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2 Nuclear Experts Briefed Bin Laden, Pakistanis Say

By Kamran Khan and Molly Moore
Washington Post Foreign Service
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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Dec. 11 -- Two Pakistani nuclear scientists reportedly have told investigators they conducted long discussions about nuclear, chemical and biological weapons with accused terrorist Osama bin Laden in August in the Afghan capital of Kabul, according to Pakistani officials familiar with the interrogations of the men.

Pakistani intelligence officials said they believe that the two retired nuclear scientists -- who have been under questioning for more than two months -- used an Afghan relief organization partially as a cover to conduct secret talks with bin Laden.

The Pakistani officials characterized the discussions between the scientists and bin Laden as "academic" and said they have no evidence the information resulted in the creation or production of any type of weapon.

The reported admissions by Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, who held key appointments in each of Pakistan's three most important nuclear facilities, and his associate, Abdul Majid, represent a turnabout from their earlier claims that they met with bin Laden only to discuss their charitable endeavors in Afghanistan, according to the accounts provided by Pakistani intelligence authorities.

Mahmood and Majid, who are being detained at an undisclosed location, could not be reached to confirm the purported statements described by Pakistani officials. Because the interrogations are being conducted in secrecy, it is impossible to determine the nature of the investigatory techniques being used. Neither of the men has been charged with a crime.

Officials here said the Pakistani government is considering charging Mahmood and Majid with violating the national official secrets act, a crime that carries a seven-year jail term. It would be the first known case of a nuclear official charged with that offense, officials said.

Pakistani officials said Mahmood -- who had experience in uranium enrichment and plutonium production but was not involved in bomb-building -- had neither the knowledge nor the experience to assist in the construction of any type of nuclear weapon. The scientists were not believed to be experts in chemical or biological weaponry.

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Pakistan has been under pressure from the U.S. government to pursue the investigation of the scientists' relationship with bin Laden at a time of heightened concerns by U.S. authorities that bin Laden may have acquired nuclear, biological or chemical materials, or weapons. The investigation was a major issue discussed during CIA Director George J. Tenet's recent visit to Pakistan, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials.

Though neither U.S. nor Pakistani officials say they have evidence that bin Laden has obtained any such material, intelligence agencies for both countries have indicated they believe he has sought it.

Pakistani officials familiar with the investigation said representatives of the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency are in contact almost daily concerning the investigation.

Pakistani authorities said Mahmood and Majid changed their accounts recently after they were presented with compelling evidence of their relationship with bin Laden. The evidence was provided to authorities here by the CIA, but Pakistani intelligence officials declined to describe it.

Mahmood and Majid reportedly met with bin Laden; his top lieutenant, Egyptian Ayman Zawahiri; and two other al Qaeda officials several times over two or three days in August at a compound in Kabul, the Pakistani officials said.

The scientists described bin Laden as intensely interested in nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Mahmood and Majid said bin Laden indicated that he had obtained, or had access to, some type of radiological material that he said had been acquired for him by the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The scientists said they left the meetings believing that bin Laden had some such material, but Pakistani officials said they have been unable to verify those claims.

The scientists reportedly said bin Laden asked how the material could be made into a weapon or something usable. They also said they told him it would not be possible to manufacture a weapon with the material he might have.

Pakistani officials noted that organizations and individuals throughout South and Central Asia have frequently approached Pakistani officials offering to sell nuclear materials smuggled from nuclear facilities in former Soviet republics.

The scientists have insisted they provided no material or specific plans to bin Laden, but rather engaged in wide ranging "academic" discussions, Pakistani officials said.

"They spoke extensively about weapons of mass destruction," one Pakistani official said. The official described the scientists as "very motivated" and "extremist in their ideas," but added they were "discussing things that didn't materialize, but fall under the breaking secrets act."

U.S. officials recently have expressed concerns that bin Laden could have access to radiological materials that could be combined with conventional explosives to create a "dirty bomb." Though far less potent than a nuclear weapon, such a device could nonetheless contaminate several city blocks with radiation if exploded, according to experts.

Mahmood, who received one of Pakistan's highest civilian honors for nearly three decades of work in the country's nuclear programs specializing in uranium enrichment, was largely forced out of his job through a demotion in 1999. Officials were concerned about his vocal advocacy of producing an extensive amount of weapons-grade plutonium and enriched uranium to help equip other Islamic nations with nuclear arsenals.

After his departure, Mahmood continued to espouse his views in public speeches, and one friend recalled that Mahmood said his knowledge about Pakistan's nuclear program was a state secret, but not his expertise on enriching uranium and producing weapons-grade plutonium.

Majid worked for Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission until 1999.

After Mahmood was forced out, he helped start an organization called Ummah Tameer-e-Nau (Islamic Reconstruction), which he described as a relief agency dedicated to construction and redevelopment projects in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government gave Mahmood and some of his associates, including Majid, permission to travel to Afghanistan three times this year, including one visit after the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and on the Pentagon, according to Pakistani officials.

Mahmood reportedly told investigators he met several times with Mohammad Omar, leader of the Taliban militia that then ruled Afghanistan, during a long visit to Kandahar in mid-summer. He is said to have discussed a flour mill his agency operated in Kandahar, as well as the need for alternative agricultural programs to persuade farmers to stop growing poppies for opium production. At one point in that visit, Omar introduced Mahmood to bin Laden, officials said.

Mahmood said he did not discuss any issues related to nuclear, chemical or biological weapons in his first meeting with bin Laden, describing it as an introductory encounter in which he discussed his relief program.

Mahmood and Majid returned to Afghanistan in August, traveling to Kabul, where they held extensive meetings with bin Laden and his associates, the officials said. Omar was not present at any of the sessions, they said.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the two scientists returned to Kandahar, where they met with Omar, but not with bin Laden, they said. The scientists said they never discussed nuclear, chemical or biological issues with Omar.

Pakistani authorities have detained or questioned at least seven members of Mahmood's relief agency in connection with the investigation, including two air force general officers, an army one-star general, a third nuclear scientist, a well-known Pakistani industrialist and at least one financial officer of the organization, according to Pakistani officials. The two air force officers, the third nuclear scientist and the industrialist have been released. The others remain in detention.

U.S. officials have long raised concerns about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear program and the reliability of some of its scientists. Pakistan is believed to have the materials to assemble between 30 and 40 warheads, and has test-fired intermediate-range missiles that potentially could be used to launch the warheads, according to intelligence reports and nuclear experts. Both Pakistan and neighboring India tested underground nuclear devices in 1998, and the two countries are viewed by many security experts as the globe's most worrisome nuclear flash point.

Khan reported from Karachi. Researcher Robert Thomason in Washington contributed to this report.

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