

BANGLADESH MAN FOUND IN PAKISTAN JAIL DIES 4 YEARS LATER

DHAKA, Bangladesh: A man who returned to Bangladesh four years ago from a Pakistani prison, where he spent 15 years on suspicion of being an Indian spy, died yesterday, his family said. He was 56. Moslemuddin Sarkar had been suffering from diabetes and kidney failure, and in recent days had trouble breathing. His brother, Julhas Uddin, said Sarkar's imprisonment and torture in Pakistan had left him "physically very weak."

"We are preparing for his burial," Uddin said, sobbing. "Please pray for my brother." Sarkar vanished in 1989 from his village of Bishnurampur, about 110 kilometers (70 miles) north of Dhaka, and traveled for several years in India before being picked up in 1997 by Pakistani authorities near the border. He spent 15 years in prison cells in Karachi and other locations in Pakistan. His family thought he was dead. But an anonymous caller from Pakistan told them he was in Pakistan, and the International Committee of the Red Cross helped secure his return in August 2012.

He arrived at the international airport in Dhaka that year - bearded, thin and ravaged by fatigue. Family members greeted and embraced him for the first time in 23 years. Sarkar said

little while wiping away tears rolling down his cheeks. His elder brother, Sekandar Ali, gripped him tightly and said "I can't believe you are alive! You are back!" before more gently suggesting, "Brother, let's go home. Mother is waiting for you." When Sarkar first disappeared, Ali searched the shipyard where he had once worked, but found no evidence of his brother. He and the family waited for years to hear news from Sarkar, but eventually came to believe he had died.

Upon his return to Bangladesh, Sarkar told The Associated Press that he had first crossed into India in 1989, visiting New Delhi for a few months as well as the northeastern states of Assam and Meghalaya. He then returned to New Delhi, got married and moved into a slum. But when his Indian wife left him, he decided to travel to Pakistan to find work. "Some people told me I will get a better work if I go to Pakistan. They told me you are a Muslim, go there, you will get better chance," he said in 2012. "But I got caught along the India-Pakistan border when I tried to enter Pakistan in 1997. I had no travel documents."

Sarkar said he was interrogated and tortured by Pakistani authorities



DHAKA, Bangladesh: In this file photo, Bangladeshi man Moslemuddin Sarkar, 52, center, who had been missing since 1989 is hugged by his brother Sekandar Ali, right, after he arrived at the airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh. — AP

who believed he was an Indian spy. Pakistan and India have a history of bitter relations and often imprison each other's citizens for lengthy periods for entering their territories. Both

sides have freed scores of such prisoners, but hundreds are still believed held in jails. Sarkar was buried near his home, his family said. He is survived by his two brothers. — AP

PAKISTAN WANTS AIR FORCE UPGRADE FOR PROLONGED MILITANT FIGHT SAYS NO END NEAR IN FIGHT AGAINST ISLAMIST MILITANTS

PARIS: Pakistan wants to upgrade its ageing fleet of fighter jets in anticipation of a prolonged battle against Islamist militants, although the purchase of fifth-generation planes would only be a last resort, a senior air force official said. US ally Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of 180 million people, is fighting a Taliban insurgency in its northwest, a separatist insurgency along its Iranian border in the west, and has a heavily militarized and disputed border with arch rival India in the east.

In 2014, the military launched a crackdown in the northwestern areas of North and South Waziristan and has managed to push back militants into a few pockets. But its air force, which will need to retire dozens of jets over the coming years, lacks the latest technology and relies heavily on a fleet of about 70 US -made Lockheed Martin F-16s, which are solely capable of carrying out precision targeting.

"Our concern is that we don't know how long these anti-terrorist operations will continue," Pakistan Air Force second-in-command Muhammad Ashfaq Arain told Reuters in an interview late on Wednesday. "We have weakened them (militants) to a great extent, but I don't see an end in the very near future, so all the burden is being shared by the F-16s and its pilots." Sceptics suspect that Pakistan's military is seeking an improved arsenal to counter the growing military might of India, its eastern

neighbor. The two countries have fought three wars since their violent separation in 1947 at the end of British colonial rule.

Pakistan's fleet also includes hundreds of Dassault Aviation French-made Mirage jets that are over 40 years old and F7 Chinese warplanes that are over 25 years old, both of which the air force plans to retire over the next few years. To fill the void, Islamabad has decided to bet on the JF-17 fighter, jointly developed by China and Pakistan, rather than spending billions on fifth-generation multi-role aircraft like Dassault's Rafale, which rival India is buying, or the Russian Su-35. That option, Arain said, had almost been ruled out for being too expensive and because Pakistan did not want to mix technologies and resources. It would only be reconsidered if "it was pushed against a wall". Instead, 16 JF-17s will be produced this year with a further 20 in 2017, but Arain acknowledged that the jets' usefulness in current operations was limited because it lacks precision targeting.

Damocles pod

"Operationally, the aircraft are working pretty well so we if we had a targeting pod on the JF-17, the burden would be shared," Arain said. He said his visit to Paris was in part aimed at assessing from French officials the prospects of supplying the Thales-made Damocles, a third-generation targeting pod. He said that was

Islamabad's priority for now. Previous negotiations in 2010 for a deal worth 1.2 billion euros (\$1.6 billion) worth of electronics and missiles collapsed under pressure from India, uncertainty over Pakistan's finances and fears of the transfer of technology given Chinese involvement in the JF-17.

"We're looking at the best option. The Damocles is a battle-proven system and the other options are not," Arain said. "If we do not get the Damocles pod for example, then we will need to look for alternate options that may not be proven." He said that in the long run, the air force was thinking about its needs beyond 2030 when F-16s and JF-17s would start to be replaced. The United States in February approved the sale to Pakistan of up to eight F-16 fighter jets for the short term, but Arain said even that was proving complicated.

"It's a much cheaper fighter jet, but buying more F-16s is economically not feasible for us and then there is a lot of human outcry," he said. Arain countered any suggestion that Pakistan might want greater air power to target India by saying that New Delhi itself was expanding its fleet. "We get eight aircraft and there are people who start to say that it will tilt the balance of power in South Asia. But when somebody across the border buys 36 aircraft and has plans to buy 126, that doesn't change the balance of power," he said, referring to India. — Reuters

SECULAR ACTIVIST HACKED TO DEATH IN BANGLADESH

DHAKA: A Bangladeshi law student who posted against Islamism on his Facebook page has been murdered, police said yesterday, the latest in a series of killings of secular activists and bloggers in the country. "At least four assailants hacked Nazimuddin Samad's head with a machete on Wednesday night. As he fell down, one of them shot him with a pistol from close range. He died on the spot," deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Syed Nurul Islam told AFP.

"It is a case of targeted killing. But no group has claimed responsibility," Islam said, adding police were investigating whether Samad was murdered for his writing. The Dhaka Tribune said the assailants shouted Allahu Akbar (God is Greatest) as they attacked Samad on a busy road near Dhaka's Jagannath University, where he was a law student. Samad had only recently arrived in Dhaka from the northeastern city of Sylhet to study law. Deputy commissioner Islam said police suspect the attackers had been monitoring the victim since before he arrived in Dhaka.

Last year, suspected Islamist militants hacked to death at least four atheist bloggers and a secular publisher in a long-running series of targeting killings of anti-Islam activists in the Muslim majority country. Police arrested members of a banned group called the Ansarullah Bangla Team over those murders, although none have yet been prosecuted. Imran Sarker, who leads Bangladesh's largest online secular activist group, said Samad had joined nationwide protests in 2013 against top Islamist leaders accused of committing war crimes during the country's war of independence. "He was a secular online activist and a loud voice against any social injustice. He was against Islamic fundamentalism," said Sarker, head of the Bangladesh Bloggers Association. Samad had written against radical Islam in a number of recent Facebook postings. — AFP