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U.S. Hinders Pakistan's Bomb Plans

If Pakistan's dictator, Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, decides tomorrow that he wants to explode a nuclear device, it will be only "a matter of weeks" before he can do it.

This is the secret assessment of a top CIA official. In fact, the only reason Zia has not taken the final few steps and started producing the long-dreaded "Islamic bomb" is his desire to keep U.S. military aid flowing in, suggested the high-level Central Intelligence Agency source.

A private letter from President Reagan last September made this clear to Zia, warning that the nuclear weapons issue "could undermine all that we are trying to achieve." The president urged Zia to limit the uranium enrichment being done at Pakistan's heavily guarded plant at Kahuta to the 5 percent of U-235 necessary for reactor fuel.

This would be well below the percentage needed for weapons. Last November, the Pakistani foreign minister visited Washington and assured Reagan that the enrichment lid was being observed.

Our intelligence sources confirm that the Pakistani nuclear program has slowed since Reagan's letter. The key to the situation is the activity of Dr. Abdul Qadar Khan, the Western-trained Pakistani who allegedly stole nuclear secrets from the Dutch in the 1970s and now heads the nuclear bomb development program.

In the past year, Khan has diversified his military work to include such secret projects as development of a Chinese-style hand-held antiaircraft missile. He spends "a great deal of time" on the nuclear bomb program, however.

From intelligence documents and other sources,

we've pieced together this picture of the Pakistani nuclear weapon effort:

■ Technology exchange with China since at least 1980 has brought Pakistan to the point where it could have a small nuclear arsenal in less than two years. Chinese scientists have been to Kahuta to study the centrifuge technique that Pakistan stole from the Europeans a decade ago. And there is evidence that China gave Pakistan information about the actual design of a Hiroshima-sized bomb that the Chinese have successfully tested.

■ The Pakistanis' own nuclear bomb is described as crude but effective. It consists of a sphere of enriched uranium about six inches in diameter, suspended within a steel sphere about 13 inches in diameter. This is surrounded by more than 100 pounds of conventional "shaped charges," and the whole disaster is encased in curved metal plates to form a 21-inch sphere. The shaped charges implode, compressing the uranium core until it reaches a critical density and blows up.

■ Pakistan's bomb builders have tried to modernize their weapon through the illegal acquisition of Western materials. They succeeded in buying a high-speed Swedish X-ray machine that is crucial to the implosion technique they're using. But the acquisition was discovered in time to stop delivery of the operating manual and the dispatch to Islamabad of a Swedish expert.

■ Perhaps most scary of all is Libya's involvement in the Pakistani bomb. Libya's petrodollars have helped finance the effort, and the CIA is afraid Pakistan would be obliged to share its nuclear technology with Libya as compensation.