

## Pakistan Faces Protests Over Scientist's Sacking

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Pakistan's opposition parties yesterday demanded nationwide protests after the government sacked the country's leading nuclear scientist as part of an investigation into the suspected sale of nuclear technology to foreign powers.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, 66, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear programme, was sacked as a special adviser to Zafrullah Khan Jamali, the prime minister, on Saturday to "facilitate" the investigation into the suspected sale by local scientists of nuclear expertise to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

The decision, which came after a meeting of the country's political and military leaders, chaired by President Pervez Musharraf, shocked a nation that reveres Khan.

"It is the ultimate insult to the people of Pakistan," said Senator Saadia Abbasi, of exiled premier Nawaz Sharif's secular Pakistan Muslim League.

"The entire nation feels humiliated over the treatment being meted out to a national hero by the government."

An alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties said that the West was trying to curb the nuclear capability of an Islamic nation.

Qazi Hussain Ahmad, a leader of the alliance, said Gen Musharraf would soon feel the wrath of the Pakistani people if he continued supporting America in its war on terror. Five nuclear scientists have been exonerated by investigators, while three others and three army officers are still being held.

Jamaat-e-Islami, the chief of Pakistan's largest religious party, called for nationwide protests to express solidarity with Khan and other nuclear officials caught up in the scandal.

By sacking the country's top nuclear scientist, Gen Musharraf is seeking to distance the army from accusations that Pakistan has been responsible for the illegal proliferation of nuclear technology.

He is under intense pressure from the United States, Britain and the International Atomic Energy Agency, (IAEA), who have charged Pakistan with selling its nuclear secrets.

Khan's removal came after several weeks of chaotic and contradictory statements from Islamabad.

The decision was taken after a meeting of the National Command Authority, which oversees the country's nuclear arsenal of an estimated 30 weapons.

Senior Pakistani officials said Khan was first asked to resign but he refused, saying it would make him appear guilty when he denies any wrongdoing.

Khan, who is under house arrest at his luxurious villa outside Islamabad, is being investigated for allegedly accruing vast sums of money held in bank accounts in Africa and the Middle East after selling nuclear secrets to Iran between 1988 and 1993.

The IAEA has also charged that Khan's designs for gas centrifuges, which enrich uranium for nuclear weapons, were also provided to North Korea and Libya.

American and British scientists are now investigating Libyan documents and bomb-making equipment including centrifuges, which were flown to the US last week as part of a deal with the Libyan leader, Col Muammar Gaddafi.

Khan had been effectively sidelined in 2001 when, facing intense US pressure, Gen Musharraf sacked him as head of Khan Research Laboratories (KRL).

KRL is the key bomb and missile research and manufacturing facility in Pakistan. Khan's closeness to the army and his popular status did not allow Gen Musharraf to go further.

It is still unclear if Khan and Dr Mohammed Farooq, a former director-general of KRL will go on trial under the Official Secrets Act.

Last week Gen Musharraf called Khan and other scientists under investigation, "enemies of the state".

Najam Sethi, the editor of The Friday Times, said: "Musharraf's strategy seems twofold - admit a degree of guilt but absolve the state by attributing it to a few greedy scientists."