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# Al Qaeda's nuclear agenda verified

By Arnaud de Borchgrave  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Pakistani intelligence officers were assisting Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization to develop the ability to build a "dirty" nuclear device, U.S. and Pakistani intelligence agencies have concluded.

Intelligence officers in Washington and Islamabad, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said they are now convinced that al Qaeda was attempting to put together a "nuclear device in the dirty bomb category."

Documents uncovered in Kabul and the interrogation of nuclear scientists who were frequent visitors to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan — ostensibly to perform humanitarian work — have produced conclusive evidence of the fact, the officers said.

One Pakistani general who has seen the evidence described the device as a "dirty nuclear weapon," meaning one in which radioactive materials are wrapped around conventional explosives. Such a device can contaminate an area of several square blocks with radiation.

The general said he also believes bin Laden obtained such materials on Russia's nuclear black market. The International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna is aware of 175 cases of trafficking in nuclear materials since 1993, including 18 that involved highly enriched uranium and plutonium pellets the size of a silver dollar.

There are 18 million potential delivery vehicles that could be used to smuggle a nuclear device into the United States. That is the number of cargo containers that arrive in the country annually. Of them, only 3 percent are inspected, and bills of lading do not have to be produced until the containers reach their destination, according to current regulations.

Radioactivity is invisible, as was the case in the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. There is no way of knowing in advance the impact on health 10 years hence. It is more a weapon of mass disruption than mass destruction.

An unidentified former chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency is believed to be the man who coordinated bin Laden's nuclear ambitions.

One local intelligence source speculated that before September 11, a dirty bomb could have been smuggled out of Afghanistan in a truck all the way to Karachi and then shipped out in a cargo container.

That could be the weapon Taliban chief Mullah Mohammed Omar was referring to when he said, after the U.S. bombing started Oct. 7, that America would soon have to face extinction. Allowing for hyperbole, he may have known what bin Laden was planning next.

Another ex-ISI chief, retired Gen. Hameed Gul, predicted after September 11 that one day there would be a single Islamic state that would stretch from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan and Afghanistan and that would have nuclear weapons, as well as control of the Gulf's oil resources.

The general is an ISI legend, and still popular among the agency's present crop of leaders who were his junior officers in the late 1980s. Gen. Gul, a Muslim fundamentalist, is vehemently anti-American. He acts as "strategic adviser" to Pakistan's extremist religious parties, and spent two weeks in Afghanistan just prior to

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September 11.

Gen. Gul is slowly emerging as the spokesman for the combined opposition of Islamic fundamentalists. In Urdu-language newspapers on Friday, he was quoted as saying: "No one can tell us how to run our nuclear facilities and nuclear programs. This is being done in the interest of Pakistan, not the United States. Taliban will always remain in Afghanistan, and Pakistan will always support them."

He was presumably referring to the Taliban in its guerrilla mode, following the fall of Kandahar.

Gen. Gul's only daughter runs VARAN, the public transportation bus company that enjoys a monopoly in Islamabad and its twin military garrison city of Rawalpindi. Gen. Gul himself lives in "Pindi" in an army compound housing development earmarked for retired generals.

Officially, the Pakistani government has accepted the explanation of three nuclear scientists about their "innocuous" relationship to the Taliban.

Privately, however, some Pakistani officials, working closely with U.S. colleagues, said their activities "cannot be described as innocuous by any stretch of the imagination."

On a brief visit to Islamabad early this month, George Tenet, director of CIA, conferred with President Pervez Musharraf on what was described as the need for "more and better intelligence" from ISI.

The CIA has reportedly submitted a list of six more nuclear scientists whom it wants to probe for suspected links to al Qaeda. Two of them, Dr. Suleiman Asad and Dr. Muhammad Ali Muktar, are now in Burma doing undisclosed research with local scientists. Apparently anxious to avoid further U.S. probes into Pakistan's ultrasecret nuclear weapons program, these two scientists have been advised by the government to remain in Burma until further notice.

Dr. Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmud, former director of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), and Chief Engineer Dr. Chaudry Abdul Majeed have been questioned by a joint FBI-ISI team. According to PAEC sources, the CIA wishes to conduct a separate interrogation based on documents seized in Kabul.

Dr. Mahmud is a close associate of Gen. Gul. They were colleagues when Gen. Gul ran ISI. Dr. Mahmud is one of three scientists who befriended Taliban leaders. He is an expert in enriched uranium and plutonium, having lectured all over Pakistan with odes to the Taliban as "the wave of the future for Pakistan."

Dr. Mahmud and two of his colleagues were detained in late October as a result of U.S. questions about Pakistani "relief" organizations active in Taliban-run Afghanistan, including an agricultural project near Kandahar.

They admitted to meeting with al Qaeda associates of bin Laden and were officially cleared of passing on nuclear secrets. Dr. Mahmud says publicly that plutonium production is not a state secret, and advocates increasing plutonium output to help other Islamic nations build nuclear weapons.

After the start of the U.S. bombing campaign, Gen. Musharraf ordered an immediate redeployment of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to six new secret locations, including separate storage facilities for uranium and plutonium cores and their detonation mechanisms.

Army colleagues now say privately that Gen. Musharraf was fearful of assassination by extremists who were already accusing him of betraying Islam and selling out to the United States. There were also rumors of a coup by hard-liners in the military. The officer corps is 20 percent fundamentalist, according to a post-September 11 confidential survey by military intelligence separate from ISI.

Pakistan's community of nuclear scientists is held to be "profoundly fundamentalist" and anti-American. They are particularly resentful of U.S. economic and military

