

Afghanistan : Reporting "war on terror"

Sunday 21 February 2010, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2010).

Since Afghanistan has plunged into chaos, Peshawar has become a favourite destination for journalists arriving from all over the world to cover Afghan war. Capital of Pakistan's Frontier province, Peshawar is the gate way to Afghanistan. It takes an hour's zigzag drive through bushy hills to reach border post at Torkham. From Torkham, it takes almost three hours to Kabul. A fascinating place surrounded by steep dry hills, Torkham daily receives thousands of people arriving from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hundreds of trucks, among them vehicles carrying Nato supplies, line on both sides of the no man's land waiting for hours to get the customs' clearance. The travellers, however, do not bother customs or passport control. As a matter of fact, hardly anybody carries a passport let alone visa, either to enter Pakistan or reach Afghanistan. Both sides of Pak-Afghan borders are inhabited by Pashtoon tribes. This artificial border, drawn by British authorities when India was ruled by London, is as absurd as Berlin Wall used to be. Not merely culture, language and religion on both sides of Durand Line are strikingly similar, human features and geography are surprisingly identical too.

This similarity is what makes job for Western journalists easy and helps Peshawar-based journalists make some quick bucks. I realised it when I visited Peshawar in 2002 to do a story my paper *Internationen*, a Stockholm-based left-wing weekly. Some of my former colleagues from Lahore had moved to Peshawar in search of jobs. Couple of them had been facilitating, among others, Swedish journalists. I was taken aback when Shahid told me how the two Swedish journalists from a mainstream daily, stationed themselves at Swedish Afghan Committee's guest house, situated in city's posh Hyatabad neighbourhood, literally hired him to do the stories for them [1]. They were too scared to venture out of the guest house. "But very keen to get their hands on exclusive stories", Shahid told me with a grin. This indeed was nothing compared to Ahmed Jan's revelations.

Last year, ahead of general elections in Pakistan, I was working as interpreter with two journalists from *Svenka Dagbladet* (SvD), in Rawalpindi. Josef el-Mehdi, was reporting for SvD and was keen to go to Peshawar. My friend Ahmed Jan facilitated us in Peshawar. Later in the evening, the conversation over dinner turned to the manner in which Western journalists cover "war on terror". In many cases, Ahmed Jan told us, the local journalists would arrange fake meetings between Western journalists and fake Taliban commanders. "One would take these journalists in the thick of night to his village where the guest journalist would meet a friend or some cousin of the host journalist. This friend or cousin was presented as some big Taliban commander. Since 'Taliban commander' could not speak English while host journalist knew all the statements visiting journalist wanted from Taliban commander, hence, during translation all such statements were produced. An exclusive was ready."

Sometimes it was not as superficial as Ahmed Jan narrated. In Kabul soon after Taliban's exit, for instance, it would cost only US\$50 to bribe a woman (often a beggar on the roadside) into lift her veil for a photo shot. Countless such \$50-a-shot pictures were flashed those days on front pages. Such made-up photos are not difficult to get. I bet even Taliban commanders (the real ones, not the fake ones) would agree to pose in any funny posture only if the Peshawar-based journalist facilitating a Western journalist enjoys good relations with the Taliban leadership. And most of the 250 members of Peshawar Press Club do enjoy good relations with Taliban.

Take for example the case of Hakeemullah Mehsud. When Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud was killed in a drone attack August last year, Hakeemullah succeeded him. For few days, Hakeemullah made headlines the world over. In most of the stories, a smiling Hakeemullah appears holding LMG (Light Machine Gun) that anybody with a basic sense of weapons would tell you is a gun one never holds like this while firing. Colonel Jafri, an acquaintance, on watching the picture told me: "The LMG is not exactly a 'shoulder-fired' weapon. In the picture, Hakeemullah is firing the weapon by holding its bi-pod. It is more for a photo-session and, allow me to say, to impress the naive journalists who know not much about the weapons and weaponry with his prowess and sort of ruthlessness".

But all this is indeed innocent compared to what Pakistan's leading English-language daily, *Dawn* has reported. According to *Dawn*, "a freelance journalist was arrested making a fake documentary on Taliban for a foreign TV channel in Balochistan in 2004". This free-lancer was working for two French journalists who were also arrested but released since their arrest was an attack on freedom of Western press.

This is, however, only half the story. The mainstream press in Pakistan is as, if not more, incredible. Take for instance, the case of Ahmed Rashid and Hamid Mir. "Taliban" by Ahmed Rashid has almost achieved the status of text book on Taliban phenomenon. Renowned Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir in a column for largest Urdu-language daily *Jang*, back in 2003, asserted that many facts and anecdotes in "Taliban" were faked by Ahmed Rashid. I interviewed Ahmed Rashid for *Internationalen* and asked about the claim Hamid Mir had made. Ahmed Rashid dismissed Hamid Mir's claim pointing out the fact that military establishment wanted to discredit him [2]. Hamid Mir, in turn, is suspected to have concocted the the only interview Osama bin Laden has supposedly granted after September 11. This interview appeared soon after September 11 and made world-wide headlines. "This interview is a table-story" was a claim made by all my journalist colleagues at Lahore Press Club when I arrived Pakistan back in 2002. Table-story is a popular term used in Lahore by journalists to denote a fake story. Back in 1994-95, I myself and Hamid Mir were working with Lahore-based daily Pakistan. He was a rising star and even back then was dismissed by few colleagues as somebody busy writing table-stories. Others would reject the criticism on Hamid Mir as "bullshit" generated by jealousy. To dismiss an interview with Osama bin Laden, however, was a big thing. I decided to interview Hamid Mir in 2004. He himself, it seems, knew the rumours making rounds about the credibility of the said interview. Even before I posed a question, he started narrating the details of his trip to Afghanistan where he met Osama bin Laden to interview. His interview narrating these fantastic details as well as Ahmed Rashid's interview mentioned above appeared in the same issue of *Internationalen* [3]. I have no authority either to dismiss or approve of the claims made about both Ahmed Rashid's "Taliban" or Hamid Mir's interview with Osama bin Laden. This anecdotal 'evidence' is presented here only to highlight the question of credibility regarding the reporting standards and journalistic morals when it comes to "war on terror".

This becomes even dangerous when some well meaning left-wing writers in West and alternative media outlets seize upon reports published in English-language dailies as weighty arguments straight from horse's mouth.

An example in this regard is a story by Amir Mir on U.S. drone attacks to target Taliban in Pakistan's Tribal Areas. According to Amir Mir's claim: "Of the 60 cross-border predator strikes carried out by the Afghanistan-based American drones in Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted al-Qaeda leaders, besides perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians. The success percentage of the US predator strikes thus comes to not more than six per cent" [4].

Who determined whether one was a civilian or an al-Qaida militant, is not described in the story. To

question this story in no way is aimed at supporting the U.S. drone attacks on Pakistan. These attacks like U.S. occupation of Afghanistan signify the imperial pride of Empire. These attacks tantamount to violation of all the international norms a country is supposed to uphold. The point here is to lay bare certain facts. Amir Mir's story was widely cited on websites like *Counterpunch*, *Znet* and *Tomdispatch*. Since the well-meaning contributors and commentators on these famous sites perhaps cannot read Urdu hence what BBC Urdu has been reporting after every such drone, goes missing. Every time there is a drone attack, BBC Urdu reports how after the drone attack Taliban encircled the attacked village, not allowing anybody either enter or leave the village until all the dead bodies removed. This is a fact I was told about by the journalists in Peshawar and Labour Party comrades living in Tribal Areas. For last many years, local correspondents have fled the area following Taliban threats. All the reports about Tribal Areas under Taliban control are filed from Peshawar by journalists who ring some relative or friend in the area concerned. Sometimes the reporters ask some intelligence official in that area. These reports are neither verified nor questioned by the editors before passed on to the newspaper readership or TV audience.

Also, a fact hardly known outside of Pakistan is domination of pro-Taliban journalists and columnists over country's media outlets. Ridiculed by left and liberal circles as Media Mujahideen, these journalists and columnists distort the facts, misreport or slant the news, and employ all the dirty tricks of the trade to build an opinion in favour of Taliban. Also, like any other country, many known journalists are cat's paw for Pakistan's secret services. Since Benazir Bhutto was never in the good books of Pakistan military hence she used to get a lot of bad press. Cornered and frustrated, when she became prime minister, she took a sweet revenge. A list comprising two dozen journalists was leaked to press. These journalists had been receiving monetary benefits from Intelligence Bureau to feed the readership with falsehoods and half-truths. It is not merely monetary benefits, sometimes journalists in Pakistan go an extra mile out of conviction to glorify or justify Taliban brutalities. The attack, for instance, on Islamabad's five-star Marriott September 2008 was given a specific colour by Ansar Abbasi: "Was there a top secret and mysterious operation of the US Marines going on inside the Marriott when it was attacked on Saturday evening? No one will confirm it but circumstantial evidence is in abundance. Witnessed by many, including a PPP MNA and his friends, a US embassy truckload of steel boxes was unloaded and shifted inside the Marriott Hotel on the same night when Admiral Mike Mullen met Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and others in Islamabad" [5]. In a recent talk show on Geo TV, owned by the same media group that publishes *The News*, Ansar Abbasi claimed: "I am proud to be an Islamist". When video footage of a girl from Swat valley flogged by Taliban shocked entire Pakistan and drew wide-spread condemnation, Ansar Abbasi appeared on Geo TV and defended Taliban's flogging of the girl on the plea that Taliban did what Allah had ordained in Quran. Hence, in his view, condemning Taliban was tantamount to disrespecting Quran. His story on Marriott, lacking all the ingredients of journalistic objectivity, was an attempt to justify the attack on the hotel claiming lives of many innocent civilians. Since hatred for US is justifiably universal in Pakistan, hence, banking on this hatred Ansar Abbasi attempted to justify the deaths at Marriott as collateral damage. The PPP MNA (member parliament from Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, or PPP) mentioned in this news report contradicted the story. However, in a hurriedly written piece for *Counterpunch*, Ansar Abbasi's story was cited to convince the readers that U.S. presence was destabilising the region. The U.S. presence, no doubt, is destabilising the region. But we do not have to base our anti-imperialism on half-truths spun either by Media Mujahideen or Western reporters building their exclusive stories on fake encounters with fake Taliban commanders.

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P.S.

* Two previous versions of this articles have been published. The first one, shorter, in Internationalen (in Swedish). The second one Kabulpress (with different headline and a sentence about the USA badly slanted):

<http://kabulpress.org/my/spip.php?article4717>

Footnotes

[1] Names of Peshawar-based journalists, to hide their identity on their request, have been changed

[2] *Internationalen* No. 19/04

[3] *Internationalen* No. 19/04

[4] *The News*, April 10, 2009

[5] *The News*, 21 September 2009