

## Link Leaks

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

"My father told me that if ever anything happened to him, I was to call you," said the plaintive, attention-grabbing voice of a young Pakistani woman on the telephone to me Sunday. Her father, a nuclear scientist, had been detained by Pakistan's feared Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). They had come in the evening and told her father to pack a small bag, with personal articles sufficient for a few days. Barely able to hold back the tears, she passed me onto her brother. "There had been five or six standing by the door and another three or so in a four-wheel-drive vehicle and another car outside," he told me.

At least four men have been arrested in the last few days, bringing my tally to a total of at least seven scientists arrested since the beginning of December. (One person over the weekend told me between 25 and 30 scientists and other experts might have been detained so far.) The Pakistani authorities have publicly acknowledged only a few of the detentions, saying they are trying to work out whether "renegade nuclear experts" have helped neighboring Iran develop a nuclear-weapons program.

Why phone me? I have written about Pakistan's nuclear-weapons endeavors for more than 25 years. I have a variety of good contacts. The woman who called me clearly thinks publicity could help her father and the others. I previously wrote "Nuclear Spinning: The Iran-Pakistan Link" in December for NRO, a few days after the first arrests. It had been prompted by other telephone calls.

The story is bizarre. It is also probably true -- although it is safe to assume we have so far learned only a fraction of that truth. In essence, the story is that Pakistani scientists, directly or indirectly, allowed Iran to acquire centrifuges suitable for enriching uranium. The centrifuges were discovered when international inspectors visited Iran last year, much to the embarrassment of President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military leader turned dictator. Under pressure to cooperate with the U.S. against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, Musharraf himself is threatened by Islamic extremists, as two failed assassination attempts in the last month testify. Iran's public nuclear-centrifuge admission is giving Washington an excuse to hammer Pakistan for its long history of reckless proliferation, previously thought to have been in exchange for Chinese and North Korean assistance. But whatever Musharraf might have known about Iran for years, first as a senior general, and then as chief of army staff (the Pakistani army is guardian of the country's nuclear project), he is now claiming total ignorance -- and innocence -- as head of state.

The arrested men all worked at the Khan Research Laboratories, a uranium-enrichment plant outside the capital city of Islamabad. In 1981, the then military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, gave the plant its current name in honor of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, who created it in the 1970s. This gesture was intended to annoy the United States, and it did. What is going on now appears, in part, to be Washington's revenge. Using the Iran-centrifuge scandal, Washington can pressure Musharraf to shut down perhaps half of his nuclear-weapons projects.

Khan himself was retired on his 65th birthday in April 2001, against his own wishes. President Musharraf, who had taken power in a military coup in 1999, apparently was responding to U.S. demands. He also retired Khan's main rival, Samar Mubarakmand, at the same time. Khan had followed the highly enriched-uranium route to the bomb; Mubarakmand's team had followed the plutonium route. Both groups successfully tested devices in Pakistan's May 1998 nuclear blasts. Both teams also separately worked on providing Pakistan with missiles capable of carrying nuclear bombs. Khan's group acquired a Nodong production line from North Korea -- the missile is known as the Ghauri in Pakistan, and is in operational service. The plutonium team chose the Chinese M-11 missile, known in Pakistan as the Shaheen.

Last month the Pakistani government briefed a select few of its journalists to report that rogue scientists had used German go-betweens to sell their secrets to Iran. The scientists had also been helped by two Sri Lankan businessmen in Dubai, the journalists were told. "The [scientists] were motivated entirely by money," went the briefing line.

Khan's name did not appear in the subsequent reports, but it is clear that Khan is considered the center of the web. He probably hasn't been arrested himself only because he is a national hero. In Pakistan, he is known as "the father of the Islamic bomb." But he has been invited in for questioning nonetheless, most recently last Saturday evening. It started at 6 P.M. and was not finished until after 9 P.M. A friend who spoke to him later reported that, although Khan said he was okay, he sounded exhausted.

Two other men were detained around the same time: Major Islam ul-Haq, Khan's personal staff officer, and Nazeer Ahmed, a director at KRL with a British Ph.D., who was Khan's principal and closest aide in the KRL headquarters for many years. The men arrested in December had been linked to centrifuge production and purchases of equipment from abroad. One, Saeed Ahmed, had been head of the centrifuge-design office, another, Yasin Chohan, ran a production line. Both have been released. A third, Farooq Mohammed, is still detained; his family went to court last week to secure his release. This week, they will learn the result -- but they are not optimistic. Legal niceties about habeas corpus take second place in a military regime.

The story could be bigger than just leaks of uranium-enrichment technology. Two other men arrested last week, Abdul Majid and Mansoor Alam (also directors at KRL), had both been directly involved in the first 1998 nuclear test, watching from a distance when a device using highly enriched uranium had been detonated under the Chagai Hills in Pakistan's southwestern region.

But to believe the storyline dictated so far by the Musharraf regime, you have to believe that a group of scientists, motivated by national glory (the quest for a bomb), was distracted by the opportunity to earn a quick buck (selling secrets to Iran, a potential enemy). The whole escapade apparently completely escaped the notice of a wide array of governments, some military, some democratic.

None of this makes any sense, yet. But with the keywords "Iran," "Islamic terrorism," and "nuclear proliferation," this should be one of the stories to watch in 2004.

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