

Time for Action!

By: Riaz Fatyana, MNA, Chairman, PCHR

Having risen from the masses through sheer hard work, devotion and public service, my sensitivity towards the problems faced by the common man is thus quite natural and understandable. Instead of working in a haphazard way, I however always wanted to give institutional strength to my efforts. Fortunately enough from amongst the Parliament, which came into being as a result of general elections held in 2002, I found many likeminded colleagues. All of us had a clear understanding that as elected representatives, we had a special responsibility to protect and promote the rights of those people we claimed to represent. This is how Parliamentarians Commission For Human Rights came into being. Almost whole of the first year went to the establishing PCHR, equipping it with manpower, setting the work patterns, generating sources of funding for it, comprehending the dynamics behind the human rights issues in Pakistan, and devising strategies to tackle problems related to them. During this busy schedule, the invitation by British Council to attend an international seminar in Ireland was no less than a breeze of fresh air. This was indeed the first official recognition of our work at international level. The energetic team of British council in Pakistan readily made the arrangements of the visit and one fine morning our plane touched the airport of Belfast—the capital of Ireland. A hectic schedule of the seminar was waiting for us in the days to come.

The theme of the seminar was “National Human Rights Commissions: effective or just existing?.” Actually, over the past decade there had been a remarkable growth in National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), such as human rights commissions and ombudsmen. The United Nations itself had encouraged the development of such institutions and sought to provide guidelines for how should they operate. However, several of those that had been established came under criticism from governments as well as human rights activists, and there remained wide spread uncertainty over what exactly they expected to achieve. This seminar was therefore designed in a way to draw a range of international experience, including recent research studies, to explore the question of how could be best ensured that NHRIs play an effective role in the promotion and protection of human rights. The topics included the organization of NHRIs, funding and staffing, working with the legislature, working with NGOs, using litigation effectively, working with the media, investigations, and legislation and education. The primary focus of the event was on discussions, debates and sharing of experiences among more than 30 participants that included prominent parliamentarians, politicians and civil society representatives from 25 countries. Pakistan was represented by me and Mr. Masood Khan, Additional District and Session Judge, Peshawar High Court.

Most working sessions of the seminar took place in the Canada Room at Queen’s University, Belfast. All the events were designed to be interactive and participative, and those attending were encouraged to contribute in their own personal capacity. An interesting feature of the seminar was the observance of ‘Chatham House Rule.’ The rule meant that the participants were free to use the information and views received during the event, but that no individual contributor or participant was to be quoted or his identity or affiliation revealed without express permission. The sessions and discussions were as informal and inclusive as possible. Rather the whole seminar provided the participants with the opportunities to contribute to the discussions, to network with one another and to share experiences. In the second leg of my tour, I proceeded to London to attend a one day international conference on National Human Rights Institutions organised by Human Rights Centre, Queen’s University in collaboration with the Human Rights

Centre of the University of Essex and Centre for Civil and Human Rights, Notre Dame University Law School. The Conference covered some of the same topics earlier covered at Belfast, but with some different perspective and with some very high level speakers and a lot of additional UK participants. During the conferences, I presented Pakistani point of view on global human rights issues. I also introduced to the participants the vision behind the establishment of PCHR and its modus operandi. The participants were particularly interested in knowing about the liberal policies followed by President Pervez Musharraf at home and abroad. Keeping their interest in view, I dwelt upon the role of his policies in detail and told them that how had they gone a long way in improving the human rights situation in Pakistan.

In London, I also had the opportunity to visit House of Commons and have one to one meetings with a number of prominent Members of Parliament there. My meetings with Mr. Donald Anderson, Chairman Foreign Affairs Committee, Professor David Feldman, Legal Adviser Joint Committee on Human Rights, Ms. Ann Clwyd, Special Envoy to the Prime Minister on Human Rights in Iraq, Sir John Stanley, Mr. Ernie Ross and Mr. Muhammad Sarwar were particularly informative and enriching. We also agreed to find out ways and means for future collaboration between British MP's and Parliamentarians Commission For Human Rights, Pakistan. The two way interaction led to greater awareness about each others' points of views regarding the human rights issues faced by the world in general these days. I was taken aback by their knowledge of human rights violations in Pakistan. Mr. Anderson was particularly concerned about state of minority rights in Pakistan. Mr. Muhammad Sarwar expressed his desire to benefit his motherland and talked in length on his ongoing project of building a hospital in Toba Tek Singh. My meeting with Mr. Ross was particularly interesting. He was being elected uninterruptedly for last 24 years and shared with me the factors behind his successful political career.

Now that the visit is over, what I felt everywhere in UK was that there were a lot of apprehensions regarding the state of human rights, especially the minorities' rights, in Pakistan. Similarly many eye brows were raised while talking about the observance of Blasphemy Law in Pakistan. I clarified many of the apprehensions expressed and told them how a PCHR subcommittee was working to prevent the misuse of the law. I must however admit that although there were some misunderstandings too, yet most of their concerns were well founded. Actions, and not words, are thus needed if we want Pakistan to stand proudly among the comity of nations.