

# Umar Cheema's Abduction - September 2010

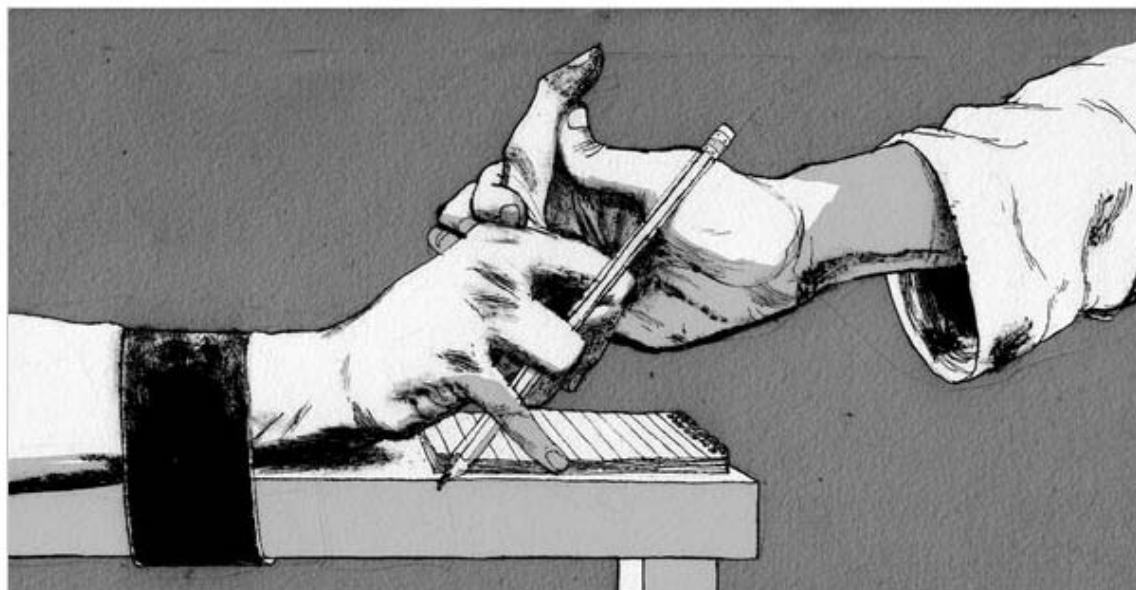
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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

### Dying to Tell the Story



Matt Rota

By UMAR CHEEMA

Published: June 11, 2011

#### Islamabad, Pakistan

WE have buried another journalist. Syed Saleem Shahzad, an investigative reporter for Asia Times Online, has paid the ultimate price for telling truths that the authorities didn't want people to hear. He disappeared a few days after writing an article alleging that Al Qaeda elements had penetrated Pakistan's navy and that a military crackdown on them had precipitated the May 22 terrorist attack on a Karachi naval base. His death has left Pakistani journalists shaken and filled with despair.

I couldn't sleep the night that Saleem's death was confirmed. The fact that he was tortured sent me back to a chilly night last September, when I was abducted by government agents. During Saleem's funeral service, a thought kept haunting me: "It could have been me."

Mourning journalists lined up after the service to console me, saying I was lucky to get a lease on life that Saleem was denied. But luck is a relative term.

Adil, my 2-year-old son, was the first person in my thoughts after I was abducted. Journalists in Pakistan don't have any institutionalized social security system; those killed in the line of duty leave their families at the mercy of a weak economy.

When my attackers came, impersonating policemen arresting me on a fabricated charge of murder, I felt helpless. My mouth muzzled and hands cuffed, I couldn't inform anybody of my whereabouts, not even the friends I'd dropped off just 15 minutes before. My cellphone was taken away and switched off. Despite the many threats I'd received, I never expected this to happen to me.

Sure, I had written many stories exposing the corrupt practices of high-ranking officials and pieces criticizing the army and the intelligence agencies. After they were published, Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's prime security agency, always contacted me. I was first advised not to write too much about them and later sent messages laced with subtle threats. But I never imagined action was imminent.



On Sept. 4, I was driven to an abandoned house instead of a police station, where I was stripped naked and tortured with a whip and a wooden rod. While a man flogged me, I asked what crime had brought me this punishment. Another man told me: "Your reporting has upset the government." It was not a crime, and therefore I did not apologize.

Instead, I kept praying, “Oh God, why am I being punished?” The answer came from the ringleader: “If you can’t avoid rape, enjoy it.” He would employ abusive language whenever he addressed me.

“Have you ever been tortured before?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“These marks will stay with you forever, offering you a reminder never to defy the authorities,” he replied.

They tortured me for 25 minutes, shaved my head, eyebrows and moustache and then filmed and photographed my naked body. I was dumped nearly 100 miles outside Islamabad with a warning not to speak up or face the consequences.

The following months were dreadful. I suffered from a sleep disorder. I would wake up fearing that someone was beating my back. I wouldn’t go jogging, afraid that somebody would pick me up again and I’d never return. Self-imposed house arrest is the life I live today; I don’t go outside unless I have serious business. I have been chased a number of times after the incident. Now my son asks me questions about my attackers that I don’t answer. I don’t want to sow the seeds of hatred in his heart.

When Saleem disappeared, I wondered if he had been thinking about his children, as I had. He had left Karachi, his hometown, after receiving death threats, and settled with his wife and three children in Islamabad. From there, he often went on reporting trips to the tribal areas along the Afghan border. Tahir Ali, a mutual friend, would ask him: “Don’t you feel scared in the tribal areas?” Saleem would smile and say: “Death could come even in Islamabad.” His words were chilling, and prescient.

The killing of Syed Saleem Shahzad is yet another terrifying reminder to Pakistani journalists. He is the fifth to die in the first five months of 2011. Journalists are shot like stray dogs in Pakistan — easily killed because their assassins sit at the pinnacle of power.

When Daniel Pearl was brutally murdered by militants in Karachi in 2002, his case was prosecuted and four accomplices to the crime were sentenced. This happened only because Mr. Pearl was an American journalist. Had he been a Pakistani, there would have been no justice.

Today, impunity reigns and no organization is powerful enough to pressure the government to bring Saleem’s killers to justice. Journalists have shown resilience, but it is hard to persevere

when the state itself becomes complicit in the crime. Now those speaking up for Saleem are doing so at a price: they are being intimidated and harassed.

Pakistan is at a crossroads and so is its news media. In a situation of doom and gloom, Pakistani journalists offer a ray of hope to their fellow citizens and they have earned the people's trust. Even the former prime minister Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain has admitted that people who once went to the police with complaints now go to the press.

But this trust will be eroded if journalists continue to be bullied into walking away from the truth. News organizations throughout the world must join hands in seeking justice for Saleem and ending the intelligence agencies' culture of impunity. An award for investigative journalists should be created in his honor, as was done for Daniel Pearl. No stronger message could be delivered to his killers than making him immortal.

*Umar Cheema is an investigative reporter at The News International, Pakistan's largest English-language daily. He was a Daniel Pearl Fellow at The Times in 2008.*

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on June 12, 2011, on page WK11 of the New York edition with the headline: Dying To Tell The Story. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/opinion/12Cheema.html?ref=opinion>

OPINION | OCTOBER 13, 2010

# Abducted and Tortured—for Reporting the News

*'This is the consequence of writing against the government,' my captors said.*

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Text



By [UMAR CHEEMA](#)

*Islamabad, Pakistan*

Being a journalist, I'm always in search of a juicy story. Last month I happened on one I'll remember forever: a torture operation conducted presumably by thugs of Pakistan's intelligence agency under the nose of the federal government in Islamabad. Unfortunately, I was the central character.

On Sept. 4, I was heading home late at night from dinner with friends when a group of 10-12 men stopped my car. They were wearing commando fatigues, and the words "No fear" were inscribed on their shirts. They seized me, cuffing my hands and muffling my head and face as if I was some high-value al Qaeda leader. Then they drove me to a secret place where they stripped me naked, put me face-down on the floor, and tied my hands behind my back. Breathing was hard since my face was so tightly wrapped.

Soon after, my captors started lashing my naked body with a long piece of leather and a wooden rod. I was not aware of my crime until I was told during the beating: "This is the consequence of writing against the government," they said as they whipped me. The language these thugs used to address me was filthy—they sounded like they were living in medieval times, treating fellow citizens as their subjects.

The physical torture lasted almost half an hour, leaving me in excruciating pain. Shaving my head and eyebrows followed. Next, they took my picture in different humiliating poses.

Six hours later, I was dumped 120 kilometers outside Islamabad with a warning: "If you tell the media about this, you'll be abducted again—and won't ever be returned. And your nude pictures will be put on YouTube."

Ten minutes after I was released, I made the decision to speak up regardless of the consequences. My convictions can't be stamped out with torture, I told myself. And this was not the first attempt: I was also targeted in December 2004 when a car hit me twice, leaving me with a compound fracture in my left leg that kept me bed-ridden for six months.

I cannot live without freedom. It is worth any price—even my life. People ask me what lesson I've learned from this terrible episode. I say it has given me a new reason to live.

Instead of submitting to fear, I've decided to form a coalition of Pakistani journalists committed to waging a public struggle against such efforts to repress our freedom. We're also setting up the Center for Training and Investigative Reporting to cultivate a new crop of reporters who will continue our important work.

I was not the first to be tortured by such thugs, but I am the first to speak out so publicly and expose myself to more serious risks. The news about my ordeal was on television within hours, triggering anger and country-wide condemnation. The Pakistani government ordered an immediate inquiry into the incident.

Who is responsible for this barbaric act is still hotly debated. But the most prominent journalists and politicians in the country believe that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—the army-controlled intelligence agency, Pakistan's equivalent of the CIA—carried it out.

There are many reasons we suspect the ISI. For years, I have written investigative reports criticizing the army, the intelligence agencies and the government. But only the people from the ISI would approach me, directly or

indirectly, when my stories were published. The spy agency has a history of sorting out its critics whether they are journalists, politicians or ordinary citizens.

Regardless of who committed this crime, the culprits must be brought to justice. In the current culture, killing a journalist is not a big deal. So far in 2009-2010, 23 journalists have been killed and 45 have been wounded, according to the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists.

Yet in the past few decades no murder case of a journalist has reached the stage of prosecution, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The only exception is the case of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter who was abducted in January 2002 and beheaded a month later in Karachi. Incidentally, I was a Daniel Pearl Journalism fellow at the New York Times in 2008.

Though a government body is conducting a probe of my case, if history is any guide the investigation will reach a dead end and the elements who seek to silence us will be emboldened. I strongly appeal to the community of journalists world-wide, to the World Editors Forum and other organizations, to stand with us in this time of crisis. The outcome of my case is critical to the fate of all journalists in Pakistan and beyond.

*Mr. Cheema is an investigative reporter for the largest English-language Pakistani newspaper, The News.*

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[Gilani phones Umar Cheema, sympathises over torture incident](#)

ISLAMABAD, Sep 4 (APP): Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani rang up Umar Cheema, Correspondent of the Daily "The News" to express grief and sorrow over the unfortunate incident of kidnapping and torture. The Prime Minister assured him that the matter would be thoroughly investigated to bring the culprits to book. He further apprised him that he had already issued orders for judicial inquiry. The Prime Minister during his telephonic conversation with the journalist said that Pakistan People's Party believed in the freedom of press and its leadership had given sacrifices for the independence of media.

He further said that he himself has a journalistic background and strongly believes in freedom of expression. He further mentioned that he has personally called him to express solidarity with him and the journalist community.

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SEPTEMBER 05, 2010

**PRESS FREEDOM: PAKISTANI JOURNALIST UMAR CHEEMA ABDUCTED, TORTURED**

[In an interview with SAJA in 2008](#), Pakistani journalist Umar Cheema said that it was only rural areas that are "volatile or hostile to journalists...not urban areas." But what happened with Cheema on Sept. 4, 2010, tells a different story.



Cheema, a reporter with *The News International* in Islamabad and the 2008 Daniel Pearl Fellow at *The New York Times* was "tortured and humiliated during 6-hour captivity after abduction by unidentified men from Islamabad," [The News International reported](#).

According to the news portal, a group of men covered his face and took him to a building 45 to 50 minutes drive while he was returning home after meeting his friends.

"A few unknown men wearing uniforms of Elite Force came up to me, saying I crushed a man at Zero Point and drove off and then these men forcibly took me along with them," Umar Cheema said. "I was held in illegal captivity for 6 hours during which I was continuously tortured and humiliated in nude. They stripped me out of my clothes, hanged me upside down and shaved off my head and moustaches," the senior reporter of the country's leading English daily recounted.

[Café Pyala](#), a blog that follows the news from Pakistan and Pakistani media wrote that Cheema was "stripped naked, hung upside down and beaten severely before his head and moustache were shaved off." According to the blog, Cheema, who is an

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**PAC condemns attack on reporter**

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New York—Pakistani American Congress (PAC), an organisation of several Pakistani American Organisations, has strongly condemned the attack on Umar Cheema, an investigative reporter of The News and Daily Jang.

This coward and shameful acts against a journalist is a direct attack on the freedom of press in Pakistan, which must be condemned by all members of the civil society and must be stopped, said a press release of PAC here Sunday.

"PAC holds Government of Pakistan fully responsible for this barbaric attack and demands a full judicial inquiry to prove that it is not involved in this heinous crime," said PAC president Dr Muhammad Akram.

Dr Akram said just a few days ago a similar incident took place in Sialkot where the reporter of a TV station was severely beaten and injured just because he exposed the death of two innocent brothers. "Several other incidents show a continuous trend to silence the voice of people. Such acts of calculated terrorism are just as shameful and condemnable as suicidal attacks by terrorists on processions and places of worship."

The PAC appreciated the statement of Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani and the Interior Minister Rehman Malik for full investigation of this barbaric act. However, it said, such statements mean nothing unless they are followed by tangible actions. "So far government has shown no action, which shows that, the government may be covering up the crime, as it has routinely done in many other similar incidents. To stop future such attacks, the PAC demands full protection of journalists and freedom of the media," Dr Akram said.—NNI

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## Journalists killed and injured in Quetta bombing, reporter kidnapped in Islamabad

Published on 6 September 2010

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3 September 2010 - Supporting media and journalists hit by flooding

1 September 2010 - Murder attempt on journalist over TV report of lynching

See country files : Pakistan

The level of violence that Pakistani journalists are facing nowadays is entirely unacceptable. The events of the past three days in which two TV employees were killed in Quetta and an investigative journalist was kidnapped in Islamabad need a response from the Pakistani authorities and the international community.

A cameraman and a TV station driver were killed and six other journalists were seriously injured in a suicide bombing on 3 September in Quetta and the ensuing acts of revenge violence by demonstrators who were targeted by the bombing. The overall death toll was 59. In Islamabad, an

investigative newspaper reporter was kidnapped, mistreated and humiliated the next day by uniformed gunmen who may have been members of the security services.

"At a time when the country needs everyone's help in coping with disastrous flooding, Jihadi terrorists and certain members of the security services continue to target civilians, including media employees," Reporters Without Borders said. "Such criminal behaviour and recourse to thuggish methods is absolutely incredible."

### Quetta bloodshed

The media fatalities in Quetta, the capital of the southwestern province of Balochistan, were Samaa TV cameraman Ejaz Raisani and Muhammad Sarwar, the driver of an Aaj News live broadcast van. The six seriously injured journalists were Fateh Shakir of Dawn News, Mustafa Tareen of ARY News TV, Noor Elahi Bugti of Samaa TV, Irshad Mastoi of Express News TV, Shahid Mukhtar of Express News and Imran Mukhtar of Geo TV.

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### Why my attackers failed but gave me strength->Umar Cheema views in TheNews

September 8, 2010 [united4justice](#) [Go to comments](#) [Leave a comment](#)

Source : <http://thenews.com.pk/08-09-2010/National/3745.htm>

ISLAMABAD:(Umar Cheema) The wee hours of late Saturday brought a metamorphosis in my life. Not just that I was muffled, picked up, tortured, and humiliated. No absolutely not. Rather the torture has removed the remaining fear, if there was any in my heart and mind, and has instead given me the realization that we have to die fighting for this country.

My love for this country is based on some reasoning which is inspired by my firm belief that we can neither change our past nor our national identity. I learned this during my stay abroad for one and a half years when I went for studies, first in the US and then in UK. Lord Curzon's words that "exile is a nursery of nationalism" always keep resounding in my ears.

Let us suppose I decide to settle abroad. I will again be Pakistani-British or Pakistani-American and the prefix 'Pakistan' cannot be dropped from my identity. It is always counted where you're rooted in. So I have to stay attached and take care of my country wherever I am.

Having decided to live and die on this land, I have a dream to see Pakistan where brains, not batons reign supreme, where people can question the use of public money, where all institutions can be held accountable without any fear or favour, where our children love to live instead of fear to live, and where we are governed by the rule of law and not on the basis of personal loyalties. The message of my captors for me was to become a status quo abiding person, not law abiding. They forced me through violence to accept their views and become a silent spectator to the rot without questioning what was happening to my beloved country.

I instead learned a different lesson from the torture and humiliation, to stand guard for this country, help the oppressed, keep questioning the high and mighty and continue the struggle to make this land livable and safe for the next generation.

The captors thought themselves to be heroes but emerged as villains and will go down in the history with same status. I feel pity for them. They were born innocent but forced to become sick minds. Instead of cursing them, I only pray for them because they don't know we're fighting for their betterment too.

My captors were probably not aware that I was also hit by a car in December 2004 that left me with compound fractures in my left leg. But I never bowed to those attackers either. Although I've forgiven my captors but not forgotten the perpetrators of this act that should be exposed and this mind-set be eliminated once and for all.

I believe in reporting with a moral force without any personal grudge against anybody or any institution. Whenever I write about anyone, the concerned people have always been approached for their version to balance my reporting. It is however a different story that those without answers to our questions try to propagate as if the stories are being planted and we are being bribed for doing this.

Such excuses are crafted by the individuals and institutions not inclined to revisit their conduct. But they don't know that we, by virtue of our profession, have been tasked to unfold the truth, no matter who is affected by whatever way.

Some consider journalism as a shortcut to rise on the ladder to political power but we are here to protect the interest of people, neither our own nor of the rulers.

I have no words to thank so many of my well-wishers in Pakistan and abroad for consoling me and praying for me. I didn't know many of them before. I was amazed to note how they struggled to reach me. Due to the flood of calls, I could not attend most of them. It was a silent majority that rose against the oppression of a tiny minority claiming to have monopoly on violence.

There was a mixed reaction to this incident. Those who didn't know me gave me a new strength and conviction, emboldened me further and offered all-out help. People, who know me for years, were concerned about me and my family's security. They think that I should think about my children. This is a question which comes to every parent's mind. I would like to explain that the



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## Abduction, torture of Umar Cheema

### LHC CJ directs SP to appear in court during suo motu proceedings

#### Staff Report

LAHORE: Lahore High Court Chief Justice Khawaja Muhammad Sharif on Monday directed the Islamabad superintendent of police (Investigation) to appear during suo motu proceedings against the abduction and torture of a journalist, Umar Cheema, by unidentified assailants.

The CJ directed the SP to appear on September 15 along with a progress report on the matter. On Monday, Islamabad SSP Tahir Alam appeared and stated that so far no arrest had been made. He informed that a special investigating team had been formed consisting of the CIA DSP and CID SP under the supervision of the Industrial Area SP to nab the culprits.

The CJ took suo motu notice on a news report, according to which unidentified persons accompanied by personnel of Elite Police abducted Umar Cheema, a reporter of an English daily, from Sector I-8, Islamabad and detained him for six hours. They subjected him to severe torture by hanging him naked upside down and also shaved his head and moustache. The abductors let him go after threatening him of dire consequences if he did not abandon writing stories against the government.

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