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## SC decision disappoints Mai, women bodies

Gang-rape victim fears Mastoi tribe may seek revenge; civil society protests verdict, pays tributes to Mai

### Our correspondents

ISLAMABAD: The Supreme Court decision to acquit five out of six accused in the high profile Mukhtaran Mai gang-rape case has gravely disappointed the internationally recognised icon of courage and resistance from Meerwala.

The three-member bench of the apex court upheld the ruling of the Lahore High Court (LHC) of 2005 and acquitted five accused for lack of evidence.

Terming the decision 'terribly unjust', Mukhtaran Mai told The News from Meerwala: "I leave my case to Allah," expressing deep disappointment in the justice delivery system in the country. "I am told that the FIR was weak. Was it my fault that the police did not do its job?" she lamented.

She said that she has no faith left in the judicial system and is unsure to go for a review of the SC verdict adding that a final decision in this regard will be taken after consulting her lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan. Mukhtaran said that she had wanted to be present in the court for the hearing but her lawyer had advised her against it.

Expressing serious apprehensions about her safety she said that she along with her family members could be harmed by the Mastoi tribesmen who live in the same area and are known for being ruthlessly vengeful. Interestingly, eight children of the same tribe attend Mukhtaran Secondary school. "I have nothing against them. I have admitted them because they are innocent and must not be deprived of schooling," Mukhtaran said. The school was formed in late 2002 with four girl students. Nine years later its enrolment is one thousand plus and is steadily shaping Mukhtaran-led social change in Meerwala — a remote and dusty village of district Muzaffargarh.

Mukhtaran was gang raped on 22nd July 2002 on the orders of the village council as a

punishment for her younger brother's suspected relationship with a woman from the rival Mastoi tribe. Later, investigations proved however that the boy had been molested by three Mastoi tribesmen. The leader of the village council and five others were convicted and sentenced to death by the Anti-Terrorist Court but later the decision was overturned by the LHC which released six out of five accused for gang-rape and commuted Abdul Khaliq's death sentence into life imprisonment; perhaps for lack of evidence.

Mukhtaran told journalists in an online conference from Meerwala that despite the terrible injustice she is not feeling defeated and will continue with her struggle for gender dignity.

Meanwhile, civil society representatives and women rights activists gathered at the D-Chowk of the federal capital to protest the court verdict.

The protesters which included a large number of students, first gathered in front of National Press Club and then marched towards the Supreme Court to register their concern. They were stopped by law enforcement agencies at D-Chowk where they chanted slogans in the favour of Mukhtaran Mai and dispersed peacefully. The protest was organised under the forum of Awami Jamhori Ittehad.

The protestors demanded justice for Mukhtaran Mai and for the women of Pakistan. They were holding placards inscribed with slogans in favour of Mai. They also had telephonic conversation with Mai and assured their support to her. "She was crying like anything on the telephone. It is really a black day for the women of Pakistan," said one young protestor.

Immediately after the decision was announced, representatives of civil society organisations and women rights activists convened an emergency meeting at the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) to register their protest.

The NCSW and members of Insani Huqooq Ittehad (IHI) including PODA, Mehergargh, Aurat Foundation, Rozan, Sungi, Bedari, Ethno Media, Pattan and SPO attended the meeting and expressed deep shock and disappointment over the verdict.

In a joint press statement issued after the meeting, they said that the judgment did prove that Mukhtaran was raped because one accused did get life imprisonment while others were acquitted. "We are surprised to see why only one accused was punished and others were acquitted on a charge of gang-rape," said the statement.

It mentions that the NCSW and members of civil society feel that this was the reflection of a biased and inefficient criminal justice system in the country. "This case has been a classic example of how facts are distorted and documentation of the evidence is tampered with in such cases at all levels."

The group expressed concern at the long delays to dispense justice. "The victim was raped in 2002 on the instructions of the local Panchayat. In 2005 the chief justice of the superior court took suo moto notice of the case. Despite the intervention it took more than nine years to come up with this decision, which is a source of concern for the women of Pakistan."

It says that although the court could have its own reasons, it is feared that this decision might further strengthen the anti-women parallel legal and judicial systems and mechanisms in the country.

It further mentions that the decision of Mukhtaran mai case discourages survivors of rape and gang-rape to report. "However, we are proud of Mukhtaran Mai, who stood bravely against all intimidation and harassment and has refused to buckle under life threats. She has given a message of courage and hope to all women victims of our country. We consider her a role model for women of Pakistan."