, after all that, she has the courage to set up a local girl's school and seek justice at all levels.

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To make matters worse for the government, we had the minister of state for interior, Dr Shehzad Waseem, telling parliament that the restrictive security cordon

Exit Control List, while the perpetrators had been released. The adviser's remarks did nothing to address that, and, in fact, reflected a pettiness of approach.

As for the initial plan that preventing her from travelling abroad would somehow avoid a lot of negative publicity for the country and its government, just the opposite happened. Newspapers in Pakistan, especially the English-language press, wrote strongly critically of the government's conduct in this episode. This was followed by a *New York Times* column by Nicholas Kristof and a lead editorial on the issue, both of which demanded that the Bush administration raise issue with Islamabad on the matter of human, especially women's, rights. And then on June 15, the Voice of America quoted a US State Department spokesman as saying that the travel restriction on Mukhtaran Mai had been lifted after "high-level intervention" by the US government.

The report quoted State Department spokesman Sean McCormack as describing Mukhtaran as a "courageous woman and victim of a horrendous crime." She was "welcome to visit the United States at any time". The VOA report further

in Pakistan would know that while the interior ministry sends the names of people who are to be placed on the ECL, such instructions usually come from various intelligence agencies.

It is quite plausible that the same happened in this case too. In their misguided view, they mounted what they thought would be an effective damage-control exercise by stopping Mukhtaran Mai from travelling abroad. In any case, it doesn't matter who made the decision; whoever did it seems to have had idea how images are built up, maintained or destroyed.

The government may hire all the expensive image-building consultants it wants, as it recently did, but it should know that it is its own actions and decisions or lack of them that most effectively project the country's image to the rest of the world.

One other unfortunate aspect of the whole affair is that on many issues the only voice that the Pakistan government yield to is not that of its elected representatives, media or civil society but that of Washington. It might deny this but the US State Department already seems to have taken credit for the quick cancellation of the travel ban on Mukhtaran Mai.

Email: Omarq@cyber.net.pk