

Addressing Our Human Rights Crisis

delivered by

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Mr. Speaker and Distinguished Members of the National Assembly:

I speak today on an issue of increasing urgency to the people of Pakistan, and to Pakistan's place in a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected world.

As Leader of the Opposition and Chairperson of the PPP, I come not with vindictiveness nor malice towards the present government. Rather, I am offering what I trust will be taken in the spirit of national unity, steps to take together -- by all Parties -- for the good of our people, for the good of the country, and for our common future.

I draw your attention to the increasingly deteriorating state of human rights in Pakistan. More importantly, I rise today to propose, and offer a series of proactive and positive steps to address this crisis.

Mr. Speaker, it is time for all of us, those who have been in power, those currently in power, and those who wish to be in power, to rise above our petty differences; to join together and lay the groundwork for a proud nation, a strong nation, a nation which protects our people, which strengthens our place in an increasingly competitive world, and which leaves for our children a lasting legacy of trust, of opportunity and of hope.

As many of you know, since leaving the Prime Minister's office last November, I have had the opportunity of traveling abroad. *Mr. Speaker, Sir*, what I hear about Pakistan when I am away from home is disturbing. How others in the world perceive our good country is of great concern to me, and should be to all of us responsible for governing this great nation.

It is clear, *Mr. Speaker*, that Pakistan is viewed as a lawless land.

It is clear, *Mr. Speaker*, that Pakistan has been viewed by many in the international community as a nation which allowed safe haven to murderers, kidnappers, thieves and scoundrels.

It is clear, *Mr. Speaker*, that Pakistan is not viewed as one of the more desirable places in which to conduct business.

It is clear, *Mr. Speaker*, that the people of Pakistan are not keeping pace with the improving standard of living and quality of life which an increasing number of open and free societies now enjoy.

It is clear, *Mr. Speaker*, that Pakistan since the time of our fragile democracy's first demise -- and in particular the imposition of Marshall Law following my father's hanging-- has been a country high on the list of nations perceived to be run by self serving and corrupt individuals, more concerned with their own power than ruling in the name of the people, for the people.

Indeed, my own two governments have been prey to these same allegations, a fact which underscores my own deep and painful understanding of how difficult it is to overcome and reform a society which for too many years has been gutted and torn asunder by self-serving and corrupt men.

I would recall for all of us here the desires of our founding fathers to create a country for the Muslims of South Asia where they can live in peace, to grow and to prosper.

Our founding fathers sought to build a nation which ensured equal and just rights for Muslims, for we felt unjustly treated by the British and the Hindus. Yes, just and equal treatment.

I would venture to say that our series of governments since that time have precious little to answer for in that regard.

I must ask this distinguished Assembly, chosen by the people to improve their condition in life: Have we, indeed, helped to usher in a country where our own people can live and prosper; or have we created a nation where greed, personal aggrandizement and power are more important than family, more important than our faith in our religious beliefs, and more important than our ability to provide a better world for our children than that which we ourselves inherited?

As we consider the crisis of human rights in Pakistan, let me remind all of us of the words of our own constitution, that document which all of us serve, and to which we owe our respect and allegiance:

"...it is the will of the people of Pakistan to establish an order --... Wherein the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed; ... Wherein shall be guaranteed fundamental rights, including equality of status, of opportunity and before law, social economic and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief and faith, worship and association, subject to law and public morality; Wherein adequate provision shall be made to safeguard the legitimate interests of minorities and backward and depressed classes; Wherein the independence of the judiciary shall be fully secured...."

Preamble to the Constitution of Pakistan of 1973

In the face of these inspirational ideals, let us review the current situation in Pakistan:

According to numerous credible sources, both from within Pakistan and the international community:

While a small group grows increasingly rich, some 35 million of our citizens live in absolute poverty, 60 million do not have access to any health facilities, 67 million people are without safe drinking water and 89 million people are deprived of basic sanitation.

Scores of extrajudicial executions – murders by government authorities-- are reported each year. Indeed, last year alone more than 136 extrajudicial killings were under investigation in Karachi alone. And these were just the reported cases.

I remind my distinguished colleagues that our own constitution states, in Article 9, that

“no person shall be deprived of life or liberty save in accordance with law”.

According to the latest reports received by the Pakistan Peoples Party:

- Dozens of prisoners of conscience have been held; many opponents of government charged with criminal offenses may also be prisoners of conscience.
- Torture remains widespread, reportedly leading to scores of deaths.
- Many people "disappeared".
- Armed opposition groups committed human rights abuses, including deliberate and arbitrary killings.
- Torture, including rape, in police and paramilitary custody was widespread and systematic.
- Journalists are intimidated on a regular basis, and our radio stations are restricted in their ability to broadcast freely and from impartial sources.
- Businessmen, Bureaucrats, Police Officers have been held on trumped up charges, subjected to torture and humiliation, threats, coercion and eviction from homes to fulfill political agendas.

At this moment my own husband, an elected Senator, lies in jail, as does my brother-in-law and other supporters (I have attached a list of such persons with the text of my speech for distribution to the media), without any substantiated evidence for the charges brought against him, without access to medical assistance, and in a situation which, to most outside observers is little more than a political witch-hunt of one party to another.

Huge sums of national revenues have been squandered on the pretext of accountability.

Our law enforcing agencies, paid for by the taxpayers to protect them from undue harm, are perceived as an instrument of intimidation, torture and death. Our army seems to stand above national laws. Our intelligence and security services run without check.

This is not a government system which protects the people, which provides for the people. This is a government which robs our people of their dignity, their hope, even their lives. To any casual observer of history, such a government can not long survive the growing frustrations, anger and humiliation of the people it is empowered to serve.

Mr. Speaker, we, and by that I mean all of us who have the privilege to govern, and have been doing so for many years, have allowed a human rights crisis of unparalleled proportions to not only remain unsolved, but in many instances, to even be EXASPERATED.

SOLUTIONS

As the Leader of the Opposition, one of my duties to the country and the people is to propose alternative solutions.

I come to do that today.

Herewith is a PPP-sponsored plan to address the growing human rights crisis in our country:

1. Human Rights Hotline

First: In order to move forward without delay, the PPP, under my leadership, announces today the creation of a "Human Rights Hotline". I openly invite any citizen of Pakistan who has a grievance against any government entity which they feel has unduly and unjustly taken away their basic freedoms of equal treatment under a fair and open judicial process of due law to call the **Pakistan Peoples Party Human Rights Hotline**. We will document your case. We will take steps to bring the grievance before the correct authorities. We will publish the findings of the Hot Line, and keep records of the abuses and corrections to those abuses.

Anyone may reach the Human Rights Hotline by calling: **111-888-444**. This is a first step, a small step, and one which I feel is necessary for our governing parties to take to begin to regain the trust of our own people. My own party will shoulder this responsibility, this cost and this effort.

2. Independent Human Rights Commission

Second, any government, to truly represent the people, must keep in check attempts to abuse power. To do so requires open and free checks and balances, independence from influence, and respect for a society based on the rule of law and due process. Our country has a Human Rights Commission, but this commission has become a lone voice which needs strengthening.

The Ministry of Human Rights, now integrated within the Ministry of Justice, is under pressure to please whichever government is in power. Such a system does not provide for trustworthy review.

To rectify this, we propose, and invite all other parties in the National Assembly to join with us, in the creation of a new Human Rights Commission, to be created by the National Assembly, report to the National Assembly with equal representation to the Treasury and Opposition benches.

We propose, that the Commission include prominent Pakistanis from all Parties appointed by consensus between the Leader of the of the House and the Leader of the Opposition, who sit for a minimum of three years' term not to be renewed, and who are empowered by the National Assembly to subpoena and bring to bear the full powers of judicial punishment for crimes against basic and fundamental human rights.

3. Human Rights Conference of Experts

Third: The PPP, in cooperation with any other party who so chooses to join with us, does hereby call for a Human Rights Conference of Experts, to be held in late spring, 1998. We invite the leading human rights experts from around the world to assist us in assessing the full scope of the human rights crisis in Pakistan, and in publicly proposing to our people solutions for solving this crisis.

Specifically, we call upon the leading human rights experts from the Carter Center, Amnesty International, the Conference of Islamic Nations, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the United Nations, and our own Ministry of Human Rights, to join together in evaluating, documenting and proposing solutions to this growing crisis of human rights.

4. Independent Office of Internal Police Investigation

Fourth: The PPP calls for the creation, empowerment and strengthening of an Independent Office of Internal Police Investigation, an office which independently can investigate internal police violations of law. We propose that the Inspector Generals Police be made fully independent in all postings, transfers and disciplinary action to free the police from government interference on political grounds.

We must ensure that our police force is held accountable to the same legal standards that we expect of our citizens. There is no worse fate than the loss of this basic covenant with our people, for they, too will eventually take the law into their own hands. We, the privileged who have the honor and the duty to rule, will be the first casualties of this anarchy.

5. Pakistan Police Academy

Fifth: The PPP calls for the establishment of the Pakistan Police Academy on the lines of Pakistan Military Academy and Command and Staff College Quetta, to impart basic and advance training to the police officers. In fact people government had initiated steps to establish a police academy but could not succeed due to the dismissal of the government.

6. Specific Legislative Actions

Sixth: I ask for the cooperation of all parties to repeal, amend and make modifications to the following existing statues which, over time, have greatly eroded the basic human rights of our people:

1. We must revoke the Executive branch's ability to influence what must be an independent judiciary. First and foremost, let us revoke the ability of the President and the Prime Minister to transfer Supreme Court Justices and Justices of the Provincial High Courts. Let us all accept the ruling of a free court, of an impartial court, and reinstall faith in the rule of law.
2. We must curb the governments ability to invade the privacy of our citizens, and most specifically curb the governments ability to wire-tap and censor domestic and foreign mail. The practice, in times of true national threat - as in war - may have some basic national security justifications. In times of peace, particularly when we are all trying to build lasting democratic institutions, wire-tapping and censorship undercut this process at its very core.

I urge the National Assembly to take the necessary actions to curb this abuse of power, and for the government to repeal the December 15, 1997, act by the interim government allowing the government to censor foreign and domestic mail by the Special Branch and the ISI.

3. We must amend the Public Order Ordinance (MPO) of 1960 by reducing the time frame for detention without trial from three months to three weeks. The use of imprisonment without trial is a barbaric use of intimidation. This must cease, and along with it the ability of a Review Board to extend detention without trial unless in the case of extreme national security risk.
4. Our people deserve a free press. Informed citizens are a necessary component of any democracy. Let us take the first step and revoke restrictions on domestic radio to broadcast news other than from the APP.
5. Our police force is woefully untrained in the basic Code of Criminal Procedures, a code which, if followed and implemented, would guarantee a much higher degree of protection from abuse for our citizens. Let us take a small but important step and increase funding for policy training in the Code of Criminal Procedure and establish a review board within the police departments for monitoring compliance with the Code.
6. Lastly, and returning to my original statements on the perception which Pakistan has to many overseas, our country has not ratified many of the basic human rights conventions now in existence throughout the world. We are perceived to be a backward nation by many, and our refusal to pass these common international provisions strengthens that perception.

Thus, I urge this Assembly and the government to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

CLOSING

In closing, *Mr. Speaker*, let me say that I offer these solutions not in the spirit of partisan bickering, nor the placing of blame on any one government or another. All of us here are the unfortunate recipients of many years of repressive rule and unresponsive government which has tended to crush the will of the people more than it has launched their aspirations.

It is in this light, with full knowledge of the mistakes that have been made in the past, that I hope we can all move forward and address what has become an unconscionable and deplorable situation - our loss of human rights, dignity and due process.

The PPP looks forward towards a brighter future for our people. The PPP stands ready to help build, in cooperation with all facets of society in Pakistan, a new foundation of respect for life, of respect for law, of respect for the basic rights of the individual.

I thank you, and the People of Pakistan thank you.