

Greedy Scientists 'Sold Nuclear Secrets'

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore and Anton La Guardia

Pakistan admitted for the first time yesterday that some of its scientists "motivated by personal ambition or greed" might have sold nuclear technology to Iran. Faced with growing evidence that Pakistani nuclear know-how made its way to several "rogue states" - including Iran, North Korea and perhaps also Libya - Islamabad tried to argue that any transfer of technology was the work of individuals rather than of the government. But President Pervez Musharraf will not easily fend off accusations that Pakistan, despite presenting itself as a vital ally in the war on terrorism, may in fact be the nuclear quartermaster for the "axis of evil".

As the head of the army, Gen Musharraf will have to provide credible answers to questions about how a nuclear programme that was supposed to be under strict military control leaked its secrets. "There are indications that certain individuals might have been motivated by personal ambition or greed. But we have not made a final determination," said Masood Khan, the foreign ministry spokesman. The Pakistani foreign ministry said intelligence agencies had begun questioning at least four of the country's leading nuclear scientists after Iran told the United Nations' nuclear watchdog that it obtained uranium enrichment centrifuges from Pakistan in the late 1980s.

Those being questioned include Abdul Qadeer Khan, who is nicknamed the Father of the Bomb. Islamabad said the scientists were not formally under arrest, but were being "debriefed". The foreign ministry spokesman said that anyone found to have sold nuclear technology would be punished. "Nobody is above the law," he said. The spokesman insisted: "The government of Pakistan has not authorised any transfer of technologies out of the country. "We are a responsible state and we understand our obligations and we fulfill our international commitments and obligations." Until this week, Pakistan dismissed all accusations of nuclear proliferation as part of a Western plot to divert attention from the action of Western companies that sold nuclear-related technology to "rogue states". Western intelligence agencies have long suspected that Pakistan provided nuclear technology to North Korea in return for help with its missile programme.

But Iran's decision this year reluctantly to open up its nuclear facilities to UN inspectors has revealed a trail of hard evidence leading to Pakistan. In particular, the uranium enrichment centrifuges discovered in the Iranian town of Natanz were based on European designs that Khan is accused of stealing in the Seventies. In Washington, the White House spokesman Scott McClellan said that President Musharraf "has assured us that there are not any transfers of weapons of mass destruction related technologies or know-how going on at the present time". Mr McClellan called these personal assurances "important". The series of allegations about Islamabad's transfer of nuclear secrets has caused immense strain in the United States-Pakistan relationship, and has provided ammunition to Gen Musharraf's Islamic opponents who accuse him of selling out cheaply to the US.

Local newspapers were filled with reports of fears expressed by opposition politicians that the US was manipulating the crisis to try to gain control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.