

Iran Says Pakistanis Helped With Nukes

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By Ahmed Rashid

At least four of Pakistan's top nuclear scientists have been under investigation since mid-November for complicity in providing Iran with equipment to make nuclear weapons between 1987 and 1991. Unlike previous accusations in the long history of allegations that Pakistan has been responsible for nuclear proliferation, this is the first time that a covert customer for nuclear-weapons technology has actually named its suppliers. Iran has made secret, dramatic disclosures to the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency implicating Pakistani sources in its purchase of gas centrifuges for the enrichment of uranium. Iran is believed to have covertly imported at least 2,000 parts related to nuclear weapons from a variety of suppliers including Chinese, Russian and Pakistani scientists and unnamed businessmen based in Dubai. The Pakistan government was not named. "Unlike previous charges that Pakistan may have proliferated to North Korea or Libya, in Iran's case the wriggle room for Islamabad is zero," says a senior Western diplomat in Islamabad. When charges first surfaced in October, Pakistan categorically denied them. But when a Washington Post article in mid-December implicated Pakistan, Islamabad was forced to change its tune. "There are indications that certain individuals might have been motivated by personal ambition or greed. But we have not made a final determination," Foreign Ministry spokesman Masood Khan said on December 23. "If there are individuals who are found involved in transfers of any sort, action would be taken against them. Nobody is above the law."

Those being questioned include A.Q. Khan, the country's top nuclear scientist, nicknamed "The Father of the Pakistani Bomb." Until 2000, Khan headed A.Q. Khan Research Laboratories, 25 miles from Islamabad. The facility is run by the army and is the main production centre for ballistic missiles and enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. The laboratories were renamed in Khan's honour after Pakistan exploded nuclear devices in 1998. Khan was sacked in 2000 after the United States accused him of providing nuclear technology to North Korea, but he remains an adviser to Prime Minister Zafrullah Khan Jamali. Khan has close links to the military establishment and to Islamic fundamentalist parties, which revere him. Since last summer, when the U.S. accused Pakistan of exchanging nuclear-bomb blueprints with North Korea for its latest missiles, President Pervez Musharraf has tried to distance the military from Khan. That crisis subsided when American Secretary of State Colin Powell said that no more transfers were apparently taking place. Musharraf said he was not in power when the transfers occurred. In Washington, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said on December 23 that 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." Pakistan has deflected criticism by saying individuals were responsible for the illegal acts, not the state. The army has run Pakistan's nuclear weapons effort and some civilian leaders, such as former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, have said that they were never even briefed about the programme.

Retired army officers say it is possible that some generals helped Iran's nuclear programme in isolated instances rather than as a sustained relationship. During the period in question, the desire of then-army chief Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg to establish a strategic anti-American bloc with Iran was well-known, as was his support for Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War. At the time, Beg was opposed on all counts by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Ishaq Dar, the finance minister in Sharif's cabinet and now a member of the senate, told Lahore-based The Daily Times newspaper on December 25 that Beg had asked the Sharif government to transfer Pakistan's nuclear technology to a "friendly" state for a payment of \$12 billion. Beg denies the accusation.