

DAY OF SURPRISES IN AFRIDI CASE: CONVICTION NOT RELATED TO CIA HELP; IGNATIUS CHASTISES CIA

There are many developments today surrounding Pakistan's sentencing of Dr. Shakeel Afridi to 33 years in prison, including two that are quite unexpected. According to documents released today to multiple news agencies, it turns out that Afridi's conviction is not on the treason charges relating to his work with the CIA in finding Osama bin Laden that many thought were the basis of the charges against him. Instead, the documents indicate that Afridi was convicted for aiding the outlawed group Lashkar-e-Islam, which is said to be in open conflict with Pakistan. Equally unexpected is today's column by CIA ~~spokesman reporter~~ columnist David Ignatius in the Washington Post where he chastises the CIA for using Afridi in a vaccination ruse, citing the resultant danger to public health as vaccination programs come more generally under suspicion in the areas where they are needed most urgently.

Reuters gives us the basics on the documents released today by the court:

A Pakistani doctor who helped the United States find Osama bin Laden was imprisoned for aiding militants and not for links to the CIA, as Pakistani officials had said, according to a court document released on Wednesday.

Last week, a court in the Khyber tribal region near the Afghan border sentenced Shakil Afridi to 33 years in jail. Pakistani officials told Western and domestic media the decision was based on

treason charges for aiding the CIA in its hunt for the al Qaeda chief.

But in the latest twist in the case, the judgment document made available to the media on Wednesday, states Afridi was jailed because of his close ties to the banned militant group Lashkar-e-Islam, which amount to waging war against the state.

Dawn fills in more details:

The order said intelligence reports had indicated that the accused had close links with the defunct LI and “his love for Mangal Bagh, Amir of Lashkar-i-Islam, and his association with him was an open secret”.

Referring to the report submitted by the JIT, it said the accused had paid Rs2 million to LI when he was serving at the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital Dogra, Bara, Khyber tribal region.

The court also accused Mr Afridi of providing medical assistance to militant commanders like Said Noor Malikdinkhel, Hazrat Sepah, Wahid Shaloberkhel and others at the hospital which he headed.

It also referred to statements by some people that militant commanders used to visit the hospital and hold private meetings with the accused. “These meetings were usually of longer duration and most often those meetings were followed by attacks by militants on security forces’ checkpoints and other places at night,” the order read.

It said LI’s design to wage war against the state of Pakistan was a reality known to all and that those attacks were planned in the office of the accused. Being a public servant, the involvement of the accused in subversive activities

and his role in facilitating the waging of war and attacks on security forces made him liable to be proceeded against, it added.

There is one more point that stands out in the Dawn article:

The court thus tried and convicted Dr Shakil Afridi under four different clauses of the 1901 Frontier Crimes Regulation.

That 1901 date takes us back to the British era in Pakistan.

Returning to the Reuters article, there is this:

One of the doctor's lawyers, Samiullah Afridi, was baffled after reading the verdict, which he also received on Wednesday.

"These charges against him are very different from the ones we were told earlier," he told Reuters.

"The earlier allegations against him were very serious. We deal with issues like this every day in the courts, of people accused of helping militant groups. So it's not that big an issue for us to defend."

In other words, the attorney, who clearly was not allowed to be present during Afridi's "trial" seems to think that it will be a relatively simple matter to defend against the charges of aiding militants instead of a treason charge.

Probably setting the stage somewhat for that defense is one more bit from the Reuters article:

Afridi had been working with the CIA for years before the bin Laden raid, providing intelligence on militant

groups in Pakistan's unruly ethnic Pashtun tribal region, said a former Pakistani security official.

So it appears that Afridi's defense may well consist of claiming that his meetings with Lashkar-e-Islam may well have been for the purposes of gathering intelligence rather than supporting them. The AFP article carried by the Express Tribune notes that the money Afridi is accused of providing the group amounts to \$22,000.

The second huge surprise for the day consists of David Ignatius actually calling out the CIA rather than providing cover for them. From his column today:

As an intelligence operation, it must have seemed like pure genius: Recruit a Pakistani doctor to collect blood samples that could identify Osama bin Laden's family, under cover of an ongoing vaccination program. But as an ethical matter, it was something else.

The CIA's vaccination gambit put at risk something very precious – the integrity of public health programs in Pakistan and around the globe. It also added to the dangers facing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a world that's increasingly hostile to U.S. aid organizations.

Although Ignatius doesn't go into the details of how this operation harmed public health, we have this from an op-ed in The Guardian on Sunday by Dr. Heidi Larson, who previously headed Unicef's global communications work on immunization and now heads the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. In this current role, Dr. Larson monitors "trends in vaccine confidence globally":

Last week's call by the World Health Assembly for an emergency response to

polio eradication is not unrelated to the news that Dr Shakil Afridi has been convicted of treason in Pakistan and sentenced to 33 years in prison. Dr Afridi, former surgeon general of the Khyber agency, was central to the CIA-led fake vaccination drive used to confirm the presence of Osama bin Laden in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The news of Dr Afridi's role did not emerge until a Guardian article in July 2011, when it shook the immunisation world. Although Dr Afridi had pretended to provide a hepatitis B vaccination, not normally a door-to-door delivery, the news had a particularly strong impact on those working in polio eradication, where door-to-door vaccination is the norm. Anxieties and distrust about the polio vaccine and its western providers were rampant in some communities, and suspicions about CIA links with the polio vaccination campaigns, and rumours they were a front for the sterilising of Muslims, had been around for a decade after 9/11. After years of working to dispel myths about CIA links to the polio eradication efforts – from northern Nigeria to Pakistan and India, all of the work seemed fruitless.

It is no coincidence that the remaining three countries in the world which have polio endemics are Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yes, there are geographical challenges and financial challenges. And, yes, finding Bin Laden has been a global security priority. But deep-seated suspicions about the motives of those who provide polio vaccines have persisted in some circles from Nigeria to Pakistan, and the CIA's choice of immunisation as a strategy to find Bin Laden has only given credence to the conspiracies.

I'm wondering if Ignatius read these words from Dr. Larson, as they are a stinging indictment of the CIA's use of the vaccination ruse.

There were additional Afridi developments in the news today. Senator Rand Paul has joined with Representative Dana Rohrabacher to suggest a complete defunding of Pakistan over the Afridi jailing. Also, local officials in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa agency of FATA have asked Pakistan's federal government to take custody of Dr. Afridi in order to assure his safety.