

DID FOX NEWS REALLY INTERVIEW DR. SHAKEEL AFRIDI FROM PESHAWAR CENTRAL JAIL?

In a remarkable development, Fox News published a story Monday based on an interview Dominic DiNatale says he conducted with Dr. Shakeel Afridi, the doctor who aided the CIA's search for Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. As I had described back in June, Afridi now is in the central jail in Peshawar, but local authorities there have been asking the federal government to find a safer place for Afridi to be imprisoned, because it is feared that militants will attack Afridi to exact revenge for the aid he provided in the bin Laden mission.

Prior to his trial earlier this year, it is believed that Afridi was detained by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI. In the Fox story, Afridi is quoted as saying that the ISI is merely manipulating the US to obtain funding for Pakistan:

Pakistan's powerful spy agency regards America as its "worst enemy," and the government's claims that it is cooperating with the US are a sham to extract billions of dollars in American aid, according to the CIA informant jailed for his role in hunting down Usama bin Laden.

/snip/

"They said 'The Americans are our worst enemies, worse than the Indians,'" Afridi, who spoke from inside Peshawar Central Jail, said as he recalled the brutal interrogation and torture he suffered after he was initially detained.

Pakistan, and especially the ISI, vigorously denies that the interview could have taken place:

The ISI rubbished as 'fiction' on Tuesday a reported interview by a US TV channel of jailed Dr Shakeel Afridi, allegedly involved in tracing Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.

"There is no evidence to suggest that Fox News correspondent had interviewed Dr Afridi," a senior security official said after preliminary investigations.

"It is all concocted and baseless," he said as he laughed off the claims made in the interview. "It's amusing how well he (as reported in the interview) learnt about ISI operations from the cell in which he was kept blindfolded for eight months, as claimed by him," he added.

The jail in which he has been lodged has 'jammers' that block cellphone signals, another official said.

At yesterday's press briefing at the State Department, Victoria Nuland said that the authenticity of the interview has not yet been determined:

QUESTION: Staying on Pakistan, I wondered if State Department's had a chance to review a supposed interview that Dr. Afridi has given to Fox News and whether you think it's credible.

MS. NULAND: Well, frankly, we can't at this point verify the authenticity of the interview. If we do find that it's authentic, though, then the allegations would be extremely concerning. Pakistan obviously has international human rights obligations, including under the Convention Against Torture, and we would expect that the people and the Government of Pakistan would be

interested in investigating such claims by Dr. Afridi if, in fact, it turns out that this tape is authentic. But at this point, I can't verify.

QUESTION: Have you made representations – irrespective of this tape, have you made representations to Islamabad about the need – about how they're treating Dr. Afridi?

MS. NULAND: Well, I think you know we have all the way along. The Secretary has been extremely outspoken on this case for many, many months; has called the sentence unjust, unwarranted; has called for his release. And we continue to do that at all levels.

Despite reference to a "tape" in the exchange at the State Department, I can find no video of Dominic Di-Natale's story at the Fox News site and I also can't find any videos on YouTube where Di-Natale is shown reporting on the interview or playing audio of his interview. This is interesting because there appear to be multiple videos available in which Dr. Afridi is speaking, so voice comparison analysis could be carried out if the Fox tape is provided.

BBC spoke with officials at Peshawar's central jail and with Afridi's lawyers:

But Dr Afridi's lawyer told the BBC he was not confident about the authenticity of the interview.

Samiullah Afridi said his client was kept under "very strict security", and was even prevented from seeing his family and lawyers for months at a time.

"How a journalist can set up an interview with him in jail is beyond my comprehension," the lawyer said.

Prison officials contacted by the BBC were taken by surprise by reports of the interview, but did not rule out that a

phone could have been smuggled into his cell.

In contrast to what the attorney said about Afridi being “under strict security” the Fox story has this passage:

His living conditions now are vastly improved over those given by the ISI. Guarded at Peshawar, about 120 miles northwest of Islamabad, around the clock by two commandos, he has a large cell with three ceiling fans, a bed and a bathroom. He has a small gas burner for cooking meals and his family is able to bring him food and supplies – though they say they have to bribe prison officials to do it.

Presumably, if the prison officials can be bribed by the family for food to be brought in, a bribe to bring in a phone and to turn off the jammers at a selected moment doesn't seem out of the question. Of course, this bit of conjecture is based on the purported interview, so independent verification would be useful here.

Writing for The Atlantic Wire as carried by Yahoo News, John Hudson provides a very interesting comment regarding Afridi, his motivations and his trustworthiness:

Afridi's script certainly plays into the narrative that the White House and Congress have recited that Afridi is a hero for helping the U.S. find bin Laden. One thing to consider, however, is that Afridi, by his own admission, had no idea that he was helping find Osama bin Laden when he operated a fake vaccination campaign for the CIA. That scheme attempted to secretly collect DNA evidence from local Abbottabad residents in the hope of finding bin Laden's DNA and sending that information to the CIA. Someone willing to deceive his own

patients in order to help a foreign spy agency catch an unknown person should certainly raise suspicions about Afridi's character, especially given previous allegations of corruption and quackery on his part. Still, the CIA, and by extension the U.S., hasn't forgotten how he helped them and continues to push for his release. Clearly, in the spy business, personal foibles don't always count against you.

Because we are dealing with both the ISI and the CIA here, I doubt we will ever have a full understanding of the forces at play. That isn't stopping Rand Paul, however, and despite the absence of a confirmation that the interview actually took place, Paul has written a letter to Harry Reid threatening to shut down the Senate if there is not a vote on his bill to strip funding from Pakistan unless Afridi is released:

For many months I have worked tirelessly to bring awareness to Dr. Afridi's plight, and I have offered legislation to deny any current or future foreign assistance to the Pakistani government until they reverse course and free Dr. Afridi. It is now abundantly clear that Pakistan has no intention of pursuing a proper and just hearing for Dr. Afridi- in fact, just this month the Director General of the ISI indicated it would be in the best interest of the United States to "forget the matter of Dr. Afridi." I will not forget Dr. Afridi, and it is time for the Senate to show it has not forgotten-or turned a blind eye to-Dr. Afridi.

In a letter dated July 12, 2012, I asked that you work with me to schedule a vote on my bill to end aid to Pakistan until Dr. Afridi is freed, S. 3269. As of today, that vote as not been scheduled.

As you know, the number of work days in the 112th Congress is dwindling, and Congress may break for the November election as soon as next week. Because of the urgency of seeing that Dr. Afridi is freed, I am prepared to pursue any and all means to secure a vote on my bill immediately, including objecting to other Senate business and recessing the Senate for the election.