

US bullying Pakistan to release “diplomat” who killed two in Lahore market

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Pakistan’s government is facing escalating US pressure to release Raymond Davis, the American national responsible for gunning down two Pakistani youths in a Lahore market on January 26.

Obama administration officials and US Congressional leaders have suggested that US aid to Pakistan could be curtailed, a March visit of Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari to Washington canceled, and US-Pakistan relations downgraded, if Davis is not immediately allowed to leave Pakistan and all charges against him dropped.

Last weekend, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton refused to meet with Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, at the Munich security conference. In a definite signal as to the US’s priorities and a calculated affront to Pakistan’s embattled civilian government, she did meet, however, with General Ashfaq Kayani. The head of the Pakistani Army, Kayani is a Pentagon favourite.

On Monday, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, met with President Zardari to reiterate Washington’s demand that Davis be released on the grounds of “diplomatic immunity.” The next day, US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley denied a press report that Washington has suspended all “high-level contacts” with Islamabad, saying “We continue to talk to the Pakistan government to stress the importance of resolving this issue.”

The Davis affair has created yet another crisis for the deeply unpopular Pakistan Peoples’ Party-led coalition government, which in addition to a raft of economic problems faces mounting popular opposition because of its collusion in the crimes of US imperialism in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Davis was arrested in Lahore on January 27, the day after he had gunned down two Pakistani youths, while driving through a busy market area in a Honda Civic. When the motorbike bearing Mohammad Faheem and Faizan Haider, pulled up beside his car, Davis opened fire on the young men, with a Beretta pistol, killing both of them on the spot. According to Davis, and the US Embassy in Islamabad, one of the men was carrying a gun, and Davis, fearing that he was about to get robbed, shot the youths in “self-defense.”

A third man, Ibadur Rahman, was killed when US officials ran him over while rushing to the scene of the shooting, so they could prevent Davis’ arrest. The vehicle that struck Rahman was speeding in the wrong direction on a one-way street. The US officials fled the scene without bothering to assist him.

A murder case was registered against Davis after he was arrested the following day. The driver of the vehicle that killed the bystander Rahman has also been charged with murder, but has yet to be apprehended, and is believed to have fled the country.

A post-mortem report has revealed that both of Davis’ victims were shot from behind.

While insisting on Davis’ immediate and unconditional release, US authorities in Pakistan and Washington have refused to answer any questions about the shooting incident, including why Davis was driving alone and armed in Lahore, and his role in Pakistan. All they have said is that he works for the US mission in Pakistan as part of its “technical and administrative staff.”

Davis himself has refused to state where he was headed and who he was going to meet when the shooting took place.

Washington’s conduct and the lengths it is going to secure Davis’ speedy return to the US indicate that he is a highly-trained US security operative.

The official US version of events lacks consistency and strains credulity.

According to a report by *ABC News*, Davis runs a shadowy Florida-based security firm Hyperion Protective Consultants, heightening suspicions that he is an operative for, or otherwise, linked to the CIA. Some reports have suggested that he may have been working on behalf of the notorious private security firm Blackwater.

The manner in which Davis gunned down the two youths suggests the modus operandi of an elite agent with advanced firearms training. The men were shot with sniper-like precision, after which Davis immediately called for a back-up vehicle.

US officials and Pakistani authorities initially attempted to paint the victims as criminals.

Some suggested that both men were armed and that they had robbed another person in the area just before the shooting incident occurred. However, no conclusive evidence has been presented to show that the youth were involved in criminal activities and the allegations are vehemently denied by the victims’ families.

According to Geo TV, police investigators in their initial report stated that Davis’s act was “excessive and disproportionate.” The police report concluded that the shooting could not in anyway be labeled an act of self-defense. Investigators said that they were unconvinced by Davis’s story. They also added that he was not a diplomat and that no security agency was aware of his presence in the area where the killings took place.

The police report and anonymous sources cited by Geo TV have complained that the US Consulate in Lahore has refused to provide any information about the driver and the vehicle that killed Ibadur Rahman.

Pakistan’s Foreign Office has been tasked with establishing Davis’s status and whether or not he qualifies for diplomatic immunity. Theoretically Davis could be ordered to stand trial for murder. But ordinary Pakistanis fear—with good reason—that their government and the military, which continues to effectively run the country’s foreign

and national security policy, will release Davis to avoid any conflict with Washington.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has been forced to publicly deny that he is pressuring the judiciary to release Davis.

President Asif Ali Zardari has warned those expressing support for the victims' families and demanding justice not to "politicize" the issue. The Punjab provincial government, which is led by the rival Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), has tried to curry public favor by associating itself, at least initially, with the demand that Davis be subject to Pakistani law. But the government's and elite's real fear is the growing popular hostility to the Islamabad-Washington axis.

Thousands of people joined protests held in Islamabad against the killings and chanted anti-US slogans. At a rally against the killings held in Karachi on February 6, protestors denounced the US and demanded the release of Pakistani neuroscientist Aafia Siddiqui, who is currently serving an 86-year sentence in the US on trumped-up attempted murder charges.

Several legal experts have argued that Washington and elements in the Pakistani government are deliberately misinterpreting the Vienna Convention that governs diplomatic immunity so as to protect Davis. According to international law expert Ahmar Bilal Sufi, the 1961 and 1963 conventions are being mixed up in order to prepare the grounds for Davis's release. "The Vienna Convention on Consulate Relations 1963, in its Article 41 clearly states that in the case of grave crimes like murder there is no immunity," says Sufi.

On Sunday, Shumaila Kanwal, the wife of Mohammad Faheem, committed suicide. The 26 year-old widow was rushed to hospital in Faisalabad early on Sunday morning after swallowing insecticides. She was still conscious when she arrived at the hospital where she spoke to the media. Kanwal told the assembled journalists that she had decided to take her own life in protest against the "favorable treatment being accorded to the killer of her husband by police and reports he will be set free." Her cousin told reporters that Kanwal had decided to kill herself when she learned that Davis would be released without trial

"The killer is being treated as a guest at the police station," she had said. "I need justice and blood for the blood of my husband...I do not expect any justice from this government. That is why I want to kill myself."

Kanwal had only been married to Faheem for six months. Her brother-in-law said that she had been plunged into a severe depression by her husband's killing. Several protestors gathered outside the hospital when news of the tragic incident spread around the city.

The double-killing in Lahore has only exacerbated anti-US sentiment in the country, as it has provided a further illustration of the impunity with which the US operates in Pakistan, violating its sovereignty, and with utter indifference to the destruction it leaves in its wake.

The US's insistence that Pakistan's courts not be allowed to test and adjudicate Davis' claim that in gunning down two youths in the middle of its second most populous city he was acting in self-defense harkens back to the extra-territoriality, enshrined in "unequal treaties," that prevailed during the heyday of colonialism and gun-boat diplomacy.

Just as it propped up the rule of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia, the US has supported a succession of dictatorships in Pakistan. During the 1970s and 1980s, the US backed the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq, who assumed power after toppling Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto in 1977 and oversaw his execution. The Zia regime served

as a linchpin of a major US diplomatic and military offensive against the USSR.

In the interests of US imperialism and its Saudi allies, the Pakistani state armed the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and made Islamicist militias an indispensable part of the Pakistani elite's geo-political strategy.

The Zia era witnessed reactionary attacks on the rights of women, the promotion of Islamic schools and social services as an alternative to state funding for education and health care, and the introduction of barbaric punishments for various offenses. Zia actively promoted Islamic parties and the Muslim clergy as a buttress against the working class. Under his rule, Pakistan's cities were flooded with guns and heroin.

More recently, the US supported the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. Under Musharraf, Pakistan played a central role in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and provided its imperialist sponsor with offshore torture sites.

In 2008 the Musharraf was forced to relinquish power to a PPP-led civilian government that has escalated the previous regime's neo-liberal policies, while imposing brutal austerity measures demanded by the IMF, and deepened Pakistan's support for the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Illegal US drone attacks continue to kill scores of people in the country's northwest. Indeed, the Obama administration has drastically increased the use of predator drones, enraging ordinary Pakistanis in every part of the country. And, at the US's behest, the PPP-led government has intensified the counter-insurgency war in the northwest tribal areas. In crushing support for the Taliban and Taliban-allied militias among the Pashtun of northwest Pakistan, security forces have used kidnappings and extrajudicial killings, torture, and collective punishment.

The Lahore-based Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recently produced a list of 249 suspected extrajudicial killings from July 30, 2009, to March 22, 2010, stating that most of the bodies were found in Swat. It added that independent journalists and local residents were certain that Pakistani security forces were responsible for the killings. According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, when the military reasserted control over the Swat Valley it targeted "civilians who had voiced support for the Taliban."

The Pakistani government's despicable response to the slaying of two youths by a US operative is yet another example of its subservience to Washington and callous indifference to the basic democratic rights of the Pakistani people.



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