

Acceptance Speech By Ahmed Rashid On Receiving The “Nisar Osmani Award” For Courage In Journalism,’ Awarded By The Human Rights Commission Of Pakistan (HRCP) On March 25, 2001.

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I am deeply grateful to the Council of HRCP, its elected representatives and members for awarding me this coveted prize. I would especially like to thank HRCP Chairperson Afrasiab Khattak, General Secretary Hina Jilani, Director I.A.Rehman as well as Asma Jehangir and Dr.Mobashir Hassan. I have no words to describe my feelings at the moment because this is for the first time, after more than 20 years in journalism, that a Pakistani organization with such enormous credibility as the HRCP, has acknowledged my work on covering Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. No amount of international recognition can make up for being acknowledged in one's own country, in one's own home and by one's own peers who I so deeply respect. I am deeply moved and enormously grateful. HRCP's work in increasing awareness about human and minority rights, poverty and political and press freedoms in Pakistan has no parallel.

I would also like to pay tribute to Nisar Osmani, a journalist of impeccable credibility who faced down three military regimes and who was a mentor and a friend to so many young, aspiring journalists like myself for decades. We have every reason to remember him here today as Pakistan goes through another period of turmoil and crisis. I would also like to pay tribute to the other two recipients of this prize Zamir Niazi and Razia Bhatti of Newsline who advanced the cause of a free press, investigative journalism and support for the democratic process. I would also like to thank my parents and my sisters who have been a constant source of inspiration and especially my wife Angie and our two children who have put up with my long absences from home.

I have covered the brutal, tragic conflict in Afghanistan for the past 23 years. That conflict also took me to Central Asia for the first time in 1988. My persistence has been due to the enduring courage, warmth and formidable character of the freedom loving Afghan people who today, even after all these years of war, are still facing an unprecedented assault on their independence, culture, history and faith in Islam as a religion of peace and equal rights for men and women. But my persistence in sticking to this story for so long has also been my desire to journalistically write about and unveil the secretive decision making process of Pakistan's Afghan policy over the past 23 years. During the past ten years Pakistan has been involved in the war in Afghanistan alongside one or another of the Afghan factions and most Pakistanis have been unaware of this involvement and the implications it is having in the body politic of our country. This is what I would briefly like to speak to you about today.

Much as I respect and admire the Afghan people, as a Pakistani I can only want, first and foremost, the best for my own country. For too long we have all stood as silent spectators and watched as Pakistan's political and economic development and progress is sacrificed on the altar of a foreign policy wanting to support one or other Afghan faction and committing excesses of interference, which has only encouraged other neighbouring states to step up their interference in Afghanistan.

Pakistan played a heroic role in supporting the Afghan people's resistance to the invasion by Soviet troops in 1979. At great risk to its own integrity Pakistan hosted millions of Afghan

refugees, allowed its soil to be used for Western military supplies to the Afghan Mujheddin and internationally advocated the territorial independence and integrity of the Afghan state. Why is it today that every ordinary Afghan you speak to has not a kind word to say about Pakistan ? In fact since Kabul fell to the Mujheddin in 1992 our policies have created a wave of criticism and even hatred for Pakistan amongst many Afghans. The majority of Afghans blame us for being the single biggest contributor to the continuing war in their homeland. Today we stand isolated in the community of nations due to our Afghan policy. We stand isolated in the region as all our neighbours condemn our policies, while they send munitions to opposing factions in Afghanistan.

Let us not beat around the bush here. For the past ten years successive elected and non-elected governments in Islamabad have poured munitions and logistic backing in support of first one and then another Afghan faction. Quite separately during the past seven years, between 50-60,000 young Pakistani militants have gone to fight in Afghanistan. Many have died there never to return, many have participated in the worst ethnic and sectarian massacres that have taken place in Afghanistan's history. Pakistani interference has contributed to the enormous human suffering in Afghanistan. Pakistani munitions have helped destroy Afghan cities and villages and given the justification for other neighbouring countries to do the same. I ask you here today, with such policies have we embraced the Afghan people or have we created more hatred for ourselves and tension in the region. As Afghanistan's largest neighbour, should Pakistan have a policy and a role as a peace maker by treating all Afghan ethnic groups equally or should we continue to take sides in their war ?

Today Afghanistan is utterly destroyed, there is no functioning state, the humanitarian crisis there is the gravest in the world, the country is the center for the export of Islamic extremism across the region, terrorism, heroin and weapons. The reason is not the fault of the poor Afghan people, but the ambitions of a handful of ambitious warlords and the continued interference of outside powers who fuel this war. I can safely tell you, cut the supplies of military equipment to all sides and the war machines will dry up within months.

What has been the result of these policies for Pakistan's internal dynamics. In the 1980s we suffered from the spread of what was then called "the kalashnikov culture". Today I do not need to tell you that the situation is much worse. For the past ten years every single ministry in Islamabad, every single domestic policy programme, even our desperately needed economic revival are partially being held hostage by our Afghan policy - whether it is trying to encourage foreign investment, dealing with the sectarian issue, promoting modern educational programmes or ending our diplomatic isolation. As citizens don't we have a right to know how much of our money is being spent in Afghanistan intervening in a useless war ? We should also remember that the much talked about process of the "Talibanisation of Pakistan" is not purely an Afghan phenomena. This process started in Pakistan where some Afghans attended religious schools where they imbibed an interpretation of Islam that was against the ethos of our founding fathers. I have shown in my book how we exported this process to Afghanistan and now it is being re-exported back to us. We should not blame the Afghans for this, we should blame ourselves and correct our mistakes.

Why are we pursuing such policies ? We are told that we need a friendly regime in Kabul so that we can acquire "strategic depth," counter India in the region, promote Islam - but what kind of Islam I ask you - and that the whole world is wrong by criticizing us and we alone are right. I have consistently argued that stability, progress and self-respect in Pakistan cannot come from pursuing the chimera of strategic depth in foreign fields. That is first built at home with modern, progressive policies and a foreign policy aimed at making friends and creating new markets. We need peace on our borders, democracy, education, jobs and a rock solid economy to give our people faith in the country. In the 1965 war against India, Iran provided us true strategic depth

by allowing our war planes and ships to use their ports and airbases, but today Iran is bitterly antagonistic to Pakistan because of our Afghan policy. Today the Central Asian Republics are busy extraditing all Pakistanis, be they businessmen, traders or students accusing them - unjustifiably in most cases - of promoting radical Islam and unrest in their countries. India has now fully jumped into the Afghan fray by providing military equipment to an opposing Afghan faction. I ask you is this the way to make friends or create new export markets for our goods or tame the dangers of sectarianism and religious extremism or promote democracy ?

How can a country like Pakistan faced with such monumental economic, ethnic, sectarian and political problems justify its policy of involvement in the war next door? This has only been possible because of the total silence and acquiescence of Pakistan's politicians, the partial silence from civil society and the media and the insistence of the military in maintaining the status quo while refusing to consider policy alternatives. These are the kind of issues I have been raising for the past ten years. What is desperately needed today is courage by all Pakistanis to question where these policies are taking us and to demand information and debate of what they mean for us and the future of our children.

I would like to end now, but not before offering an apology. In my personal and humble capacity I would like to apologise to the brave Afghan people for the consequences of Pakistan's recent policies in Afghanistan. I would like to unconditionally apologize for the deaths of countless Afghans, which have been caused by Pakistani interference. I would like to apologize for the part that we have played in the destruction of your cities, your culture, your traditions and your freedom to choose your own government. As a small tribute to the Afghan people I would like to return this award of Rupees 100,000 to the HRCP, with the stipulation that they use it for the benefit of Afghanistan's suffering women and children. This award is named the courage in journalism award. Let me assure you that I am not particularly courageous. I have just tried to do my job while covering a war, the end of which I consider as vital to Pakistan's stability, progress and self respect in the international community. I hope you and other Pakistanis, in particular the silent politicians, have the courage to speak out so that we make friends not enemies beyond our borders and build a truly stable, democratic and progressive homeland.

Thank you for your patience.