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CANADA'S NUKE TIE TO TALIBAN

FEAR GROWS THAT CANUCK ATOMIC EXPERTISE
WILL FIND ITS WAY TO EXTREMISTS

BY ALEX ROSLIN

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the suicide bomb that exploded in New Delhi last week,
triggering renewed tensions between India and Pakistan, has
once again landed the latter country's nuclear arsenal at the top
of international security concerns. Alarm about a possible
nuclear meltdown in the subcontinent comes amid fears that
rogue extremists in Pakistan could try to seize that country's
nuclear arsenal and reports linking former and active Pakistani
nuke scientists to al Qaeda.

According to the Washington Post, one of them, Sultan
Bashiruddin Mahmood, a pioneer of Pakistan's nuclear
weapons program and a vocal admirer of the Taliban, confessed
he'd had several meetings with bin Laden before and after
September 11 to discuss nuclear weapons.

But while nervous observers hope India's and Pakistan's
Kashmiri spat won't lead to a radioactive showdown, many
blame Canada and its all too promiscuous atomic expertise for
turning the area into a powder keg.

Mahmood, for example, started his career helping run a
Canuck-supplied Candu reactor, a path followed by many other
Pakistani nuclear weapons specialists.

"Canadian expertise was vital for developing nuclear weapons,"
says Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physicist at Quaid-e-Azam University
in Islamabad. "There is no clear line that separates (civilian
from weapons) programs." And the know-how, says Duane
Bratt of Alberta's Mount Royal College, a Candu expert, is
more important than the trade in components. "This story is
going to damage the Canadian nuclear program," he warns.

The Candu was Pakistan's first nuclear reactor, acquired in a
deal heavily subsidized by the Canadian government's low-
interest loans. The 137-megawatt Candu, named Kanupp (short
for Karachi Nuclear Power Plant), was Pakistan's only such
plant until last year, when a second, Chinese-built reactor came
online. As Kanupp was being built in the 70s, up to 50
Pakistani scientists and engineers were brought to nuclear
facilities in Ontario and New Brunswick to be trained to
operate it.

On their return, many went into Pakistan's clandestine military
nuclear program.

"Canada was absolutely indispensable. Without (its help)
neither India nor Pakistan would have gotten nuclear weapons,"
says Zia Mian, a Princeton University nuclear physicist and
leading proliferation expert. There has been, he says, a
revolving door for personnel between Pakistan's civilian and
military programs, which are both run by the same agency, the
Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission.

Canadian cooperation continued quietly through several coups
d'état, wars with nuclear rival India and even after Pakistan and
India were slapped with international sanctions in 1998 because
of a series of nuclear tests.

Such assistance continues to this day through Pakistan's
associate membership in the Candu Owners Group, a
consortium of Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. and three
Canadian power utilities, confirms John Sommerville, the

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group's president. The group sent several "expert missions" to Pakistan after 1998 to give advice on running the aging Kanupp safely, says Sommerville.

Asked if Canada played a role in helping Pakistan develop weapons, Sommerville says, "People did get trained. How much that contributed to the program I really don't know."

AECL spokesperson David Lisle denies that Canada facilitated arms development. Kanupp, he says, is subject to "stringent" international inspections to ensure that the byproducts of nuclear power generation are not diverted to nukes. Candus pump out spent fuel that contains highly radioactive plutonium, a prime ingredient in nuclear bombs.

Lisle says the inspections ensure that Kanupp "is not involved in any kind of proliferation issues."

But experts say the safeguards are full of loopholes because Canada was anxious to reap Candu sale profits and to reward allies in the Cold War. "Canada went along with Indian and Pakistani insistence on not having full safeguards that might have made sure weapons programs were not developed. The Canadian government didn't push it," says Princeton's Mian.

As early as 1993, the Nonproliferation Review, a journal of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, reported concerns that Pakistan was diverting plutonium from Kanupp into its weapons program. Canada, says Hoodbhoy, pretended not to notice because Pakistan helped fight the Soviet Union in the 80s. "They turned the other way to this monster. It was expedience and a lack of principles that brought them this gift," he says.

But, says Paul Leventhal, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Nuclear Control Institute and a former Senate staff proliferation expert, the world will experience the consequences of this opportunism. "The payback time," he says, "is right now."

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