WMD TERRORISM: Another Wake-Up Call From Pakistan

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Coinciding with the announcement of an agreement reached by Libya in secret talks with the UK and the USA on the dismantling of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) assets and capabilities, another wake-up call has come from Pakistan regarding the role played by its scientists in the clandestine proliferation of WMD to States which pose a concern to the international community and the role which they could play in a similar proliferation to terrorist organisations.

2. Since 1980, there were periodic reports of the external funding of Pakistan's military nuclear project by Saudi Arabia and Libya and about Pakistan's role in assisting Libya and Iran in the development of their nuclear and missile capabilities and in the training of their officers in the use of military equipment acquired by them from North Korea.
3. In 1988, Dr. Abdul Qadir Khan, who was then heading Pakistan's military nuclear project, and Reza Amrollahi, the head of the Iranian military nuclear programme, were reported to have signed a secret agreement under which A.Q.Khan allegedly sold to Amrollahi copies of the designs and drawings of the URENCO uranium enrichment plant in Holland. Dr. Khan used to work in the URENCO plant in the 1970s and the Pakistani authorities persuaded him to return to Pakistan and head its programme for the construction of an uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta. While doing so, he stole the drawings and designs of the URENCO plant and used them in the construction of the Kahuta plant.

4. It was reported in 1988 that he had given copies of these designs and drawings to Iran and had agreed to help it in the construction of an enrichment plant based on the Kahuta-URENCO design. Following this agreement, nuclear scientists and engineers from Iran started visiting Kahuta at regular intervals for discussions and training. The news of this deal became public in 1992 when Nawaz Sharif was the Prime Minister. He strongly denied that any such deal existed and asserted that there was no question of Pakistan assisting Iran in nuclear development. The "Washington Post" reported on November 7, 1992, that Pakistan had strongly refuted reports that it sold the URENCO centrifuge designs to Iran.

5. Despite this, suspicion that Iran was building a Kahuta-style plant with Pakistani assistance persisted. The question, which kept coming up from time to time without convincing answer was whether the Pakistani assistance to Iran in the construction of an uranium enrichment plant was a rogue operation undertaken by Dr. A.Q. Khan and some of his colleagues in the Kahuta plant without the knowledge and clearance of the political and military leadership or whether it had their approval.

6. Subsequently, after Pakistan test-fired a medium-range missile (Ghauri) based on North Korea's Nodong series in April, 1998, it came to notice that Pakistan was compensating North Korea for its sale of medium and long range missiles to it partly by paying cash and supplying wheat and partly by helping North Korea in setting up an uranium enrichment plant based on the Kahuta-URENCO model. Again, the same question as to whether this was a rogue initiative of Dr. Khan and his colleagues in Kahuta or whether it had the clearance of the political and military leadership arose, but without a convincing answer.

7. While the US State Department imposed sanctions as required under its laws against the North Korean and Pakistani entities involved in the clandestine missile transaction, it refrained from imposing similar sanctions in respect of Pakistani assistance to North Korea in uranium enrichment on the ground that the evidence in this regard was not conclusive. However, reportedly under US pressure, Dr. Khan was removed last year from all executive responsibilities relating to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes and appointed to the merely ceremonial post of Scientific Adviser to the General, without any meaningful responsibilities. He was also reportedly banned from travelling abroad.

8. During the US military action in Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom, its intelligence agencies reportedly came across documents which showed that two nuclear experts of Pakistan---Sultan Bashirudeen Ahmed, who had taken premature
retirement when Nawaz was the Prime Minister in his second term (1997 to 1999) and Abdul Majeed--- had been visiting Kandahar when Osama bin Laden was based there.

9. At US request, Musharraf ordered their detention so that they could be interrogated by the USA's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). During the interrogation, they were reported to have admitted visiting Kandahar and meeting bin Laden, but they insisted that their visits were in connection with the work of a non-governmental humanitarian organisation for assisting the Afghan people which they had founded.

10. Since their interrogation did not lead to any evidence that they were helping Al Qaeda in its efforts to acquire WMD, they were released, but banned from travelling abroad. The bank accounts of the NGO headed by them were also ordered to be frozen under the UN Security Council Resolution No.1373.

11. In the past, President Pervez Musharraf used to categorically deny any clandestine nuclear or missile deal with North Korea and maintain that Pakistan's Ghauri and related series of missiles were indigenously designed and produced with no North Korean input, but during his recent visit to South Korea after attending the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) at Kuala Lumpur in October, he admitted for the first time that North Korean technology had played a role in Pakistan's missile programme. At the same time, he continued to deny any nuclear supply relationship with North Korea.

12. Since the beginning of this year, there has been a subtle change in his denials of any Pakistani assistance to Iran and North Korea in the nuclear field. While in the past he used to be categorical in such denials, in recent months, he has been qualifying them by saying that while there was no question of Pakistan's military and nuclear establishment assisting Iran and North Korea, it was difficult to keep a complete control over what individual scientists said or did during their travels to these countries.

13. He started introducing this qualification in his statements after reports started coming in that the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had, during its inspections, detected traces of enriched uranium in some of the centrifuges in the Iranian enrichment plant at Natanz and in another pilot plant. Iran strongly denied that it had already started enriching uranium and contended that the traces of enriched uranium must have come from the supplier of the centrifuges. This indicated that the centrifuges were acquired second hand from another country---most probably Pakistan. Media reports emanating from Vienna claimed that IAEA officials suspected Pakistani assistance to Iran in the construction of the enrichment plants.

14. Quoting the "New York Times", the "News", the prestigious daily of Pakistan, reported as follows on February 24, 2003:
Pakistan is in the dock again. A report in the Saturday edition of the New York Times, citing American intelligence sources, claims Pakistan assisted Iran with its alleged weapons of mass destruction programme.

Inspectors, including IAEA chief Dr Mohamed ElBaradei, visited the Natanz site on Friday and discovered a small network of gas centrifuge machines for enriching uranium. These are the same machines used by Islamabad and, according to Japanese defence analyst Shunji Taoka, North Korea. The official Iraqi arms declaration sent to the UN late last year claimed an emissary of Pakistani nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadir Khan offered nuclear assistance to Baghdad at the time of the Gulf war. The NYT report says American intelligence believes Pakistan assisted Iran.

“American officials believe Natanz is part of a long suspected nuclear weapons programme, an Iranian project that American intelligence believes has benefited from Pakistani assistance and that is far more advanced than the effort by Iraq,” states the report.

15. The "Washington Post" reported as follows on August 27, 2003:

* Iran has admitted for the first time it received substantial foreign help in building a secret nuclear facility.

* A facility south of Tehran was now beginning to enrich uranium, turning it into a key ingredient in the manufacture of nuclear weapons, according to U.N. documents and diplomatic sources.
* Though Iran has not yet identified the source of the foreign help, evidence collected in Iran by the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency implicates Pakistani companies as suppliers of critical technology and parts, officials familiar with a U.N. investigation of Iran's program said.

* Pakistan is believed by many proliferation experts to have passed important nuclear secrets to Iran and North Korea. Pakistan has denied providing such assistance.

16. The "Los Angeles Times" reported on November 28, 2003, as follows:

* The United Nations' nuclear agency is investigating potential links between the atomic programs of Iran and Pakistan after discovering that Iran's secret uranium-enrichment program used technology identical to Pakistani plans, according to diplomats.

* Tehran has acknowledged to the International Atomic Energy Agency that its centrifuge enrichment program was based on designs by a European company, Urenco. Diplomats said the designs were the same Urenco-based technology used by Pakistan to develop its nuclear bomb in the 1990s.

* The most recent IAEA report on Iran's nuclear program said Tehran had started research in 1985 and had got the centrifuge designs "from a foreign intermediary in 1987. " Iran has told the agency that they came from a middleman whose identity remains a mystery.

* A diplomat said the IAEA had not determined whether the centrifuge plans had come directly from Pakistan or had been obtained or stolen from a Pakistani nuclear laboratory by the middleman.

* The company (URENCO) denied supplying centrifuge technology or blueprints to Iran. Pakistan has repeatedly denied providing nuclear assistance to Iran and has responded to articles suggesting that it aided Iran by calling them
anti-Muslim. Iran also has denied cooperating with Pakistan.

* Two former Iranian diplomats told the Los Angeles Times last summer that Khan had made several trips to Iran, beginning in 1987, to help with Iran’s nuclear program. One of the diplomats, Ali Akbar Omid Mehr, said Khan had been given a villa on the Caspian Sea in return for his assistance.

* Earlier this month, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said a reported visit by Khan to Iran was connected with attempts to purchase short-range missiles, not nuclear-technology sales. The Iranian centrifuge program is at the top of the IAEA inquiry list because traces of weapons-grade uranium were discovered in two locations where the machines had been assembled and tested. One of the locations was the huge underground enrichment plant being constructed near Natanz in central Iran. Diplomats said IAEA inspectors had spotted the similarity to the Urenco designs when they visited the plant.

* Traces of weapons-grade uranium also were discovered at Kalaye Electric Co. Once identified as a watch factory, the Iranians reluctantly acknowledged having performed extensive tests there on purifying uranium with centrifuges.

* Iran had long maintained that its centrifuge program was indigenous. Confronted with the IAEA discoveries, Iranian officials said some components were purchased outside the country through middlemen and were contaminated with enriched uranium.

17. In the meanwhile, during the secret talks between Libyan officials and their counterparts from the UK and the USA since March 2003, and during secret visits by British and American experts to Libya during the course of these negotiations, they were reportedly surprised to find that Libya had made much more progress in its efforts to develop a military nuclear capability than originally believed and that A.Q.Khan and his associates had possibly played a role in this regard.
18. Before the simultaneous announcement regarding Libya's agreement to dismantle its capabilities and assets was made from London and Washington, the Musharraf regime, under US pressure, detained two close associates of A.Q.Khan for interrogation---Dr.Farooq and Dr.Yasin Chauhan, both working in the Kahuta plant. When news of their detention leaked to the media, the Pakistani Foreign Office denied that they had been detained and contended that they were merely being debriefed. It projected their debriefing as part of an annual security drill to which all personnel working in sensitive establishments were subjected.

19. However, in a sensational report extremely embarrassing to the Musharraf regime, the "News" of December 21, 2003, has come out with the following account of their so-called debriefing: "As comprehensive and intensive investigations got underway to pinpoint those who stole and sold the country’s nuclear secrets for their personal financial glory, several top Pakistani scientists were found involved in nuclear proliferation only to jeopardise national security.

"Informed circles say that recent debriefing of some scientists revealed that certain individual scientists of the country’s top nuclear establishment might have breached the strict export control procedures by making unauthorised and irresponsible contacts with foreign nationals.

"In the process these individual nuclear scientists have been instrumental in leakage of information or components to foreign sources," said a source, who declined to disclose the name of a Dubai-based foreign individual (not Pakistani) who purchased loyalty of these scientists in lieu of hefty financial favours.

"Senior officials said the case of Iran, now under investigation by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as well as the latest news of Libya’s enrichment programme prompted Pakistani authorities to conduct thorough debriefing of certain scientists. The government has already acknowledged that fact.

"In the recent past, Director-General Khan’s Research Laboratories (KRL) Dr Farooq, Director KRL Yasin Chohan and two other individuals were taken into custody for debriefing.

"One of these scientists has given clear leads to the investigators. He is cooperating with the authorities and revealing the information relating to misconduct of some top scientists," the source told The News on Saturday.

"Investigations and background informal chat with some top officials reveal that both Iranian and Libyan sources are confirming that they are telling the IAEA some untold stories of this nuclear proliferation and stolen components and drawings.
"We are more than convinced that these individual top scientists involved in Pakistan’s nuclear-related entities have done all this proliferation and stolen national secrets in their lust for money and artificially-glorified life," said one top source.

"An initial probe launched in the recent past following a spate of allegations against Pakistani entities of having passed on vital information linked with uranium enrichment process unearthed some basic solid proofs of the involvement of these top scientists in stealing nuclear secrets.

"The living standards of some of these individuals, said the source, have been ostentatious and opulent indicating accumulation of wealth, which can come only through abnormal and devious methods. So much so, the fat bank balances and costly properties, including palatial houses, are considered a "definite indicator" of their misdeeds and ill-gotten wealth.

"Some sources maintain that any "pilferage" of know-how would not have been possible without the connivance of the top management of certain research organisations. This, they believe, cannot take place in presence of stringent procedures and measures to account for classified and sensitive information and technology.

"However, since Pakistan’s open acknowledgement in 1985 of possessing an enrichment facility, some individuals might have gradually transferred some basic know-how, drawings or small components over the next decade or so purely in pursuit of personal greed.

"The situation, following the initial probe, has reached to an alarming extent and the authorities are now considering conducting investigations of some of the top nuclear scientists who are otherwise revered by the nation.

"In weeks to come, the government looks determined to weed out such corrupt elements from the country’s strategic programmes to ensure that its national security and international obligations remain doubtless and beyond reproach.

"It will be a sad day for the country for these individuals may have violated the national trust and confidence by jeopardising national security," commented a top source. "However, the authorities are determined not to let the country’s image and standing in the international community suffer on account of any individual."

"Hectic assessment exercise is also put in place to gauge the damage these individuals might have caused to the country."
"The ongoing probe and inquiry is also expected to focus not only on Pakistani nationals but also on a number of European sources and individuals without whose collaboration the illegal operations would not have been possible," the report concluded. (End of citation)

20. Ever since Pakistan embarked on its military nuclear programme in the 1970s, the entire project has been closely controlled by the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had been handling all clandestine transactions relating to the acquisition of nuclear and missile capabilities. The elected political leadership was totally kept out of it and was not even allowed to visit any of the sensitive establishments.

21. All scientific delegations going to North Korea, Iran and Libya were invariably accompanied by a senior official of the ISI. ISI officials were also posted to Pyongyang, Teheran and Tripoli to handle all transactions in this regard and to keep a close watch on Pakistani scientists and engineers visiting these countries. An ISI officer invariably used to be present during all discussions.

22. As such, the question of individual scientists and other experts indulging in rogue operations without the knowledge and approval of the military leadership does not arise. Moreover, Pakistan has supplied to these countries not only designs and technical advice but also components such as centrifuges etc. which cannot be carried by individual scientists in their hand bags.

23. The Musharraf regime, in order to cover up the army's complicity, is staging an elaborate charade of debriefing individual scientists and putting the blame on them for the leakage of WMD components and technologies to North Korea, Iran and Libya. Reports from reliable sources in Pakistan speak of considerable panic in the military-intelligence establishment following receipt of reports that Col. Khadaffi, the Libyan ruler, has made a clean breast of Libya's WMD set-up and the assistance received by it from Pakistan.

24. Whether the leakages took place with or without the complicity of the military establishment, the fact that this could happen contrary to Musharraf's repeated assurances that Pakistan's WMD assets and capabilities were under the effective control of the Army and hence no leakages could take place highlights the dangers of similar leakages into the hands of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda and the International Islamic Front (IIF), which have made no secret of their attempts to acquire WMD and their readiness to use them to protect Islam, if left with no other alternative. In interviews given by him to Indian journalists before his last visit to India, President Vladimir Putin had expressed his concern over such a danger.

25. Of all the Pakistani components of the IIF, the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET), which now co-ordinates the activities world-wide of the IIF, has many followers in Pakistan's scientific community who, according to Pakistani media, regularly attend its annual sessions. In this connection, reference is invited to my following observation in my article dated May 3, 2003, and titled "Al Qaeda & Lashkar-e-Toiba" at http://www.saag.org/papers7/paper678.html: "Al Qaeda has been trying to use the organisational
infrastructure of the LET in Pakistan, its network in the Islamic world and its large funds for stepping up acts of terrorism against the USA and Israel. The LET's close access to senior officers of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment could be exploited by Al Qaeda to prevent any action against its surviving cadres in Pakistan. Many members of Pakistan's scientific community in the nuclear and missile fields regularly attend the conventions of the LET. By making use of this, Al Qaeda should be able to seek the assistance of LET sympathisers in the scientific community for acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Since the LET is the Pakistani terrorist organisation most active in J&K and other parts of India, its strengthened nexus with Al Qaeda should be a matter of concern to India."

26. For reasons which are not clear, the LET and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-Al-Islami (HUJI) are two pro-bin Laden jihadi organisations against which Musharraf has been repeatedly avoiding taking any action. The LET now operates under the name Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

27. Some Pakistani sources claim that the Dubai-based individual who, according to the "News", had played a role in the clandestine supply of nuclear material to Iran and Libya, is Dawood Ibrahim, the Indian mafia leader, who took shelter in Karachi after organising the Mumbai blasts of March,1993. The ISI had in the past used his wealth and his ships for payments to North Korea and for the shipment of the missiles from there. On October 16, the US Treasury Department declared him as a designated international terrorist because of his links with Al Qaeda and the LET. The US notification also confirmed that he was living in Karachi with a Pakistani passport, but the Pakistani authorities have strongly denied this.

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