

Scotland Yard's report on Bhutto assassination

Britain again comes to Musharraf's aid

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A Scotland Yard investigation team has issued a report on the assassination of two-time Pakistani Prime Minister, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader, and PPP prime ministerial candidate Benazir Bhutto. Although the report is largely politically motivated conjecture—Pakistani authorities had themselves destroyed much of the evidence within hours of the assassination—the regime of embattled dictator Pervez Musharraf and its mentors in the Bush administration have seized on it as proof of their earlier claims that Bhutto's murder was the work of Al Qaeda and/or the Taliban and them alone.

Bhutto was assassinated last December 27 at the conclusion of an election rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi. The Pakistani government and Washington immediately blamed her death on extremist Islamic groups—all the while ignoring the longstanding intimate ties between the military-intelligence apparatus and armed Islamic groups, Bhutto's own repeated warnings that elements in and around the military-controlled government were out to kill her, and Bhutto's complaints that the government was not providing her with proper security.

On the day of her assassination, Bhutto was to meet visiting US lawmakers to hand over a report on the preparations of a group led by a retired leader of Pakistan's secret police, the ISI, to rig the coming elections.

The widespread popular sentiment that the military or Musharraf's political cronies either organised or facilitated Bhutto's assassination was further fueled by the actions of the authorities in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. The crime scene was quickly hosed down, obliterating important forensic evidence. Then a government spokesman denied eyewitness reports Bhutto had been shot and bizarrely suggested that Bhutto had inadvertently killed herself. He repeatedly said that Bhutto, who had been waving to her supporters from a car, had died because of injuries she suffered when she hit her head on a sunroof latch while trying to retreat into the car after hearing gunfire.

In the days following Bhutto's death, the country was convulsed by a mass upheaval, without parallel in recent decades. Ordinary Pakistanis demonstrated their hatred for the regime by attacking government property and the offices of the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Mulsim League (Q) [PML (Q).] The riots were quelled only after security forces shot and killed

almost 60 people and made mass arrests and after opposition leaders, including Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's widower and the PPP's interim leader pending the passing of the party leadership to their son, appealed for calm.

Musharraf and Pakistani authorities long vehemently rejected any and all suggestions that foreign police forces or the UN probe Bhutto's assassination. But with the regime desperately isolated and all but bereft of credibility and legitimacy, Islamabad ultimately asked the British government to let Scotland Yard assist the investigation.

The conditions under which the Scotland Yard team worked—conditions agreed to by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown—effectively ensured it would produce a report that would support, or at least not significantly challenge, the Pakistani government's version of events.

London and Islamabad agreed that the Scotland Yard team would be allowed only to investigate the cause of Bhutto's death. Establishing the identity of her killer, let alone who orchestrated her murder, was left entirely to the Pakistani police and government.

The Scotland Yard team based its conclusions on only a select portion of the potential evidence, since the crime scene was hosed down and some standard medical imaging procedures were inexplicably not performed. Also, no autopsy was ever carried out, reportedly because her husband, Zardari, said it was contrary to Islamic practice.

The executive summary of the Scotland Yard report itself says: "The task of establishing exactly what happened was complicated by the lack of an extended and detailed search of the crime scene, the absence of an autopsy, and the absence of recognised body recovery and victim identification processes. Nevertheless, the evidence that is available is sufficient for reliable conclusions to be drawn."

The Scotland Yard team looked only at x-rays of Bhutto's head, not at pictures of her neck and torso, although eyewitnesses said that was where she was hit by one or more bullets.

Nevertheless, the British team concluded that the cause of death was a blow to her head and furthermore that she had not been shot.

Said the report, "The limited X-ray material, the absence of a

full post mortem examination and CT scan, have meant that the UK Home Office pathologist, Dr. Nathaniel Cary, who has been consulted in this case, is unable categorically to exclude the possibility of there being a gunshot wound to the upper trunk or neck. However, when his findings are put alongside the accounts of those who had close contact with Ms. Bhutto's body, the available evidence suggests that there was no gunshot injury"

In one significant respect, the Scotland Yard report does differ with earlier Pakistani government claims. It makes clear that the blow Bhutto suffered to her head was not self-inflicted. She struck her head on the car-roof latch because she was propelled against it by the force of the explosion.

Based on video and still photographs of the killing, the Scotland Yard team further concluded that there was a lone assassin, who first shot at Bhutto, then detonated a bomb.

The question of whether Bhutto was shot and whether the gunman was the same as the suicide bomber-attacker are quite significant, because, as experts have pointed out, to detonate a bomb and strike a person with a bullet while being jostled in a crowd require very different levels of expertise and training.

Not surprisingly, the Pakistani government and its supporters have embraced the Scotland Yard report. Chaudhary Abdul Majid, the head of Pakistani police team investigating the attack, was quick to say he accepts its conclusions. PML (Q) Secretary Mushahid Hussain Sayedon urged the Western powers to accept the investigation done by the Scotland Yard team (and eschew the continued appeals of the PPP for a UN probe).

The Bush administration also backed the Scotland Yard report. US State Department spokesman Tom Casey said: "In terms of the investigation itself by Scotland Yard, we view this as a credible investigation by independent, outside experts." He added: "We don't have any reason why we would question the validity of their assessment."

The *New York Times*, however, was forced to concede that the claims the Scotland Yard report was conclusive are entirely unjustified: "In effect, Scotland Yard was left with only deductions, not proof." What it did not add was that such claims are politically motivated, as was the rush of the Bush administration, supported by the media, to tout the Pakistani government claims, in the days following Bhutto's murder, that she was a victim of Islamic extremism.

The British government—which until 1947 ruled Pakistan as part of its Indian empire, it should be emphasised—has been a staunch supporter of the Musharraf regime. It also has developed a close working relationship with police and security officials in Pakistan in the name of combating terrorist attacks in Britain.

During 2007, the Blair-Brown government worked in tandem with the Bush administration in seeking to bolster the Musharraf regime, by brokering a power-sharing agreement between Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, and

Bhutto and her PPP.

The PPP did provide political cover to Musharraf at the time of last October's sham presidential election, and little more than two weeks later, Bhutto returned from exile to Karachi. But within hours of her arriving back in Pakistan, she was the target of a bomb attack that killed 140 people. Bhutto blamed the attack on elements in and around the government, while insisting that she did not believe Musharraf was himself responsible. Then, on November 3, Musharraf imposed martial law, so as to pre-empt a Supreme Court ruling that his "re-election" as president was unconstitutional, making it still more difficult for Bhutto to justify a deal with the dictator.

Like the Bush administration, the British government is anxious to shield Musharraf and most importantly, the military-security apparatus, which it regards as a pivotal ally in the so-called "war on terror" and the chief bulwark of the crisis-ridden Pakistani state, from any further political fallout from the Bhutto assassination.

Immediately after the report was released, the spokeswoman for the PPP, Sherri Rehman, who was with Bhutto on the day she was assassinated and later helped wash her body prior to her funeral, challenged Scotland Yard's findings: "We disagree with the finding on the cause of the death. She died from a bullet injury. This was and is our position." The PPP's legal head has said a detailed response to the report is being prepared.

A week after the report's release, criticism is mounting. An article by Masood Haider in *maximnews* argues investigators ignored critical evidence, as well as testimonies of people who were with Bhutto at the time the attack took place. He says one such testimony ignored was that of Naheed Khan, a Bhutto confidante who said the bomb blast took place only after a bleeding Bhutto had fallen on her lap.

Asma Jehangir, head of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, has said, "The Scotland Yard findings do not satisfy the basic requirements of any investigation."



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