

Sabotage charged at Pakistan ammo dump

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The May 31 explosion at the army ammunition dump in the Nowshera garrison, bordering Afghanistan and not far from Peshawar where the Afghan Mujahideen are based, claimed 80 lives and sent people in the surrounding areas scurrying for shelter. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has warned that the explosion is a prelude to the blowing up of the controversial nuclear facility at Kahuta.

Bhutto informed the lower house of Pakistan's National Assembly on June 2 that PLO leader Yassir Arafat had told her during their meeting at New Delhi, where they attended the funeral of India's assassinated former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, that he had "solid information that there is a plan to attack Kahuta." Arafat also told her that the sabotage has been planned "from within and not outside." Bhutto told the stunned National Assembly members that sabotage at Nowshera cannot be ruled out and "after Nowshera, the target will be Kahuta."

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg had earlier told reporters that he suspects sabotage as the cause behind the blowup of the Nowshera ammo dump.

The Nowshera explosion is similar to the ammo dump explosion at the Ojheri Camp near Rawalpindi on April 10, 1988. Official figures showed the Ojheri explosion had killed 100 people and injured 1,000 more. Unofficial estimates, however, indicate that five times as many lives were lost. Despite repeated promises from the government, the report on the cause of the Ojheri dump explosion has not seen the daylight.

About four months after the explosion, President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, along with his top army brass and the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, died in a mysterious plane crash in southeastern Sindh, near Bahawalpur. For both these events, many in Pakistan, and some outside, accused the United States.

The Ojheri explosion was also suspected sabotage, carried out to weaken President Zia. The ammo dump was a secret storage place for U.S. arms and ammunition for the Afghan Mujahideen who were carrying out an undeclared war against the Soviet Union. The arms were mostly channeled to one group among the Mujahideen, the Hezb-e-Islami, led by fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—and this did not please a section of policymakers in Washington. According to some, this is what led to the blowing up of the Ojheri ammunition camp.

President Zia's death was similarly related to his role in Afghan affairs. After financing and arming Pakistan for almost a decade to fight the "Red menace," Washington found other ways to subvert the Soviets. While Washington was carrying out rapprochement with Moscow and the tired Red Army was trudging back home after burying many in Afghanistan, President Zia's zeal to unseat the Soviet-backed Kabul government through a group of Muslim fundamentalists was no longer desired by Washington, and was even seen as an affront. By 1988, President Zia had become more of a liability to Washington than the asset he had been in earlier days.

In the case of Nowshera, it is widely acknowledged that the Hekmatyar faction's success against the Kabul government in wresting away the town of Khost in April made both Washington and Moscow unhappy. By blowing up the Nowshera ammo dump, a message has been sent to Islamabad that Hekmatyar's activities, in collusion with Saudi intelligence and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, are not liked by some in Pakistan who think the same as some in Washington and Moscow.

Probe of Zia crash reopened

At the same time, on June 4, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif suddenly decided to appoint federal Interior Minister Shujaat Hussain to head a commission to investigate, and report on, the Aug. 17, 1988 plane crash that killed Zia. Sharif, a leading industrialist from Punjab who was inducted into high politics by Zia himself, had never hinted that he was dissatisfied with the earlier investigations into Zia's death.

Whether Prime Minister Sharif's move is a slap at Washington or not, Sharif has shown deep concerns about Washington's increasing armtwisting of Pakistan to give up its nuclear program. In recent months, Islamabad has faced a growing consensus in the Bush administration and Congress, to force Pakistan to open up its nuclear facilities to inspection. Washington suspended \$570 million in economic and military aid to Pakistan for the year 1990-91. Accusations have also been leveled by U.S. Naval Intelligence that Pakistan is one of the "possible" acquirers of chemical weapons.

The spate of accusations, economic blackmail through the International Monetary Fund, and the ammunition explosion at Nowshera all point to the reality that Pakistan is facing grave dangers. Yassir Arafat, who claimed that he had cautioned Rajiv Gandhi about a month ago about the dangers to Gandhi's life, has a competent network within Pakistan, and support to the network stems from those who had all along been critical about the U.S. collusion with Israel on the Palestinian issue. The U.S. determination to annihilate Iraq and the Iraqi people has only helped to harden their stance.

It is not unlikely that PLO intelligence has got onto something, and Bhutto's statement was designed to preempt the planned strike against the Kahuta nuclear facility. Nonetheless, it is evident that the gloves are off, and Pakistan is left with no choice but to defend its assets.