US jury convicts Aafia Siddiqui

Protests erupt across Pakistan over torture victim's frame-up

Bill Van Auken
5 February 2010

Pakistanis took to the streets in angry protests Thursday after a New York jury convicted Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, an American-educated neuroscientist who was subjected to rendition and torture, on frame-up charges of shooting at US soldiers.

Thousands demonstrated in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta, chanting slogans demanding Siddiqui's freedom and the return of her disappeared children. The protesters denounced the US, while burning American flags. Demonstrators carried banners reading "We hate America" and "Shame on the US judiciary."

The case of the 37-year-old Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained scientist has been front-page news in Pakistan, fueling anti-US sentiment already high because of CIA drone missile attacks and the escalating war on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Moreover, the Siddiqui case has provided a human face for the many hundreds of people who have disappeared as a result of the US war on terror and the collaboration of Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the ISI, with the CIA in the abduction and rendition of Pakistani citizens to secret prisons where they have been tortured and held without charges.

The Pakistani woman was abducted in Karachi by intelligence agents in March 2003 together with her three children, ages seven, five and eight months, while going to the airport to catch a flight to Islamabad. She and her family as well as human rights groups have charged that she was turned over to the US officials and taken to the prison at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, where she was held for more than five years, subjected to systematic torture and abuse.

While her oldest son, Mohammed, was eventually released into the custody of her sister—on the condition that he say nothing about his arrest and confinement—the younger two, her daughter Maryam and her infant son Suleman, have disappeared. Siddiqui has recounted that her torturers continuously played tape recordings of her children screaming and that she was shown a photograph of her baby lying in a pool of blood.

Aafia Siddiqui was found guilty on all charges in the case, which revolved around an alleged July 2008 shooting at a police station in Afghanistan's Ghazni Province in which she allegedly grabbed the M4 rifle of a US soldier and fired it at a group of US military personnel and FBI agents who had come to interrogate and take custody of her. The only person hurt in the incident was Siddiqui, who was shot by a soldier and nearly died.

None of the charges brought against her are alleged acts of terrorism, conspiracy or anything terror-related. They were run-of-the-mill criminal charges of attempted homicide and commission of a felony with a firearm.

While US authorities had issued statements over the past six years claiming that Siddiqui was a top Al Qaeda operative, they have been unable to produce any terror charges against her. In contrast to the Pakistani media, the press and broadcast networks in the US have given the trial scant attention.

Nonetheless, federal prosecutors were allowed to influence the jury by repeatedly alleging that Siddiqui had been preparing to execute a terrorist attack against New York City.

The basis of this claim was evidence allegedly found in her possession when she was arrested by Afghan police the day before the shooting. This supposedly included chemicals, a list of possible targets in New York City, including the Statue of Liberty, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Empire State Building, notes referring to "mass casualty" attacks and a how-to manual on making bombs.

Why Siddiqui would be loitering alone with her son in the central square of a remote Afghan provincial capital carrying material connected to supposed bomb plots in New York City has yet to be explained. Her presence there—an unaccompanied woman who did not speak the local language—assured that she would be seen and arrested carrying this incriminating evidence.

The entire scenario suggests that US authorities staged the arrest and planted the evidence as a means of covering up her imprisonment and torture at Bagram over the previous five years. Shortly before she was taken back into American custody in Afghanistan, a campaign had been launched to expose the imprisonment of an unknown woman—dubbed the gray lady of Bagram or Prisoner 650—being held in the US military prison.

While federal Judge Richard Berman allowed the prosecution to introduce this unrelated, incriminating (and almost certainly planted) evidence, Siddiqui and her lawyers were barred from introducing any evidence about her abduction and imprisonment before she was re-arrested in Ghazni.

When Siddiqui spoke, addressing the jury at one point saying, "If you were in a secret prison, or your children were tortured," guards hustled her out of court, and the trial continued in her

© World Socialist Web Site

absence. The media referred to these attempts to expose what had been done to her as disruption and "outbursts."

Berman also allowed one of the soldiers whom Siddiqui allegedly shot at to testify, in tears, about his wounds in a recent—and totally unrelated—roadside bomb attack in Afghanistan. In its closing arguments, prosecutors told the jury that to find Siddiqui not guilty was tantamount to branding "men and women of our armed forces" as liars.

The use of such testimony and evidence to sway the jury will likely be the subject of a judicial appeal.

The trial was also characterized by unprecedented security measures, which had the effect of intimidating Siddiqui's supporters and conveying to the jury that she was a highly dangerous woman. Spectators were not only subjected to metal detectors and intense searches, but were also required to show identification to court guards, who copied down the names and addresses of all those entering the courtroom.

"This is not a just and right verdict," Elaine Sharp, one of Siddiqui's lawyers, told reporters outside the courtroom. "In my opinion this was based on fear but not fact."

The defense had based its case on the lack of any forensic evidence demonstrating that Siddiqui had ever picked up a gun, much less fired a shot. Investigators found no shell casings, bullet or fragments, and there was no gunshot residue on Siddiqui's hands. In his contemporaneous notes on the alleged incident, an FBI agent who testified failed to even mention the Pakistani woman reaching for a gun.

While the prosecutors attempted to turn a picture showing two holes in the wall of the police station as evidence of shots fired, defense attorneys rebutted this claim by presenting a video that had been taken before the alleged shooting in which the same holes are clearly visible.

In an attempt to placate inflamed public opinion, the Pakistani government has expressed displeasure at Dr. Siddiqui's conviction and said it would provide legal aid to secure her release and repatriation to Pakistan.

"President Asif Ali Zardari directed the government to immediately establish contact with the family of Doctor Aafia Siddiqui and provide her with possible legal assistance in the US," said a presidential spokesman, who added that Zardari was "concerned about the verdict and expressed the hope that justice will ultimately be done as the case passes through subsequent stages in the US judicial system."

Abdul Basit, a spokesman for the Pakistani foreign ministry, said that the government's "ultimate objective is to get her back to Pakistan and we would do everything possible and we'll apply all possible tools in this regard."

Aafia Siddiqui had previously rejected the Pakistani government's offer of legal assistance, and her mother made it clear that the family holds it responsible for her plight.

The government "did nothing" to aid her, said Aafia's mother, Asmat Siddiqui. "What has happened clearly shows the lack of seriousness on part of our government in getting her released," she told Agence France Presse.

"This is a pack of lies," the Pakistani scientist's sister, Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui told a press conference in Karachi. "Everybody knows that she was kidnapped by the Pakistani intelligence agencies at the behest of General Pervez Musharraf. He [Musharraf] later handed her over to Americans, who took her to Afghanistan, where she was detained and tortured for many months."

Fauzia Siddiqui, a US-trained medical doctor, said that if the Pakistani government really wanted to see her sister's repatriation, it would cut off all supplies to the US and other NATO troops in Afghanistan. "My sister would be with us within next three days," she said.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani daily *The News* reported Thursday that another legal proceeding is getting underway in Karachi. An investigating officer has submitted a report to a Pakistani court hearing charges related to the 2003 kidnapping of Aafia Siddiqui and her children "by intelligence agents without any warrants or notice."

"In his report, IO [investigating officer] Shahid Qureshi said that according to the statements recorded by Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui, Dr. Aafia Siddiqui's mother Asmat Siddiqui, and her son Mohammed Ahmed, FBI personnel had picked up Dr. Aafia Siddiqui and her children," *The News* reported. It continued, "He told the court that his inspection of the site of the incident corroborated these statements."

The conviction of Aafia Siddiqui on frame-up charges of attempted murder was obtained by means of fear and intimidation in which the Pakistani scientist was denied even the semblance of a fair trial. It is part of the attempt by the US military-intelligence apparatus and the Obama administration's Justice Department to cover up real and far bigger crimes than the ones for which Siddiqui was wrongly convicted.

The fate of Aafia Siddiqui and her children is a stark exposure of the real face of Washington's so-called war on terror. It demonstrates once again that what former Vice President Dick Cheney referred to as the "dark side" involved methods traditionally associated with the most repressive fascist-military dictatorships, including the torture and disappearance of women and children.

The author also recommends:

US frame-up of Aafia Siddiqui begins to unravel
[1 February 2010]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site