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## Pakistan Releases Nuclear Scientists For Ramadan's End

By Kamran Khan  
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KARACHI, Pakistan, Dec. 15 --  
Two retired nuclear scientists detained two months ago for allegedly sharing Pakistan's nuclear secrets with Osama bin Laden were released today to spend the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr with their families, senior Pakistani officials said.

Intelligence agents arrested Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majid in Islamabad in October, soon after they returned from the southern Afghan city of Kandahar. They have since been held for questioning at an undisclosed location.

The scientists initially said they had been holding talks relating to their charitable endeavors in Afghanistan. But last month, the men confessed to having had several meetings with bin Laden and other top al Qaeda leaders during which they provided detailed responses to bin Laden's technical questions about the manufacture of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, Pakistani officials familiar with the interrogations said recently.

Pakistani officials said neither scientist had been associated with Pakistan's weapons construction program, and they were satisfied the information given to bin Laden did not result in the production of any weapons.

"Through their cooperation with investigators, the scientists won an Eid reunion with their families," said a Pakistani intelligence official familiar with the investigation. "[The] probe against these scientists is by no means over, but we are satisfied that their contact with bin Laden didn't result in any improvement in al Qaeda's firepower."

Senior Pakistani officials said that in the absence of specific charges being filed, they had received hints from the judiciary that higher courts might soon approve motions filed by the scientists' relatives for their release.

"They have promised to return back to us soon after the Eid holidays," said a Pakistani official. Eid is the three-day holiday marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Pakistani officials have said that the two scientists, along with four associates from their charity also released from a safe house in Islamabad today -- including a retired army general -- would not be allowed to leave the capital until the investigation was completed.

The officials said the United States had been informed about the decision to release the men. U.S. officials have frequently 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 30 to 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. Pakistan and neighboring India tested underground nuclear devices in 1998, and the two countries are viewed by many security experts as the world's most worrisome nuclear flash point.

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