

Atom Scientist Questioned On Rogue States Link

Daily Telegraph. 23/12/2003

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore and Anton La Guardia, Diplomatic Editor

Pakistani intelligence officials are questioning the country's top atomic scientist about the alleged transfer of key technology to rogue states pursuing nuclear weapons programmes.

Abdul Qadeer Khan

Under pressure from America, Pakistani authorities have begun to investigate accusations that technology was passed to states such as Iran, North Korea and possibly Libya. Pakistan's foreign ministry yesterday denied a newspaper report that Abdul Qadeer Khan had been arrested, saying he was "too eminent" for such treatment. But it confirmed that "questions have been raised with him".

A fuller statement is expected today.

Western governments now face an acute dilemma over how to handle Pakistan - privately regarding it as a prime nuclear proliferator and a centre for Islamist extremism but publicly supporting President Pervez Musharraf as a key ally in the war against terrorism. Western diplomats say the US and United Nations nuclear inspectors would like to talk to Mr Khan, who is known to hold extreme Islamist views, and three other scientists. Diplomatic sources say the Americans may demand the extradition of any suspects to the US. Mr Khan is known as "The Father of the Pakistani Bomb" and is regarded as a hero by Islamist groups. As a metallurgist working in the Netherlands, he fled to Pakistan in the 1970s amid strong accusations that he stole designs for uranium enrichment centrifuges from Urenco, a British-German-Dutch consortium. He was convicted of stealing secrets but this was overturned on appeal. Pakistan has long denied reports that it passed on the know-how to others, saying it would make no sense to arm a neighbour and potential rival. But when Iran grudgingly opened up its nuclear programme to international inspection this year, United Nations experts found that the centrifuges being built at a large plant in the town of Natanz were apparently based on one of the Urenco designs thought to have been taken by Mr Khan.

As the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) traces Iran's secret procurement network, Pakistan now appears to be establishing a second line of defence. It claims that, while the present government of Gen Musharraf has kept a tight grip on its nuclear secrets, previous governments may have been more lax and individual scientists may have sold technology for personal gain. America will be particularly concerned by any suggestion that Pakistan's military, which oversees the nuclear programme, knew about any such transfers. The Daily Times in Lahore reported yesterday that President Musharraf was "shattered when Iran named some Pakistani scientists".

It quoted senior officials as saying Mr Khan was being "debriefed" about accusations. But a spokesman for the Pakistan foreign ministry said: "Nobody is under detention. Two scientists are undergoing debriefing sessions. "There are no restrictions on A Q Khan. He is too eminent a scientist for a normal debriefing session. However such questions have been raised with him." He said suggestions that the US would be seeking extraditions were "wild rumours". Although Pakistan initiated its nuclear weapons programme as a nationalist venture to counter India in the 1970s, Pakistani scientists, including Mr Khan, are well known for their Islamist views. Mr Khan has criticised the US and the major powers for their monopoly over nuclear weapons and has portrayed himself as willing to help the underdogs in the Muslim world. Several retired Pakistani scientists were questioned by the CIA after the September 11 attacks on America amid suggestions that they provided nuclear know-how to al-Qa'eda.

Two scientists who were running a charitable organisation to help the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan admitted meeting Osama bin Laden. Questions have long been asked about Pakistan's role in nuclear proliferation. Western intelligence experts believe Pakistan provided nuclear technology to North Korea in the 1990s, in exchange for missile technology. Yesterday The New York Times said Pakistan may also have provided nuclear technology to Libya, which has now promised to dismantle all weapons of mass destruction. Pakistani nuclear scientists have also visited Burma.

But Iran's dramatic disclosures to the IAEA are potentially devastating to Pakistan because they may provide verifiable evidence of a nuclear supply route.

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