

Punjabi Taliban behind kidnapping, says family

Thursday, April 22, 2010

By Umar Cheema

ISLAMABAD: The mystery of the abduction in tribal areas of two pro-Taliban ISI veterans has virtually been solved as the wife of a kidnapped officer says the Punjabi Taliban were responsible and they invited them to the tribal areas.

One of the kidnapped ISI veterans, Khalid Khawaja, has previously acted as a conduit for Baitullah Mehsud for an intelligence agency. He once handed to late Baitullah a list of the Punjabi Taliban in the tribal belt who were disliked by the intelligence sleuths.

Khawaja, in a recently televised video sent by the captors, said he went to the tribal belt on the advice of former DG ISI, Lt Gen (retd) Hamid Gul, a serving ISI Col Sajjad, and former Army chief Aslam Beg. Col (retd) Imam in the same video said he undertook the tribal area visit on the advice of Gen (retd) Beg.

Retired PAF Squadron Leader Khalid Khawaja and Col (retd) Sultan Amir alias Col Imam were kidnapped along with a British documentary-maker of Pakistani origin, Asad Qureshi, in the tribal area where they went to film the 'atrocities' being committed on the Taliban of the Fata region.

According to an early press release issued by Khawaja's family, they went there on the "precise invitation of the High Command of Tehrik-e-Taliban of North and South Waziristan as their respected guests for the purpose of making a documentary highlighting the present situation of the area and its impact on the indigenous population." However, details gathered in background conversations present a totally different picture.

As far their visit to the area is concerned, it was not being done at the invitation of leadership of Taliban militants in Waziristan as was initially told to the media by the family of Khalid Khawaja. It was the second visit to the area within a month by Khawaja and Col (retd) Imam. They first went to the area in the beginning of March and left Islamabad for a second trip on March 26.

Before they departed for the second time, their guide in the first visit declined to join them, stating security concerns. As Khawaja was in contact with another Taliban militant, Usman Punjabi, they decided to leave after receiving clearance from him who also sent a guide to ensure their safe travel. They were later found missing.

The man who called the family of Khalid Khawaja to convey the demands of the captors introduced himself as 'Usman Punjabi, confirmed Khawaja's wife and son who have realised that the callers represent a bunch of criminals. They understand the group is dominated by Punjabi Taliban, raising questions about their motives.

Khawaja once handed a list of Punjabi Taliban to late Baitullah Mehsud on behalf of an intelligence agency, conveying the latter's desire they be reined in as they were creating trouble time and again. Right from attacks on former President Pervez Musharraf to the GHQ and at other places, the Punjabi Taliban have been found involved.

Khawaja's family did not deny he acted as a conduit. Elaborating, his son said his father's efforts were intended to bring peace and he played a crucial role in holding Jirgas with Baitullah-led militants in the past.

Col (retd) Imam was closer to Afghan Taliban apparently working on behalf of the Pakistani establishment. His son is a serving major in the Army.

Khawaja remained more active on the domestic front. He had once claimed that he hosted Osama bin Laden in pre-9/11 days when bin Laden used to visit his Islamabad residence. Khawaja also remained at center-stage during Lal Masjid crisis, siding with the clerics. Though he spearheaded the movement of missing persons in the beginning, his alleged dual role came under suspicion by the families.