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U.S. Truckles to Pakistan Dictator

Some frightening outrages were aimed at American women trapped in the embassy compound when Pakistani mobs sacked the U.S. embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, last November. The mobs were responding to a false Iranian charge that the CIA had engineered the terrorist attack on the sacred mosque at Mecca.

But the Carter administration, truckling to Pakistani dictator Mohammed Zia al-Haq — whose police stood by without interfering, and whose army troops were hours late coming to the rescue — has virtually ignored the victims and clamped a shameful lid of silence on their accounts of the nightmare.

The women were spat and urinated on, punched, roughed up, threatened and molested, according to signed depositions I have obtained from the victims. Yet the State Department has not even debriefed all of the women to get their accounts.

Instead, the department's genteel spokesman, Hodding Carter III, extended public thanks to Gen. Zia for this belated help in saving the Americans from the hysterical mob. The victims, meanwhile, were advised not to talk about their ordeal, lest the Pakistani president's feathers be ruffled.

One focal point of the Islamabad mob's attack was the American Club, where 16 Americans, including eight women and a 5-year-old girl, were gathered for a fashion show. They were trapped inside when the mob overran the embassy compound, and the building was set afire.

The Americans fled out a back door and took refuge in a depression in the ground. There they remained, terrorized by thousands of screaming, hostile Pakistanis for the next two hours, sources told my reporters Indy Badhwar and Lucette Lagnado.

Sharon Jones, wife of the embassy air attache, described an attack by a Pakistani woman who pounced on her: "She grabbed me, insulted me, spit in my face and tore my clothes."

The wife of another diplomat said it was "a terrifying experience," adding: "All of us felt really scared. The mob would pinch us, they would punch us, but there was little one could do."

Arlene Erickson, an embassy secretary who remained in Islamabad after the evacuation, said she had been "bruised enough to last me the rest of my life."

"Needless to say, I was scared to death," said the deposition of Audrey Williamson, wife of an American banker in Islamabad. "They verbally abused us and shouted anti-American slogans. Occasionally, they spat at us. . . . Some of the mob actually urinated on us, which was most disgusting."

Siraj Patel, the Pakistani manager of the club, stayed with the Americans throughout the ordeal and did his best to protect them from the raging mob. In a signed statement, he said the police not only didn't help the group, but actually joined in harassing the women.

In his account, Patel states that

Williamson had to hit one of the policemen who was "continually mauling her." Jones also claimed that on several occasions the policemen molested her.

When the Americans were finally rescued and taken to the airport for evacuation home, State Department officials told them they should not talk about the incident. "We were told to please keep in mind that there were still people in Islamabad," said Jones, who added that U.S. officials later impressed on them the importance of U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Thomas Putcher, an employee of the Agency for International Development, was badly beaten, robbed of all his possessions, and held hostage for several hours. He was not even met by a State Department official when he arrived in the United States. His wife and parents had to spend all day at the State Department just to find out what flight he was on.

More than six months have passed, but the State Department has yet to release a report on the embassy attack. Rep. Lester Wolff (D-N.Y.) will hold hearings on the matter, to determine whether there was a cover-up.

Footnote: A State Department spokesman confirmed that a report on the Islamabad outrage has not been completed. He acknowledged that not all the victims had been debriefed, but said there would "probably" be more interviews sometime in the future.