

Mary Robinson's obligations

Human rights news 19-3-02

Inayatullah

NGO representatives.

Her presence in Pakistan thus became an occasion for politicians and social activists to (a) air their grievances against the government and in particular the discriminatory laws and practices, police high-handedness and the gross violation of human rights in the occupied Kashmir (b) draw her attention to the holocaust in Gujarat, India and (c) seek her good office to secure relief for the brutally treated Pakistani prisoners in Afghanistan.

In a press conference, Mary Robinson spoke about her asking the government to ratify the three international human rights conventions for political and culture rights and one about torture. She advised the administration to review such dis-

and emphasised that the independence of the judiciary was vital for the enforcement of human rights.

A significant result of the UN Human Rights Commissioner's visit to Pakistan was a declared undertaking on her part to seriously address the question of blatant human rights violations in the Indian Kashmir. She appeared to be visibly moved by the first hand information provided to her by a delegation of the Dukhtaran-e-Kashmir in Islamabad as also by the fact sheet handed over to her by the Kashmir Committee. Mary Robinson acknowledged that it was necessary for her to look at a mechanism and possibly constitute an independent commission to examine and assess the gross human rights violations in the occupied

Kashmir to see things for herself as indeed she had done in the case of Chechnya in the face of heavy odds, disregarding Russian reservations. Her response was not unequivocal. She said that a team of UN officials would be sent to Kashmir to report on the circumstances on the ground and referred to certain (unexplained) complexities about visiting the area herself. She did not have much to clarify when it was pointed out that India had been treating the United Nations in a cavalier manner when it came to UN high officials wanting to visit the occupied state. Here it needs to be mentioned that India categorically told even Kofi Annan not to come to New Delhi when he visited this region last. Such negative and in fact defiant attitude on the part of an important and active member of United Nations merits to be highlighted internationally especially when India is also an aspirant for a permanent seat in the Security Council.

Mary Robinson's declared resolve to examine and assess the state of human rights in Kashmir needs to be energetically followed up to ensure that the commitment does not get diluted and the idea relegated to the sidelines later because of forceful and well-crafted Indian pressure

Mary Robinson's declared resolve to examine and assess the state of human rights in Kashmir needs to be energetically followed up to ensure that the commitment does not get diluted and the idea relegated to the sidelines later because of forceful and well-crafted Indian pressure. The opportunity needs to be seized and pursued with vigour and imagination. We should also work for her personal visit to the held state. As they say, 'seeing is believing'. There is no good reason that she should not go to this UN acknowledged disputed area where gross human rights violations over the years by the Indian military and para-military forces have resulted in the killing of thousands of helpless Kashmiri men and women and also in the bulldozing and burning of their homes, schools, shrines and other properties. She need not keep away from her obligations merely because the culprit country is averse to her visit there. Mary Robinson is good enough and brave enough to undertake the proposed trip. It is for us to convince her not to be overly impressed by the Indian sophistry.

criminary laws about women as the Hudood Ordinance as also the blasphemy law and how these were enforced. She said that she appreciated Musharraf government's condemnation of 'honour killings' but a lot more needed to be done to stop such murderous acts. She offered technical assistance in training the police and judicial officers about human rights norms and in particular in addressing the question of torture by the law enforcement agencies.

She wanted more attention on the part of the government on the minorities' rights and their welfare. In her meeting with the Interior Minister she urged the removal of the ban on the holding of political rallies. She further called for establishing a high level statutory commission to monitor the enforcement of human rights and to serve as a bridge between the government and the civil society. She told the lawyers in Lahore that she had also raised the question of induction of military officers as judges in the civil courts

Kashmir. The matter she said would be taken up in Geneva by international human rights experts with a view to making an independent assessment of the situation. In this connection, she recalled her earlier visit to Delhi where two accounts of human rights violations in Kashmir had been brought to her notice.

It does not redound to our previous and present governments' credit that this particular matter had not been taken up with the High Commissioner effectively earlier. This is all the more regrettable when it is realised that well-documented accounts of non-stop atrocities perpetrated by the Indian Security Forces on the hapless Kashmiri men, women and children, as prepared by such prestigious neutral agencies as the Amnesty International and the Human Rights Asia Watch have all along been available.

At her Lahore meeting with the NGOs, I asked the High Commissioner if she had any plans to visit

The writer is a Lahore-based columnist

pacade@brain.net.pk

Two of the eminent UN women who have impressed me most for their dedication to duty and courage are Ms Sadako Ogata and Mary Robinson. The untiring Japanese head of the UNHCR, Madam Sadako would personally go wherever the helpless refugees and victims of war needed succour and support from the international community — whether it were the killing field of Serbia, the bombed and mined villages and towns of Afghanistan or the ravaged Cambodian countryside. She would not only visit the stricken lands but also organise food and shelter for the poor displaced men, women and children and do her utmost to raise funds for the humanitarian tasks entrusted to her.

Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland and presently UN High Commissioner for Human Rights too, has been active and articulate, pursuing the cause of oppressed humanity, travelling all over the world and seeking to influence the governments found deficient in observing human rights. She demonstrated great courage and grit in visiting Chechnya and braved considerable hazards and the Russian opposition in finding out the truth on the spot about the savage treatment of the Chechens by the Moscow security forces.

Madam Robinson's recent visit to Pakistan (after her tour of Afghanistan) and her busy schedule of meetings and discussions with senior government officials and civil society organisations in Islamabad and Lahore provided to her an opportunity to assess the state of human rights in this country. In Islamabad she met President Pervez Musharraf, the Chief Justice of Pakistan, ministers for interior, women's development, minority affairs, law and human rights as well as Kashmiri activists and a large number of political leaders representing major political parties. At Lahore she called on the Governor, addressed the Lahore High Court Bar Association, university students and held an interactive session with the Human Rights Commission as well as the