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Case Shows Terror-War Complications

Search for Missing Activist Illustrates Strain as Bush Works to Strengthen Pakistan Ties

By **SHAHID SHAH**

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Pakistan's cooperation in foiling last week's terror plot shows the benefits to the U.S. of good relations with its South Asian ally. But the case of Safdar Sarki shows that such ties also have complications.

Mr. Sarki, a Pakistan-born American citizen, disappeared in Karachi in February, two days before he planned to fly home to El Campo, Texas. For years, Mr. Sarki had been an advocate for Sindhis, the indigenous residents of a southeastern province of Pakistan, who claim they have suffered political and economic discrimination since the 1947 creation of India and Pakistan.



Safdar Sarki

Mr. Sarki, 42 years old, is one of hundreds of political activists who have gone missing in Pakistan over the past decade. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, a nongovernmental organization that tracks human-rights issues, says 57 political activists have "disappeared" in the past two years, including prominent figures such as Asif Baladi, a young scholar, and Nawaz Zaunr, a journalist and poet. When asked about the claim of such "disappearances," the spokesman for Pakistan's embassy in Washington said authorities in Pakistan are investigating the cases but have no information on them.

Mr. Sarki's case is different largely because it has drawn the attention of the State Department and some members of Congress. It illustrates a strain that persists as President Bush works to strengthen America's relationship with Pakistan.

Mr. Bush is advocating the spread of democracy around the world, and Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a coup, is an example of the kind of leader Mr. Bush has criticized. The disappearances of Mr. Sarki and others are an aspect of Islamabad's human-rights record that the Bush administration has termed troubling.

The State Department earlier this year issued a report stating that Gen. Musharraf's "human-rights record was poor, and serious problems remained." The document listed practices such as "arbitrary arrest, and lengthy pretrial detention," as well as "extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape." At the time, Pakistan's foreign ministry rejected the claims and said the report was "unwarranted" and lacked objectivity.

But while Washington periodically highlights such practices, it has tried to balance them -- especially since Sept. 11, 2001 -- against the need for cooperation from Gen. Musharraf in monitoring and battling terrorists, many of whom, as last week's events in the United Kingdom showed, continue to operate in Pakistan.



Getty Images

The U.S. government hasn't made a big issue about the disappearance of a U.S. citizen, but it isn't ignoring the case. Through the spring and summer, the Sarki family has enlisted help on Capitol Hill and at the State Department. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, a Texas Democrat and co-chairman of the Congressional Pakistan Caucus, has taken up Mr. Sarki's case, meeting with Pakistan's Ambassador Mahmud Ali Durrani in Washington while her staff has contacted authorities in Pakistan. So far, little information has turned up.

President Bush and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf during a news conference at the Presidential Palace in Islamabad in March.

During Mr. Sarki's most recent trip to Pakistan, he had resumed his activism on behalf of Sindhis, with

activities including organizing peaceful demonstrations.

His friends and family say they believe Mr. Sarki was abducted by Pakistani law-enforcement officials in response to his protests against the government.

The spokesman for Pakistan's embassy in Washington says Mr. Sarki wasn't abducted by Pakistan authorities and isn't in the custody of the Pakistani government or agencies. The spokesman said authorities are trying to track down what happened and where Mr. Sarki might be.

Mr. Sarki's family and friends say they have little hope of finding the motel owner alive, especially since he was fleeing authorities when he first left Pakistan in 1992. He was charged with crimes in Pakistan twice, though the charges were dismissed. In one case, his vehicle had been used in a 1984 attack on the mayor of Hyderabad in Sindh province. In another, his Karachi apartment was used in a 1990 kidnapping.

A State Department spokesman said recently that U.S. officials have contacted Pakistani authorities for help in locating Mr. Sarki. Officials at the U.S. Consulate in Karachi contacted the local police, while officials from the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad talked to Pakistani authorities in the capital. "We have been in touch with [Pakistani authorities] at numerous times," one U.S. official said. Their response thus far: They don't know what happened to Mr. Sarki.

On the day he was abducted, Mr. Sarki had arranged a meeting at his sister's apartment, where he had been staying about six months, according to Muneer Sarki, a relative who was serving as his driver. Muneer Sarki told family members that before Safdar Sarki's visitor arrived, he left to buy groceries, and when he returned, six vehicles, including two police vehicles, were on the street in front of the apartment. Muneer Sarki says he saw "agency people" beating Mr. Sarki and his guest -- a man whom neither family members nor eyewitnesses recognized.

In a court appearance this spring in Karachi, authorities denied any involvement. That left the prosecutor in the Sarki disappearance case with little to pursue, especially because both the defense ministry and home ministry submitted statements to the court saying they had no knowledge of Safdar Sarki's disappearance.

Write to Shahid Shah at shahid.shah@wsj.com¹

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(1) <mailto:shahid.shah@wsj.com>

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