

Pakistani Media: Time To Step Up
By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

If ever there was a time to shun the New York Times, the BBC or other mainstream sources of news, this was it. How were the attacks in Mumbai being covered in other parts of the world? I was curious as ever, and luckily, if you live in London and have Sky TV, there are several options. So I began searching.

The Chinese television station simply didn't cover it. It was almost as if nothing happened in Mumbai. I returned to it several times, thinking I may have missed something. But there was really no mention of Mumbai. The Chinese were busy celebrating the 50th birthday of Guangxi, a region in the southwest of China. The Russians did not dwell on it much either. Their preoccupation is with prospective oil pipelines and Georgia's Saakashvili. France 24, which is a very interesting channel in English and has excellent coverage of Middle Eastern issues, covered it similar to British networks but for a shorter duration.

Press TV, which is a new Iranian channel, was a true disappointment. Their one-hour chat show, called "Hearts & Minds," hosted by an American man in New York, was dedicated exclusively to the attacks in Mumbai and three "experts" sat on the panel. The Indian view was represented by an Indian gentleman. But there was no Pakistani representation. The other two panelists had little knowledge of what was going on and the host was consistently confused between Zardari and Karzai. At one point, he just referred to both as "Kamdari."

This was quite a let down, as I was expecting a channel along the lines of Al-Jazeera, which has excellent world coverage and has also covered the Mumbai incident very well and without bias. Al-Jazeera anchors like Ghida Al-Fakhri are good enough to compete with the best of the CNN and BBC journalists. And I would have thought that Press TV too would have tapped into the very large Iranian diaspora if it is to compete internationally, as Chinese television has also done successfully to some extent. I would have expected experts like Syed Hossein Nasr, who are truly aware of issues in Kashmir and the Middle East to have been commenting on the Iranian channel. But when I watched their world news it was quite evident that the restrictions imposed on this channel are enormous, not just in terms of content but also the dress code. "It's like watching PTV in the eighties, only in English," my husband said.

I had had enough and so flipped to NDTV, the Indian channel. NDTV is a good source for domestic Indian issues, where much like in Pakistan, there are few holes barred, but in the case of the Mumbai attacks, the less said the better.

But what India is able to do through NDTV is give the world its point of view. Pakistan's viewpoint, on the other hand, is only available on the "Specialist Channels" in Urdu. This has got to change. We desperately need a channel in English which beams along with the other international news channels. And unlike the Iranian channel, it must have reporters and anchors that are both aware of the issues and confident in English. If the few hours of Geo English and Dawn News that I have seen are anything to go by, I would say that we could very easily blow most of the other international news channels away. Our media is cutting edge, often incisive and used to asking important questions.

But there is one thing that we will have to change. And that is our preoccupation with domestic issues. Of course they are very important. But our media focuses almost entirely on them. There is very little international news available in Pakistan. And when it is made available, it often lacks perspective and is not presented in an exciting way. Pakistanis often criticize Americans for being self-obsessed in their media. But I don't see how things are different in Pakistan. We talk about the US, UK, Saudi Arabia or nowadays India, only because they have a direct impact on what is going on with us. But beyond that international coverage in our media is severely lacking.

As far as I know, we didn't even try to send any reporters to Orissa in India when the Christians were being massacred. The only channel that had an in-depth documentary on this was France 24. We will need to come out of this shell and even if it means that Geo, Dawn and other networks need to come together on this, they need to have an English channel presenting Pakistan and covering international issues on the

world stage. This needs to be done on a war-footing. It may yet be the best we can do for an image boost as well.

Just as international news in Pakistan is virtually non-existent, there is also a tireless obsession with western sources of information. Anchors on Pakistani television are addicted to Time, Newsweek, and the gamut of British and American papers. It would be nice, if for a change, they also focused on what papers in other countries are saying about Pakistan.

I did a rough search on this myself in the last few days and focused primarily on Muslim countries, who I thought may be more inclined to give the India-Pakistan news some perspective. From what I found, most Muslim countries, it appears, are suffering from a similar lethargy to Pakistan's when it comes to covering international issues, often cutting and pasting stories from the International Herald Tribune and the like instead of doing their own research.

Nevertheless, the editorial in the Jakarta Post was acceptable. It explained the Mumbai incident without bias and then focused inwards, comparing the situation to the Bali bombing and how Indonesia can avoid such occurrences in future.

The newspapers of the UAE were however a disappointment. Clear Indian bias was visible. Perhaps this is not so remarkable given that the gulf countries tend to contract out most of their work to expatriates, and I wouldn't be surprised at all if Indian expats are determining editorial policy for papers like the Khaleej Times.

Yet, the Bangladeshi newspapers gave me newfound hope. An opinion piece by Rahnuma Ahmed, in Bangladesh's New Age (an English daily with, as its name suggests, a progressive leaning and very impressive analysis on a host of issues) was like balm on my wounded heart. Finally, someone understood. I have believed for some time now that Bangladesh is Pakistan's most natural ally. My generation, who did not see, but only heard and read about what happened in 1971, should be willing to extend the hand of friendship to our Bangladeshi brothers and sisters, to acknowledge them as equals in a partnership that can be beneficial to both countries.

There has been much criticism of the "war of words" that has taken place between Pakistani and Indian media in the past days. But sometimes I think that had it not been for the war of words, we may have been confronted with the real thing. It's important to get our story out there. Not just in Urdu, but also in English, for the world to hear. It's also important for Pakistan to figure out how to pick friends. For too long we have been choosing allies on the basis of riches. America can give us aid; Saudi Arabia can give us oil. Choosing rich friends has made us a weak nation. It is about time we changed our policy and picked our friends, not based on "common interests" as Musharraf used to say, but based on "common ideology," an ideology that emphasizes the equality and fraternity that Islam preaches, as opposed to the extremism and discrimination against women that is too often ascribed to Islam. In my view, Bangladesh would top our list of friends if this approach were adopted.

The writer is a London-based lawyer turned political commentator and can be reached via her website www.ayeshaijazkhan.com