

Eyewitness: Karachi, May 12, 2007

A narrative of the events of “Black Saturday” and the “stop-the-blame-game” argument

“Here in Karachi, we avoid ‘name calling’ and ‘finger pointing’ due to fear of having our knees drilled...”

By Beena Sarwar

ON May 12, 2007, Karachi witnessed orchestrated mayhem. Such carnage is hardly unique to Karachi or to Pakistan -- law enforcement agencies have stood by and even participated in worse massacres elsewhere, like Northern Ireland and Gujarat, India. In Karachi that day, “only” about 46 lives were lost, and 150 or so injured.

But this was the first time in Pakistan that live television cameras captured the situation for viewers to see: government tankers used to block off routes to the airport, police and rangers conspicuous by their absence or standing idle as armed men ran amok on the streets of Karachi, corpses and wounded bodies lying by the wayside in pools of blood.

The security plans chalked out for May 12 were abandoned overnight. The Sindh home department withdrew the weapons of most law enforcement personnel in Karachi on May 12. Armed only with batons, the 15,000 or policemen deployed in the city avoided the violent areas. Rangers who were to hold key positions on the ‘flyovers’ on the main airport road were nowhere in sight. Instead, armed men in civilian clothes held those posts, and fired into the crowds trying to reach the airport to receive the Chief Justice stranded inside.

At 5:00am on Saturday morning, Shahrah-e-Faisal (Drigh Road), the main airport route normally trafficked at all hours, was deserted as a journalist friend in Karachi found who was out and about early. He emailed me: “I saw something which gave me the chills -- no police or Rangers on the roads, just kids with guns guiding trucks, tankers to block the intersections, entry and exit points on the main artery of city. I saw an NLC truck also being used to block the road (picture attached). We all know NLC is Pakistan’s largest trucking company, owned and managed by the army. Tie-rods were being removed from front tires so the vehicles could not be moved even by a tow truck. I thought, ‘What if ambulances are required to move on Sharah-e-Faisal?’ My thought was immediately answered when I saw two KKF ambulances moving freely (Khidmat-Khalq Foundation, MQM's social service wing) and MQM activists among those supervising the blockade.”

Getting to office took him two hours, a journey that even during rush hour takes only 45 minutes. “I told my colleagues about my fear and almost all of them told me to relax as MQM is not that stupid they will not repeat the 1992 & 94 stupidity. By 12 noon Karachi was bleeding.”

“There were bodies lying at every street intersection,” ‘Uzi’, a reporter related later on her blog. “We picked up a whole bunch of them and put them inside police mobiles

parked nearby.” As for the police and the Rangers: “They did NOTHING! They stood around and LOITERED while my city was tainted with blood.”

The areas she covered were the second bloodiest that day. It took her nearly an hour to get to Jinnah’s mausoleum (Mazar-e-Quaid), normally a 15-20 minute drive from her house. At Kashmir Road the cab driver couldn't go any further and she walked the remaining distance. At around 01:00 p.m., she was stopped by a political worker who put a TT pistol to her forehead (“NOT the temple, the FOREHEAD).” She was allowed to proceed after showing her press card.

Over at the Sindh High Court, lawyer Ayesha Tammy Haq sent this text message around 5 pm Karachi time: "In the High court. Things getting worse. Judges will not leave as there will be a rampage. I was with the CJ. City courts being attacked as re Aaj and Geo. We are going to have army rule in Karachi. It looks like that was always the plan i.e. redemption of the army.” (Later in an interview, General Musharraf denied such plans and reasserted his commitment to democratic politics. But then, he has also justified what happened in Karachi as “the political activity” of a political party attempting to show its strength to its constituency – interview with Talat Hussain, Aaj TV, May 18, 2007)

Another lawyer emailed: “Not only was the Sindh High Court under virtual siege by armed activists, but lawyers attempting enter the Court were repeatedly beaten and roughed up. The armed activists did not even spare the Judges of the High Court.” One judge was held at gun point and his car damaged. “While holding me at gun point, the youth called someone and stated ‘*Yeh bolta hai kay High Court ka judge hai...kya karun is ka?...achaa theek hai, phir janay daita houn.*’ (He says he’s a judge of the High Court. What should I do with him? Ok then, will let him go).” Many judges, unable to drive to the Sindh High Court, had to leave their official ‘flag’ cars and make their way through menacing crowds and climb over the court’s back wall in order to reach their chambers.

Munir A. Malik, one of the 25 lawyers accompanying Chief Justice Iftikhar Choudhry from Islamabad to Karachi, narrates how they were forced to remain inside the airport. The Sindh government representatives offered to transport the Chief Justice by helicopter but this offer was for him alone. Since the lawyers with him had already foiled the attempts of “two uniformed people” to “snatch the CJP and take him from the other side,” he refused. (‘Story at the airport’, *The News on Sunday*, Special Report, May 20, 2007)

Armed men attacked lawyers at Malir District Bar, Iftikhar Choudhry’s scheduled first stop in Karachi, killing a lawyer and injuring several others, including female lawyers. The Chief Justice and his team, of course, were ‘externed’ to Islamabad after several hours. Late that night, residents in the low-income Ranchore Lines *mohalla* were awakened by loud banging on their doors. One resident relates that it was two young boys distributing freshly cooked biryani and suji in plastic bags: “*Yeh chief justice ki wapsi ki khushi mein hai*” (This is to celebrate the Chief Justice’s return [to Islamabad]).

On the Karachi streets, Uzi’s press card had saved her again at around 05:00 p.m. as she and a colleague tried to reach the Rangers Headquarters in Dawood College. “A car

chockfull of ammunition passed in front of us, stopped, backed up and stopped in front of us, Kalashnikovs pointing at the two of us from the windows. We showed our press cards and the car moved on. NEVER in my LIFE have I felt more grateful to my press card than I did yesterday.”

At around 06:00 p.m., she and her colleague were trapped by gunshots all around. “Short of climbing the walls and entering one of the houses around, there really was no other place for us to go.” They stopped a police mobile and asked which way would be safe to go. The answer, accompanied by laughter: “You can be killed wherever you go. Choose your place.”

In published reports, journalists prudently avoided naming the parties involved. “Young men toting flags and banners had set up camp outside the airport departure lounge. They hid, however, when policemen came by. Reporters in the vicinity were asked whether they had seen any political activists around. Munawar Pirzada (from Daily Times) said that he had seen some nearby. After the policemen had left, the activists came up to the reporter, dragged him by the hair and took him aside. They then proceeded to threaten him with dire consequences if he said anything the next time the policemen came around” (Urooj Zia, *Daily Times*, May 14).

But the affiliation of these gangs was visible in the live coverage provided by several private television channels, which showed plainclothes men brandishing weapons on the deserted roads, using government tankers as cover, exchanging gunfire with unseen opponents, the tri-colour MQM flag visible on their motorcycles.

After Aaj TV’s continuous live coverage of such scenes, armed men attacked the television station, firing at it for several hours. Instead of stopping the coverage, Aaj showed live footage of reporters ducking behind a desk, shots being fired at their office, as anchor Talat Hussain provided an account of the situation on the phone. Reporters in the area asked the Rangers posted nearby to help the Aaj workers trapped inside their building. The answer: “We’re helpless. We can’t do anything unless we have orders from above.”

Aaj TV’s refusal to suspend its live coverage emboldened the new breed of ‘citizen journalists’. “My faith in independent media was restored and I was confident that I am not alone,” wrote one blogger. He had hesitated to post out the testimony of a doctor at a Karachi hospital who witnessed armed political workers turn up to finish off an injured political worker. Encouraged by the Aaj re-broadcasting of images that clearly showed the involvement of MQM workers in the violence, he published the testimony with a disclaimer that “it was an anonymously posted comment and could be entirely false, you be a judge for yourself.”

The testimony was apparently sent by a doctor who had been at work for several hours attending to multiple gunshot wound victims in his hospital lobby, where a makeshift emergency room had been set up. Nothing, he writes, “struck down my soul more than what 9 fully armed workers of MQM along with 2 sector office bearers did. They tried to

drag out the wounded and dying body of a Sunni Teri worker (whose identity they later learnt) for presumably finishing him off.” The protesting doctors were slapped around and dragged by their legs to the back of the gurney alley. With “shotguns, pistols and ak-47's in hand,” the men ran back to the lobby presumably to find their target again.

The doctor ran out to the rangers and police near the hospital front gate. Their answer to his appeal: *“Jaante ho inn logon ko phir bhi kyon larta ho...hamain upar se order hai ke inn ko char baje tak karne do jo karna hai. Char baje ke baad kuch dekhainge’* (When you know who these people are why do you still fight them ... we have orders from above to let them do whatever they want until 4pm. After 4pm we will see).

As a previous MQM supporter, the doctor had recognized some of the assailants and called a friend related to MQM deputy leader Farooq Sattar. Five minutes later the men received a phone call and left, threatening the doctors (and stealing one of their cell phones, *“Chikna set hai”* -- it's a cool set). “The guy they had come looking for had been shot one more time in the head. The o.t dress we had dressed him in 10 mins earlier was freshly bloody.” Full text at:

http://karachi.metblogs.com/archives/2007/05/is_this_what_ha.phtml

There is a story behind each of those who were killed, some belonging to one or other political party, and others just because they were there. Masked men stopped ambulances and sprayed them with bullets, killing an Edhi Ambulance driver, Faizur Rahman Khan, 65, when he refused to throw out a wounded person he was transporting to hospital from near the airport; the wounded man was also shot again. Armed gangs herded passers-by into an alley and shot dead a young overlock machine operator along with another man, in front of two colleagues who were also shot but survived to tell the tale (‘They shot us one by one...’ by Munawar Pirzada, *Daily Times*, May 14, 2007 -

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007/05/14/story_14-5-2007_pg12_3).

There have been reports about an SHO who guided a procession into an ambush and a pregnant woman who had to deliver her baby in the car when armed men refused to let her proceed to the hospital with her husband. The Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) reports that several journalists were manhandled and nine wounded. Some TV cameramen were beaten and their cameras snatched or damaged.

In all these stories of horror, there is at least one amusing aside: the stranded reporter Uzi had the thrill of getting to ride a motorbike when her editors sent a senior reporter to pick her up. “You couldn't use a car etc, because on a bike your press card was visible, and that was a kind of immunity. In a car or a van, they'd shoot at you on sight. So yeah, I got to ride pillion on a bike, and I didn't sit sideways either, like women usually do here. :D I sat like guys usually do – ‘handsfree mode.’ :D Initially I was scared shitless, but then I got used to it, and it was AWESOME -- like flying! MQM-waalahs on the way kept turning and staring at the weird Chick who was riding pillion like guys do and didn't have to hold on to anything to maintain her balance. :D AWESOME, it was! I want a bike now! :P”

All power to Uzi, I say. I hope she gets her bike and I hope she gets to ride it. Someone

should do a study on why Pakistan is the only Southasian country where it's a no-no for women to cycle or drive scooters, or sit pillion astride (rather than side-saddle as they do, uncomfortably and dangerously, sometimes holding on to several children). It wasn't always that way – until the 1960s college girls in Lahore, Karachi, even Peshawar bicycled around pretty freely, some even in saris. A trivial matter perhaps, given what's happening in the country but these issues are not entirely unlinked.

Karachi educationist, Anwar Abbas, later emailed: “My son-in-law and daughter who live in a building adjoining Baloch colony flyover had a good look at the ‘thugs’ in action from their rooftop. Their only regret is that they did not have a camera to capture the ghastly scenes.” They returned to their flat because their little daughter was alone with the maid and because the ‘thugs’ had also climbed the roofs of adjoining buildings in order to obtain an aerial view of their targets and shoot at random.

He added: “It is not important which group they belonged to; it is important that they could behave the way they did in complete disregard to the rule of law; if indeed the law was awake or not in collusion with the ‘thugs’.” Many others, including Aaj TV’s Talat Hussain and MQM’s Dr. Farooq Sattar have also suggested that the “blame game” be avoided.

But a lawyer friend, “angry and distressed in Karachi”, argues that “If we avoid ‘name calling’ and ‘finger pointing’, we will simply be brushing the events of last Saturday under the carpet of indifference. Here in Karachi, we avoid ‘name calling’ and ‘finger pointing’ due to fear of having our knees drilled. Even Urdu speaking lawyers, while talking of last Saturday’s events at the Sindh High Court look over their shoulders and speak in hushed tones when mentioning the name of MQM...

“As we try to understand the carnage of 12th May, we have to ask the following question: Which political group stands to lose the most in a Musharraf ouster? Not the PML (Q). The Chaudhrys and their ilk will merely disperse and filter back into the PML (N) or the PPP. The unprecedented power and privilege of the MQM however is firmly tied with Musharraf’s hold in Islamabad. It was the threat to their benefactor from the supporters of the Chief Justice, which unleashed the gunmen on 12th May. Zaffar Abbas is correct when he writes that Karachi was only at peace for the past many years because it suited its militants ('Back to the future?' *Dawn*, May 14, 2007)...

“‘Finger pointing’ is necessary, because throughout our history, instead of a catharsis, we simply go through a ‘*jo ho gaya ab bhool jaao, aagay daikho*’ (forget what has happened) attitude. Already, with the President’s pat on the back at the emergency meeting of the ruling party in Islamabad (on Monday) the MQM is back on the front foot...

“Although it is unlikely that the perpetrators of Saturday’s violence will ever be brought to justice, at least they should continue to be exposed before the entire country. More importantly, they should face the consequence of such exposure. Public image is very

important to the MQM and the national outrage at their conduct may be the best prospect of compelling them to change their ways.”

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