

OP-ED COLUMNIST

# A Heroine Walking in the Shadow of Death

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
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When I met Mukhtar Mai here two years ago, she was at her wits' end. Her campaign to fight rape and illiteracy had run out of money, and she was selling family possessions to keep her schools operating.

Now so much has changed. Mukhtar, who also goes by the name Mukhtaran Bibi, has become an international celebrity. Her autobiography is the No. 3 best seller in France and is coming out this fall in the U.S., movies are being made about her, and she has been praised by dignitaries like Laura Bush and the French foreign minister.

Pakistan has also provided a paved road, electricity and telephone service to this village, she herself has learned to read in one of her own schools, and her new aid group is flourishing.

Best of all, her campaign is really working: more women seem to be prosecuting rapes and acid attacks, and there's some evidence that such violence is dropping.

But partly because of her success, there's a good chance that Mukhtar will be murdered. "The traditional landowners want me dead," Mukhtar said sadly. "And the government doesn't want me around, either." (You can watch Mukhtar in my video report, "Courage in Pakistan.")

President Pervez Musharraf is a modern man, and I'm sure he is privately repulsed by acid attacks and rapes. In some respects, he's doing a fine job — above all, he's presiding over a stunning 8 percent economic growth rate (those socks you're wearing may be manufactured in Pakistan).

But Mr. Musharraf seems to feel that Mukhtar is casting a spotlight on Pakistan's dark side, so he is leading an effort to bully her into silence.

The authorities confiscate Mukhtar's mail and feed vicious propaganda to sympathetic journalists, portraying her as a liar, a cheat and an unpatriotic dupe of India (and of me).

"My life and death is in God's hands," she said. "That doesn't bother me. But why does the government keep treating me as if I were a liar and criminal?"

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Courage in Pakistan

A top police official has threatened to imprison her for fornication, which would discredit her and remove her from the scene. The charge is ludicrous, for Mukhtar is constantly chaperoned — by rape victims who have sought sanctuary here and sleep on the floor beside her each night.

"For the first time, I feel that the government has a plan to deal with me," Mukhtar told me. And that plan, she said, is to kill her or throw her into prison.

Naseem Akhtar, the principal of Mukhtar's elementary school for girls, added, "I want you to know that

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no matter how we are killed, even if it looks like an accident, it isn't."

The threats have come from high up. Brig. Ijaz Shah, a buddy of President Musharraf's, traveled to Lahore in December to deliver a personal warning. He met Dr. Amna Buttar, an American citizen who has interpreted for Mukhtar in the U.S. and heads a Pakistani-American human rights organization that is supporting her ([www.4anaa.org](http://www.4anaa.org)).

According to Dr. Buttar, Mr. Shah started by defending the president's record on women's rights. But then, alluding to a planned visit by Mukhtar to New York, he added: "We can do anything. ... We can just pay a little money to some black guys in New York and get people killed there."

That's right. The racism is the least of it: one of President Musharraf's closest aides was warning that unless Mukhtar piped down, the government of Pakistan might murder her and her American interpreter on the streets of New York. I asked the Pakistani government why it would do that, and Mr. Shah sent me a statement acknowledging that he had met with Dr. Buttar, but he said it had been a social visit and denied that he had threatened to kill anyone. "The allegations to this effect are baseless," he said.

Just for the record, I don't believe him. Mr. Musharraf should fire him at once.

I make a big deal of Mukhtar because if poor nations like Pakistan are to develop, they need to empower women. When a country educates girls, they grow up to have fewer children and look after them better. They take productive jobs. And plenty of studies show that as women gain influence over family budgets, the money is less likely to go for tobacco, soda or alcohol, and more likely to be invested in small businesses and in children's education.

This means that gender equality is not only a matter of simple justice, but also essential for fighting poverty and achieving economic development. If Pakistan is to become a rich and powerful country, it must empower its women — and that is what Mukhtar's revolution is all about.

So General Musharraf, back off! Leave Mukhtar alone, and go find Osama.

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