

## Pardon For Scientist Who Sold Atom Bomb Secrets

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore and Robin Gedye

Pakistan is likely to pardon without trial the father of the country's atomic bomb even though he has confessed to selling nuclear technology to rogue states, a senior government official told the Telegraph yesterday.

President Pervaiz Musharraf, now facing mounting anger over the detention of Abdul Qadeer Khan, is expected to indicate the government's plans in a television address in the next few days.

The scientist, a national icon, is under house arrest. He is said to have confessed to selling nuclear weapons technology to some of the world's most radical anti-western states, including Libya, Iran and North Korea, over at least 11 years.

There were growing indications last night that the mix of popular feeling and the risk that a trial would expose the army's involvement in the scandal will effectively end any chance of a trial.

Since Mr Khan had confessed to selling technology "there was no further need to humiliate the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, who has kept the nation safe from Indian attack", the official said.

The official, intimately involved in Mr Khan's investigation, said a trial would be too sensitive when "political opposition to the president is building up".

According to yesterday's Washington Post, the Pakistanis have other reasons for burying the issue.

It quoted a friend of Mr Khan and a senior Pakistani investigator as saying the scientist helped North Korea design and equip facilities for making weapons-grade uranium with the full knowledge of senior military commanders, including Gen Musharraf, who is also army chief of staff.

Mr Khan apparently urged investigators to question army commanders and Gen Musharraf, saying "no debriefing is complete unless you bring every one of them here and debrief us together".

Even if the president does not explicitly pardon Mr Khan, who led Pakistan's development of the Islamic world's first nuclear bomb in 1998, he is expected to say enough to calm mounting anger over his detention.

Both Washington and London, keenly aware of President Musharraf's dilemma, are understood not to have pressed him to stage a public trial.

While Pakistan can expect international indignation if a pardon were granted, the Americans and British say they are content that the nuclear network has been smashed.

"There is relief that this avenue for proliferating nuclear weapons has been cut off," said a senior diplomat in London.

"These transgressions occurred several years ago and even though one must assume they did so with the knowledge of Pakistan's intelligence services, it is not for us to advise a key ally on how to deal with the matter."

Other western diplomats appeared less conciliatory. One said leading western countries and institutions, including the US, Britain and the International Atomic Energy Agency, would demand that their experts debrief Mr Khan "in jail and not after a pardon in his mansion".

Another promised international indignation in the event of pardon. "He is the world's biggest criminal, involved for 27

years in selling nuclear technology. If you let him off with a slap on the wrist, then what kind of message are you sending to others?" he said.

Mr Khan has let it be known that he is prepared to blow the whistle on the army's involvement. A cabinet minister revealed that Mr Khan's daughter, a British citizen, had travelled to London with papers that could incriminate generals and other Pakistani leaders, including the former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

Mr Khan is also reported to have briefed several trusted local journalists with similar information before he was placed under house arrest two weeks ago, asking them to publish it if he went on trial.