

Lawyers plead for wounded Pakistani woman facing “terror” trial in New York

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Lawyers for Dr. Aafia Siddiqui held a press conference in Brooklyn, New York Monday to demand that their client, a 36-year-old mother of three, be transferred immediately from federal jail to a hospital for treatment of gunshot wounds inflicted by US personnel before she was brought to the US to face trial.

Dr. Siddiqui, a neuroscientist educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brandeis University, has been charged with the attempted murder of US FBI agents and military personnel after her reported arrest in Afghanistan’s southeastern province of Ghazni.

According to the improbable account given by US authorities, Siddiqui was detained last month by Afghan security personnel who found lists of supposed US targets, bomb-making instructions and jars of chemicals in her handbag. But then, when a team of American soldiers and FBI agents came to claim her, the petite and ailing woman managed to overpower both her Afghan and American captors, wrestle away an automatic weapon and fire on them before being shot herself.

The woman’s lawyers and family, however, dismiss the entire story as a concoction and frame-up, charging that in reality she has been held in secret US detention facilities and subjected to physical and psychological torture and sexual abuse since her disappearance—together with her three young children, who are American citizens—from the streets of Karachi in March 2003.

What is beyond dispute is that Siddiqui’s medical condition is grave and deteriorating. She was brought into court August 11, slumped over in a wheelchair and in obvious pain after being transported to New York a week earlier. She was unable to walk and barely able to speak. Her lawyers said that she had stitches from her breast bone to her belly button and that the wound was oozing from internal bleeding. She reportedly had lost part of her intestines as a result of her gunshot wounds.

The defense attorneys also charged that she had not been seen by a doctor and demanded that she receive medical attention. US prosecutor Christopher LaVigne justified the withholding of medical care on the grounds that Siddiqui was a “high-security risk.” Nonetheless, federal Judge Henry Pitman ordered that she be seen by a doctor within 24 hours.

At Monday’s press conference, Siddiqui’s lawyer, Elizabeth Fink, charged that her client had still not been granted the court-ordered medical attention. She called the government’s treatment of the wounded woman “cruel and inhuman” as well as a gross violation of US law.

“She should be transferred to Bellevue hospital for urgent medical and psychological treatment,” Fink said. “She has been significantly traumatized and she needs immediate help.”

Fink added that Siddiqui has stopped meeting with her lawyers because federal authorities compel her to undergo an invasive full body search before each visit—a process that the lawyer described as “dehumanizing and degrading”—as well as climb a flight of stairs. Both are intolerably painful for the wounded woman.

Aafia Siddiqui’s appearance, the lawyers said, has markedly changed compared to photographs taken in 2002. Her nose has been broken, she is deathly pale and her lips and skin severely chapped. They added that their client is only occasionally lucid and had lost sense of time.

The attorneys also reported that the US attorney’s office had informed them that an 11-year-old boy being held by Afghan security forces appears to be Aafia Siddiqui’s eldest son, Ahmed. The letter claimed that more tests were being done to confirm the relationship. Born in Boston, Ahmed is a US citizen.

Siddiqui’s relatives in Pakistan said that they had been informed that the boy was in US custody. Meanwhile the Afghan authorities indicated that the child’s whereabouts are in doubt. A spokesman for the governor of Ghazni province told the *Washington Post* that local authorities had turned Ahmed over to the Afghan Interior Ministry, which in turn said it had handed him off to the Afghan National Security Directorate, which works as a puppet force of the US CIA.

The whereabouts of her other two children, a daughter, Maryam, who would be nine, and a son, Suleman, who would be five, are unknown.

According to a report issued by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in March 2003 Aafia Siddiqui and her three young children left her mother’s house in Karachi in a taxi on their way to the airport. They were intercepted en route, however, by Pakistani intelligence agents, disappearing until she and her eldest son were reported detained in Afghanistan on July 18—more than five years later.

The Pakistani Interior Ministry confirmed shortly after her 2003 abduction that she had been detained, but then claimed that it had been mistaken and did not have Siddiqui in custody.

Aafia Siddiqui’s sister, Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui, told the press that she and her mother had traveled to the US in 2003 and met with FBI officials, who assured them she would soon be released. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the family was subjected to repeated death threats and told to stop any public appeal for Aafia and her children.

The US military, the Justice Department and the FBI have all claimed that she was never in their custody until her “capture” last month. CIA spokesman George Little told the *Washington Post*, “Any suggestion that the CIA would imprison her children is wrong and offensive.”

Elaine Whitfield Sharp, a lawyer representing the Siddiqui family,

however, said she has evidence that, following her abduction, Aafia Siddiqui was placed in American custody at the infamous detention facility at the Bagram air base in Afghanistan. “We do know she was at Bagram for a long time,” said the attorney. “It was a long time. According to my client she was there for years and she was held in American custody; her treatment was horrendous.”

Whitfield Sharp charged that Siddiqui was taken out of the secret US prison, released outside a government compound in Ghazni, Afghanistan carrying “conveniently incriminating evidence” so that she could be picked up again and charged.

Elizabeth Fink, her other attorney, agreed, telling the Associated Press, “Of course they found all this stuff on her. It was planted on her. She is the ultimate victim of the American dark side.”

Moreover, Afghan authorities have flatly contradicted the version given by US authorities of the arrest. Reuters news agency quoted police officials in Ghazni saying that they found maps of the city, not of targets in New York, on Siddiqui. They also reported that the American personnel demanded that they hand over the prisoner, but the Afghan officials refused. The US agents and soldiers then disarmed the Afghan police. When Siddiqui approached the Americans to complain about her abuse by the police, a panicky soldier shot her, the Afghans said.

Why would Washington mount such a staged arrest and frameup? It appears that the imprisonment and torture of Siddiqui in Bagram were on the verge of being exposed. A British journalist, Yvonne Ridley, had mounted a public campaign demanding the release of an unknown female detainee in the facility, known as Prisoner No. 650. Moazzam Begg, a British citizen who had been held at both Bagram and Guantanamo, wrote of the woman in his book “Enemy Combatant,” saying that he and other detainees could hear her screams as she was tortured.

Siddiqui and her husband, an anesthesiologist, were subjected to FBI scrutiny beginning in July of 2001 because of their alleged connection to Islamic charities. They returned to Pakistan following the September 11, 2001 attacks, when hundreds of Pakistanis and other Muslims were being rounded up in the US.

After she disappeared in Pakistan in 2003, the FBI began floating stories that she was a “fixer” or “facilitator” for Al Qaeda. There were also claims that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the senior Al Qaeda member captured in Afghanistan the same year, had given her name under torture. Mohammed subsequently testified that he gave US interrogators the names of innocent people. Siddiqui’s supporters in Pakistan have stated that her identity had been stolen and that Mohammed was not naming her, but someone who had taken her name.

Meanwhile, US officials and their right-wing apologists have attempted to lend credibility to the terror allegations by citing Siddiqui’s MIT education and referring to her as a “microbiologist” with a scientific background for producing biological and chemical weapons. In reality, her field of study was cognitive learning, and she had gone back to Pakistan seeking to teach and do work in special education for children.

In any case, Siddiqui has been charged with no terrorist-related offense, and no evidence has been produced linking her with any such crime. Rather she is accused of a simple assault—in which she was the only one hurt—that was alleged to have taken place in Afghanistan, over which no US court has any legal jurisdiction.

While largely ignored in the US, Siddiqui’s case has produced outrage in Pakistan, with tens of thousands demonstrating to demand

her release. Her case is seen as emblematic of the plight of hundreds if not thousands of Pakistanis who have “disappeared” after being abducted by Pakistani intelligence and turned over to the CIA to be sent to Guantanamo, Bagram and other secret detention and torture centers. An estimated 12,000 marched in Karachi on August 17, burning a US flag and an effigy of President George W. Bush. Among the demonstrators were children bearing placards carrying photographs of their disappeared parents.

The Pakistani Foreign Office has demanded Siddiqui’s repatriation to Pakistan and the release of her children and said it would send a delegation to Washington to inquire as to her fate. Earlier this month, the Pakistani parliament also passed a resolution demanding she be sent back.

Nonetheless, popular anger over the case is directed as much against the Pakistani government as it is against Washington. A statement issued by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan made this point: “The violation of the rights of Dr Siddiqui and her children, and countless other missing persons, is squarely the responsibility of the government of Pakistan. There is enough evidence indicating that she was initially picked up by the intelligence agencies in Pakistan, therefore, not only the government of the United States but also the government of Pakistan must be made accountable for the crime.”

The relative silence of the US mass media on this case is noteworthy. The story is obviously newsworthy. If one takes the government’s allegations as good coin, there has been a major victory in the “war on terror.” A principal figure in the Al Qaeda terrorist network has been captured and is about to go on trial.

If, on the other hand, Siddiqui’s lawyers and family together with Pakistani human rights groups are telling the truth, then a woman educated in the US has been illegally imprisoned and tortured for years, and her young children—American citizens—have disappeared and may have been subjected to the same fate or worse. And the Bush administration and its intelligence agencies bear direct responsibility.

The general media disinterest in the Siddiqui case has all the earmarks of guilty silence. The government’s case is simply not credible. And, with few exceptions, the media has little stomach for exposing the fact that the so-called global war on terror—the centerpiece of US foreign policy—has entailed horrific crimes against humanity for which top US officials, from Bush and Cheney on down, should be prosecuted.



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