

Lining Up to Be Raped?

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Our close ally President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan visited the U.S. last week and fretted aloud about a surprising problem: The "easiest way" for Pakistani women to make money is to get raped, he said, so they're lining up to be raped and thus making him look bad.

That's right. He's nuts.

"You must understand the environment in Pakistan," The Washington Post quoted him as saying. "This has become a moneymaking concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped."

That comment got Mr. Musharraf in hot water. So over the weekend, Mr. Musharraf denied that he had ever said any such thing - noting that if he had, he would have been "stupid."

True.

The Washington Post reviewed its tapes and reported that it had quoted him correctly. It also added an additional quote from the same interview, in which Mr. Musharraf spoke of rape as an avenue to riches: "It is the easiest way of doing it. Every second person now wants to."

Sexual violence has become a sensitive issue for Mr. Musharraf because of the pioneering work of women like Mukhtaran Bibi, whom a tribal council sentenced to be gang-raped as a way to punish her brother - and who then used her compensation money to start schools and launch a nationwide anti-rape campaign. After I wrote about her last year, Times readers sent her a total of \$160,000, which she is using to start an ambulance service, operate schools and campaign for women's rights.

Fearing that Ms. Mukhtaran's anti-rape campaign would make his country look bad, General Musharraf barred her from traveling to the U.S. to attend a conference. When she protested to me and others, the government kidnapped her to keep her from complaining, releasing her only after Condi Rice raised the issue with the Pakistani government.

Then in July and August, I wrote about Dr. Shazia Khalid, a Pakistani physician whom the authorities drugged, put in a mental hospital, threatened to kill and finally exiled to keep her from recounting her rape.

The latest victim to come forward is Sonia Naz, a 23-year-old woman whose husband disappeared. Desperate, she went to the National Assembly building in Islamabad to see

if she could get help. Then, she says, the police arrested her and repeatedly stripped her, raped her and beat her.

Embarrassed by these revelations, Mr. Musharraf held a conference in Pakistan this month on women's issues. He wore a necktie with blue and pink, which he said could reflect cooperation between men and women - and then he denounced Dr. Shazia.

Here in New York on Saturday, General Musharraf held a meeting with an invited audience to show himself off as a sensitive man. The meeting started awkwardly when he tried to demonstrate his feminist credentials by saying he opposed violence against women because it's unchivalrous toward the weaker sex. Then, in response to skeptical questions, Mr. Musharraf lost his temper, shouting at audience members and threatening to "get" anyone who exposed Pakistan's problems to the world.

"He totally lost it," said Yasmeen Hassan, a Pakistani lawyer in New York who was present. "It's so unbecoming of a president to get into shouting matches, and to say, 'I'm going to get you.' "

Meanwhile, activists in Pakistan say that the government is stepping up its harassment of women's groups. I tried to phone Ms. Mukhtaran yesterday, but the government seemed to be blocking international calls to her line. Finally I was able to interview her by a circuitous route. She said that all her mail is now intercepted and that the government had just transferred away two senior police officials who had supervised her bodyguards and tried to protect her.

"I feel insecure and controlled," she said.

The irony is that while he's a nitwit on social issues, General Musharraf has proved himself to be a good economic manager, and the 7 percent growth rates generated by his reforms will help undermine fundamentalism and sexual violence in the long run. During his visit, Mr. Musharraf pressed for a free-trade area between the U.S. and Pakistan, and that's a great idea to promote Pakistan's development.

So let's give Mr. Musharraf a free-trade deal - but only on the condition that he clamp down not on Pakistani women fighting against rape, but on Osama bin Laden.

For more information on Mukhtaran Bibi, Shazia Khalid and other rape victims from Pakistan, visit www.4anaa.org or www.equalitynow.org.