

Bhutto Says Bomb Was Rigged to Baby; Homecoming Attack Recalled

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Byline: Betsy Pisik, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

MARDAN, Pakistan - The bomb that ravaged Benazir Bhutto's homecoming procession in October appears to have been rigged to the clothes of a baby who was held up for the former prime minister to embrace, Mrs. Bhutto said.

A man approached her armored truck, Mrs. Bhutto recounted, and was trying to hand across a small child as her motorcade inched through the thronged streets of Karachi. She remembers gesturing for the man to come closer.

"It was about 1 or 2 years old, and I think it was a girl," Mrs. Bhutto told The Washington Times in her first public remarks about the baby.

"We feel it was a baby, kidnapped, and its clothes were rigged with explosives. He kept trying to hand it to people to hand to me. I'm a mother, I love babies, but the [streetlights] had already gone out, and I was worried about the baby getting dropped or hurt."

Mrs. Bhutto would have been killed, she said, if she hadn't stepped back to loosen the shoes on her swollen feet.

"The baby, the bomb, it went off only feet from me; there was nothing between us but the wall of the truck," she said.

"We were rocking from side to side, this huge truck. We saw the bodies, the blood everywhere; we saw the carnage. Some bodies

were naked, with their clothes burned off," she said, shutting her kohl-rimmed eyes against the vision.

More than 170 supporters were killed in coordinated blasts along the route, a horror that was carried on live television and has shaped the already tumultuous campaign season here.

For Mrs. Bhutto, whose Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is contesting "as the underdog" for 264 seats in the Pakistani parliament, the blast and subsequent failure of the Musharraf government to investigate have made a political rivalry intensely personal.

She has complained to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and demanded an investigation, but party officials complain bitterly that the government and intelligence services have done nothing and are probably even involved.

"I wanted him to say to me, 'BB, bring in Interpol, Scotland Yard. Let's get to the bottom of this.' " Instead, she said, she has "not been allowed" to file a police report.

In declaring emergency rule on Nov. 3, Mr. Musharraf outlawed political rallies, citing the attack on Mrs. Bhutto's homecoming. The emergency is to be lifted tomorrow, but even then, it is clear the charismatic daughter of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto will not be campaigning as she did 17 years ago.

The PPP chose Mardan, in Pakistan's conservative North West Frontier province, for its party leader's first campaign appearance this season. However, instead of the tumultuous outdoor demonstrations she usually addresses, Mrs. Bhutto rallied the party's faithful in the walled courtyard of the party's regional headquarters.

She said she chose the courtyard not for security, but because authorities would enable a loudspeaker to reach a larger crowd. She is rattled, though: In an interview just after the well-received

appearance, she confessed that she was tense all day, unsure whether she would arrive in Mardan before nightfall.

Only a small crowd lined the route when her motorcade wailed past, but the people could not see her through the black-tinted windows that security no longer allows her to roll down. The PPP thinks a helicopter would be a worthwhile campaign investment but ultimately rejects it as too easy to shoot down.

Mobility is important in a sprawling country with 160 million people and nearly 300 seats in parliament at stake.

Mrs. Bhutto is such a valuable election asset that the PPP charges candidates as much as \$3,000 to join her ticket. The practice is not uncommon in Pakistan, where Mr. Musharraf and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif dominate rival wings of the Pakistan Muslim League.

This pay-to-play policy is well known and universally loathed, a sign to many Pakistanis that politics has been and always will be a corrupt game played by the people who can afford it.

Ordinary Pakistanis and aspiring politicians complain that the parties have too tall a hierarchy, that candidates must appeal to the leadership before they are allowed to run, and that fortune favors the insiders and their friends and children.

Mrs. Bhutto, universally known here as Benazir or just "BB," agrees with critics who say that large personalities dominate Pakistan's political scene. However, she defends the celebrity factor as "electability" and said merit and experience justify what others see as nepotism.

"People want to belong to a party that will get them votes; it is a simple matter of electability," she said, adding that in this regard, she is little different from American Democratic hopeful Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Like Mrs. Clinton, Mrs. Bhutto has been married to a larger-than-life man who dominates her political career.

Unlike former President Bill Clinton, however, Asif Ali Zardari is considered by many to be a political liability. The businessman and former polo player has been charged with, but never convicted of, ordering the killings of political and business rivals - including his wife's brother, Mir Murtaza - and of fraud and corruption.

Mrs. Bhutto, whose marriage was arranged, defends her husband of 20 years with what sounds like genuine passion.

"People say he is a liability, but they hit me by getting at him," she said, praising Mr. Zardari for sticking by her through political scandal, financial investigations, scathing accusations and an eight-year jail term she insisted was politically motivated.

"I am very proud that he has stood by me; he stood his ground," she said, curling her hands around a tea mug and whispering intently in a room echoing with entourage and favor-seekers. "He is a proud man, and he was humiliated. ... I don't consider him a liability"

Her face beaming, Mrs. Bhutto added, "I always think, what if he was not as brave as he turned out to be? What if he had listened to the army and divorced me? He could have chosen his business, you know. But he has paid a lot politically and personally. I am very lucky to have him. I think that people respect that he has stayed with me.

"If he had left, it would have been even worse."