

PAKISTAN: INSIDE THE NUCLEAR CLOSET¹

by Pervez Hoodbhoy

The president of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, is in a self-congratulatory mood these days, savouring the praise heaped upon him by George Bush, Colin Powell, and the United States's under-secretary of state for arms control, John Bolton. After surviving two recent assassination attempts and overseeing a high-level summit meeting with India, the great survivor of Pakistani politics acts as if the worst is behind him. By way of celebration, he has announced new long-range missile tests for March 2004.

The primary reason for Musharraf's current satisfaction is the way that his treatment of Pakistan's hugely popular nuclear hero, Abdul Qadeer Khan — forcing him to apologise on public television for his illicit nuclear trafficking, yet also pardoning him for the offence — allowed him to please Washington without causing a massive uproar.

Many in the Pakistani press had warned that any attempt to punish Qadeer, advertised for near two decades as the architect of Pakistan's and the Islamic world's nuclear bomb, would provoke rampaging mobs to demand an end to Musharraf's pro-US rule. As it turned out, Washington was thrilled with the general's rebuke, while a disillusioned and disempowered Pakistani public grumbled but did not take to the streets.

But neither Musharraf's satisfaction nor America's approbation is likely to last long. For while Qadeer took sole responsibility for the trafficking in his televised confession, the sheer scale of Pakistan's secret exports raises at least two difficult questions that go far beyond him and a handful of his colleagues.

First, Iranian and Libyan revelations since December have confirmed that this was the most extensive nuclear smuggling in history. It involved the illicit export of centrifuge designs and parts, used to enrich uranium into fuel

¹3/3/2004, published in www.opendemocracy.net

for nuclear reactors, or as fissile material for weapons (an export reluctantly admitted by the Pakistani government itself); but it also included complete centrifuges, together with a shipment to Libya of 1.5 tons of uranium hexafluoride gas. Could Qadeer and his cohorts have moved such large pieces of equipment, and traveled extensively outside Pakistan, without the knowledge of the military? The ultra-high level of security in Pakistan's nuclear installations makes this unbelievable and points to deeper level of complicity.

Second, documents handed over by Libya to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) — now being evaluated by US experts — reveal that the country had received old Chinese designs for a workable nuclear bomb that had been passed to Pakistan in the late 1970s. Here lies a puzzle, and the possibility of a huge embarrassment for the Pakistani establishment: because, although Qadeer is widely advertised as the “father of the Pakistani bomb”, knowledgeable people are aware that he had nothing to do with the design and manufacture of the bomb.

As a metallurgist, Abdul Qadeer Khan's expertise was exclusively in producing weapons-grade uranium hexafluoride gas using the centrifuge process. The rest of the work of creating a nuclear weapon — including metallisation, bomb design, manufacture, and testing — was entirely the responsibility of an unfriendly rival organisation, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission.

How then did Qadeer happen to possess nuclear weapon design information when, in fact, the real work of weapons design was being done elsewhere?

Openly Selling Secrets

General Musharraf has claimed that Qadeer's export of centrifuge technology was unknown to successive governments. Yet for over a decade, Qadeer openly advertised his nuclear wares; each year — including 2003, when the proliferation controversy had already become intense — colourful banners festooned Islamabad advertising workshops on “Vibrations In Rapidly Rotating Machinery” and “Advanced Materials”. These workshops, sponsored by the Dr. A.Q. Khan Research Laboratories (also known as the Kahuta Research Laboratories), had obvious and immediate utility for centrifuge technology,

essential for producing bomb-grade uranium.

In earlier years, Qadeer and his collaborators had published a number of papers detailing critical issues regarding the balancing of centrifuges and magnetic bearings. These dealt with technical means for enabling centrifuge rotors to spin close to the speed of sound without disintegrating. The relevance of such work to the development of weapons-grade uranium was already evident even to non-specialist observers.

But to make the blatant absolutely certain in the minds of prospective customers, Kahuta issued glossy sales brochures aimed at “classified organisations”. These advertised such nuclear products as complete ultracentrifuge machines, high frequency inverters, equipment for handling corrosive uranium hexafluoride gas, as well as hand-held ground-to-air missiles.

In light of such persistent, egregious advertising of forbidden nuclear wares, can successive governments of the sovereign nation really have been — as President Musharraf claims — so ignorant?

An Empire Of Patronage

For all who cared to see, and as even his admirers admit, Abdul Qadeer Khan was corrupt. Despite a salary of less than \$3,000 a month, Qadeer had bought vast amounts of the choicest real estate; owned restaurants and colleges; purchased a hotel in Timbuktu which he named after his wife; and claimed ownership of a psychiatric hospital. His belief that his historic contribution elevated him above the country’s laws and environmental regulations even led him illegally to build a magnificent mansion along the pristine Rawal Lake, the source of Rawalpindi’s drinking water.

But Qadeer’s insistence on his paternity of Pakistan’s supreme status symbol did not come free. He had to buy the loyalty of journalists, military men, and scientists. His biographers and other sycophants were amply rewarded; none of his relatives are poor anymore. Many of my colleagues in the physics department of Islamabad’s Quaid-e-Azam University would receive cheques for substantial amounts merely by sending him an obsequious note and asking for money.

He was not so generous with me. With a physics colleague, Abdul Nayyar, I challenged in court Qadeer's bid to steal our university's land in 1996. We eventually won, but he had me placed on the Exit Control List and I was forbidden to leave Pakistan until I finally managed to clear myself of various charges of being "anti-national". These included selling the secrets of the Kanupp reactor to the United States and India — a wildly ridiculous charge given that Kanupp is under the full-scope safeguards of the IAEA.

The Wind Blows Danger

It is said that General Musharraf has a strong personal dislike of Qadeer, and it is unlikely that he approved his shady dealings. Yet when he removed Qadeer as head of the enrichment facility in late 2000, allegedly under US pressure, Musharraf did not order a thorough investigation; nor, more recently, did he show much gratitude to the two countries which had exposed an international crime ring.

Indeed, in the marathon press conference where he announced his acceptance of Qadeer's petition for mercy, Musharraf excoriated Iran and Libya for surrendering to the IAEA and meekly handing over documents on their nuclear programmes that implicated Pakistan ("Our Muslim brothers did not ask us before giving our names"). When asked if the state would appropriate Qadeer's illicitly acquired wealth, Musharraf replied that this was not necessary — this even though Musharraf has been incarcerating political rivals for many years on charges of corruption that may be true but are yet to be proved in court.

But Pervez Musharraf is not the only one with some explaining to do in this murky affair. So does the United States government, both for its past and present policies towards Pakistan and for its role in nuclear proliferation generally.

American policy on nuclear proliferation towards both Pakistan and Israel has historically been driven by expediency. As these two nations, for different reasons, set about building nuclear weapons decades ago, the US chose to look the other way. While Pakistan fought America's war-by-proxy against

the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the president of the United States certified year after year that Pakistan was not attempting to build a nuclear weapon thus allowing Pakistan to keep building the bomb. But after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan and accused it of making the bomb.

Such expediency — to put it at its mildest — continues to guide US actions today. CIA director George J. Tenet claims that his agency had penetrated deep into the nuclear technology smuggling ring in recent years. This should not have been difficult, given Qadeer’s shameless advertising of his wares. But why then did the Americans not stop him?

If Tenet’s claim is correct, then the US knew — but did not attempt to stop — centrifuge and bomb designs from being further copied, and centrifuge parts being manufactured and distributed to other interested parties. In effect this has made the difficult job of containing the spread of nuclear weapons still harder. Such a role is itself a form of complicity in nuclear proliferation. It is not clear why the CIA chose to move so slowly and with such apparent indecision.

The more recent United States indulgence of General Musharraf has a clearer explanation. The Americans want Pakistan to help eliminate the al-Qaida and Taliban threat. Colin Powell’s statement that Pakistan has done “quite a bit to roll up the (nuclear) network” must be read in the light of this urgent priority. But can Pakistan deliver on either account?

The way that nuclear organisations, in Pakistan as elsewhere, are necessarily clothed in layers of secrecy raises questions about Powell’s optimism. It is also an open question as to whether Pakistani government assurances, even if they are sincere, can prevent all in the country’s nuclear establishment from following in Qadeer’s footsteps. Only two years ago, as is well-known, senior members of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission were ready to play their role in the jihad against America. In a fit of Islamic solidarity they went to Afghanistan and met with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. It is difficult to believe that they were the only ones so inclined.