

International

Pakistan SC upholds acquittal in Daniel Pearl murder case

Pearl's family calls ruling 'a travesty of justice', seeks US intervention

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday dismissed a series of appeals against the acquittal of the British-born militant convicted of masterminding the kidnap and murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl, paving the way for his release along with three others.

"The court has come out to say that there is no offense that he has committed in this case," Mahmood Sheikh, who represented accused Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, told AFP. "The court has said he should be released forthwith," the lawyer added.

The ruling follows an international outcry last year when a lower court acquitted the 47-year-old of murder and reduced his conviction to a lesser charge of kidnapping—overturning his death sentence and ordering his release after almost two decades in prison. The lower court's move sparked a series of petitions against the acquittal, including from Pearl's family.

The Supreme Court rejected the petitions in a split decision yesterday. Pearl was the South Asia bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal when he was abducted in Karachi in January 2002 while researching a story about Islamist militants. Nearly a month later, after a string of ransom demands were made, a graphic video showing his decapitation was delivered to the US consulate. Sheikh, a British-born jihadist who once studied at the London School of Economics and had been involved in previous kidnappings of foreigners, was arrested days after Pearl's abduction and later sentenced to death by hanging. Lawyers for Pearl's family have argued that Sheikh played a crucial role in organizing the abduction and detention of the journalist, before

ordering his captors to kill him.

Defense lawyers, however, say he was a scapegoat and sentenced on insufficient evidence. Sheikh and the three other men convicted of involvement in the kidnapping have been held under emergency orders by the Sindh provincial government, which has argued that they are a danger to the public.

'Travesty of justice'

There was no word on when they will be released following yesterday's decision. Pearl's family called the latest ruling "a travesty of justice" and pleaded for US intervention in the case. "The release of these killers puts in danger journalists everywhere and the people of Pakistan. We urge the US government to take all necessary actions under the law to correct this injustice," the family said in a statement.

In a statement last month, the then-US acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen said Washington "stands ready to take custody of Omar Sheikh to stand trial here" after labelling the acquittal "an affront to terrorism victims everywhere". In January 2011, a report released by the Pearl Project at Georgetown University following an investigation into his death made chilling revelations, claiming that the wrong men were convicted for Pearl's murder.

The investigation, led by Pearl's friend and former Wall Street Journal colleague Asra Nomani, and a Georgetown University professor, claimed the reporter was murdered by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks, not Sheikh. — AFP



This undated file photo released by the Washington Post shows Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl at an undisclosed location with a copy of Pakistan's English language newspaper Dawn. —AFP

New Zealand urges Australia to 'show respect' to China

WELLINGTON: A senior New Zealand minister advised Australia to adopt his country's softly-softly approach to China yesterday, a rare public disagreement between the neighbors on how to deal with a more assertive Beijing. The comments—which closely echo Chinese government complaints—are likely to anger Canberra, while exposing the different approaches towards China by New Zealand and its "Five Eyes" intelligence partners Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain.

Pointing to Wellington's recent success in trade talks with China, Trade Minister Damien O'Connor urged Australia to show more "respect" to Beijing. "I can't speak for Australia and the way it runs its diplomatic relationships, but clearly if they were to follow us and show respect, I guess a little more diplomacy from time to time and be cautious with wording, then they too could hopefully be in a similar situation," he said. Australia's foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment on O'Connor's advice. New Zealand's cautious approach has been reflected in its reluctance to sign joint statements from Five Eyes partners criticizing China's crackdown on the Hong Kong democracy movement, including the recent arrests of activists in the city.

New Zealand officials have also been careful not to directly question China's growing influence in the Pacific, unlike their US and Australian counterparts. Critics say Wellington's China policy puts economic benefit above democratic values, something the New Zealand government has denied. "We've always been able to raise issues of concern," O'Connor told CNBC on Wednesday in the wake of a free trade upgrade that took more than four years to negotiate. — AFP

Omar Sheikh: From private schoolboy to militant kidnapper

ISLAMABAD: Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the militant who spent over 18 years behind bars for masterminding the abduction and slaying of US reporter Daniel Pearl, traded privilege and scholarship for a life of jihad, kidnappings, and ultimately a prison cell.

Born in London in 1973 to a prosperous Pakistani garment merchant, Omar was given the best education, including enrolment at a private primary school in London, a stint at Lahore's prestigious Aitchison College, and a brief tenure at the London School of Economics (LSE). He abandoned his comfortable Western upbringing after just a year at LSE, reportedly travelling to Bosnia during the brutal Balkans war in the early 1990s, where his jihadist zeal sprouted after coming into contact with Pakistani militants. The former boxer and arm wrestling enthusiast is believed to have returned to Pakistan to spend several months in a militant training camp, and travelled to the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir to fight Indian forces.

In India he carried out his first kidnapping, abducting an American and three British tourists in 1994. Indian police captured him in a shootout, initially thinking he was one of the British hostages because of his clipped accent and Western bearing. He was jailed in New Delhi, but never charged. In prison he met Pakistani jihadist Maulana Masood Azhar, who went on to found the hardline Kashmir militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed. New Delhi freed both Azhar and Omar in 1999 when the hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane demanded his release in exchange for their hostages. Omar returned to Lahore to live with his family, marrying in November 2000.

Omar came into contact with Pearl, the Wall Street Journal's



In this file photo, police escort British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh in Karachi. — AFP

South Asia bureau chief, when he was delving into the murky underworld of Pakistani militant groups after the September 11 attacks and in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan. The two exchanged several emails, according to police, as Pearl sought introductions to militant leaders. In their correspondence Omar presented himself as a warm, family-oriented man—all part of a ploy to lure Pearl to a trap that ultimately led to his abduction during a reporting trip in Karachi in January 2002. Omar was arrested in February 2002 while Pearl was still missing, and boasted to a Karachi court that the journalist was already dead. — AFP