

MUKHTAR MAI

**HON. SHEILA JACKSON-LEE**

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Friday, June 24, 2005*

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. I rise today to address the safety and well-being of Ms. Mukhtar Mai in the nation of Pakistan. As the Co-Chair of the Congressional Pakistan Caucus I have been monitoring this situation closely. As a long-standing and active member of the Women's Caucus and the Human Rights Caucus I am greatly concerned about the well-being of this woman who has undergone tremendous suffering in her life.

For those who do not know the story of Mukhtar Mai she was gang raped in 2002 by the order of a tribal council, allegedly as punishment for her brother's affair with a woman from a powerful rival clan in the remote town of Meerwala. Thirty-three-year-old Ms. Mai defied threats and local customs to testify against these suspects. In August of 2002 six men were sentenced to death. But this March, another court overturned five of these convictions and reduced the death sentence of the sixth to life in prison. Twelve men were then rearrested on the Prime Minister's orders based on community safety laws but were freed on June 10 since the law only allows them to be held for a limited time under these laws. Since that time it has been alleged that the Pakistani government has confiscated her passport and forbidden her from leaving Pakistan.

It has come to my attention that efforts have been made by the Pakistani Government to insure the safety and well-being of Ms. Mai. I understand that since this horrific incident occurred in 2002 she has been provided with a security detail and legal assistance in accordance with their laws. However, the judiciary in Pakistan, as it is here in the United States, is independent of the executive branch of the government. The decision made by the court seems ill-considered and is not supported by the Executive branch. It seems that the government plans to have these accused rapists arrested and tried again, this time before the High Court of Pakistan in accordance with their laws.

Representatives from the Government of Pakistan say that they have not in fact barred Ms. Mai from traveling where she pleases and

that she has access to her passport at any time. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli stated on Wednesday that "senior Pakistani officials, both here and in Islamabad" had been contacted regarding Mukhtar Mai and that the State Department has "been informed by the Government of Pakistan that, consistent with Ms. Mukhtar's wishes and at her request, the Government has her passport and that she is satisfied that she can have access to it whenever she wants." Moreover, they have "received renewed assurances from the Pakistani authorities that she is free to travel whenever she so desires." Mr. Ereli went on to say that they have confirmed this with sources close to Ms. Mai. I have also been told that Ms. Mai has appeared on certain TV and satellite outlets and declared that she in fact has not been barred from leaving the country; however I have not personally seen such footage so I can not confirm its validity.

The current Government of Pakistan has tried to rule by a vision of "enlightened moderation," which is to say that the people of Pakistan must raise themselves up through individual achievement and socioeconomic emancipation. One issue which the present government has worked hard to improve is that of women's rights. Currently, there are 73 female members of the National Assembly which has 60 seats open only for women to ensure that they are represented on their legislative body. Similarly, 17 percent of seats in each of the four provincial assemblies have also been reserved for women. In addition, I spoke to the Pakistani Minister of Education a few months and he told me that the national plan for education on Pakistan places great emphasis on ensuring that their female population gets educated. In fact they are working to provide incentives to poorer families in Pakistan to send their girls to school instead of keeping them at home. These are all steps the Pakistani Government under President Musharraf says they are taking to advance the cause of women in Pakistan.

However, there is much, much more work to be done in this area to ensure women's rights. The truth about Pakistan is that there is a great divide between more urban and more rural communities. Mukhtar Mai comes from a more remote area of Pakistan in which tribal law and customs are often held above the law of Pakistan. These tribal areas unfortunately often hold harsh views towards the rights of

women. One of the great heroes of Pakistani independence was Fatima Jinnah who is considered the mother of Pakistan. She was the outspoken and strong-willed sister of Mohammed Ali Jinnah who is considered the founder of Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan had the first woman to head the government of an Islamic State when Benazir Bhutto was sworn in as Prime Minister of Pakistan in December of 1988. The truth remains that Pakistan must ensure the rights and safety of women throughout their nation regardless of tribal law and customs. However, we must also recognize that such large social change takes time and will not be solved easily.

Regardless of the political or international ramifications of this issue let us not forget the pain that Mukhtar Mai has endured. But, while she was brutally victimized she did not allow herself to be a victim. After testifying against her attackers she took the money from that settlement along with many international donations to open a school in her small village. She understands that education is the way to end brutality and ignorance. She even went so far as to enroll the children of her attackers in the school because she will not allow herself to be a hateful person, she wants to bring goodness into the lives of others around her. The verdicts of her attackers being overturned were a great setback for her personally and the entire women's rights movement in Pakistan, but it certainly is not the end. This woman has gone through so much and done such great things that she will not give in. I applaud her, she is the face and voice of a movement that gains strength everyday, one that will not succumb. In tribute to her efforts I will continue to fight for the cause of women's rights and join with Mukhtar Mai and all the women of Pakistan to move forward towards justice and equality.

Furthermore, I have always supported the message of women's rights whether it is here or abroad, whether I have to deliver it to an ally of our nation or one we consider an enemy. Additionally, I join with the women of the United States House of Representatives to unite around protecting women throughout the world and in Pakistan. Today, I believe that the nation of Pakistan must do more to ensure the rights of Pakistani women and I have confidence that they are working towards this end. I pray for Mukhtar Mai and all the women of Pakistan that they will get justice in their lives.