

Scenario 164

KARACHI IN YEAR 2016 - I

HIGH CRIME CONTINUED IN 2016:

On 13th January 2016; an Assistant Sub-Inspector [ASI] of police and his two accomplices were arrested for kidnapping people for ransom. The SHO and two other officers of the Pakistan Bazaar police station were suspended following the arrest of ASI Akram and his accomplices, Mushtaq and Umair, who impersonated as Counter-Terrorism Department [CTD] officials.

SSP West Karachi Azfar Mahesar received a complaint from a citizen a night before that some men, claiming to be CTD officials, had kidnapped his brother, Jamshed and were demanding money for his release. The SSP ordered Mohammadpur pp in-charge Imran Gujjar to handle the case.

Gujjar started [covered] negotiations with the kidnappers and a ransom amount of Rs:0.1 million was finalised. The officer then called them to a location near the CTD Garden HQ for handing over the cash. Gujjar with a police team rushed to the scene in civies but did not find the kidnappers there. Later, the officer and his team traced the call and arrested Umair, who was negotiating with Gujjar on the phone.

Umair was taken to the Mohammadpur post where he told interrogators that he worked for Mushtaq, who had ties with Pakistan Bazaar police officers. Umair was then told to call Mushtaq and inform him that he had received the money.

Later, the police team tracked down Mushtaq and arrested him in an area on the outskirts of the city. During interrogation, Mushtaq disclosed that he kidnapped citizens on the directives of ASI Akram and other police officers.

The SSP West informed Additional IG Karachi Mushtaq Mehar about the ring of kidnappers. The Karachi police chief ordered the suspension of Pakistan Bazaar SHO Zaheer Ahmed and demoted him. He also directed the SSP West to arrest the officers and rescue the kidnap victim.

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On the SSP West's orders, Gujjar raided the Pakistan Bazaar police station where he found that ASI Akram and his other associates had already been rounded up by Rangers and the abducted man also rescued. The SSP West suspended the office crew of the Pakistan Bazaar police station for their involvement in the kidnappings. The Karachi police chief ordered a departmental inquiry into the case also.

On 17th January 2016; brother of PML[N]'s local leader, Mir Ishtiaq Baloch, was shot dead in Lyari's Baghdadi area in the early hours of the day ahead of a planned 'peace rally'. A passer-by was also shot at and wounded in the gun attack. The victim had also contested the recent local government election on a Union Council Chairman seat in Lyari.

Mir Ishtiaq Baloch, alias Mulla Pappu, 35, was sitting with his friends in his office of Union Council-7 on Ahmed Shah Bukhari Road when a gunman attacked him; a passerby, Irfan, was also wounded. They were taken to the Civil Hospital Karachi, where doctors declared Ishtiaq as dead. It was no doubt a targeted killing incident.

He had contested for the Chairman seat of UC-7, where he was gunned down, and was defeated by the PPP candidate with a margin of 40 votes. He had challenged the results before a returning officer, who advised him to submit the same when election tribunals would be set up. PML[N] leader Mir Ashfaq Baloch said:

"I had announced that we would take out a rally on 'peace' in Lyari on Sunday, which was supposed to pass through several areas but the gangsters killed my brother.

I wanted to make Lyari a cradle of peace but the gangsters did not appreciate our efforts and pumped five bullets into the body of my brother. Thus they turned the planned peace rally into the funeral procession of my brother."

However, a senior police officer told the media that violence had resurfaced in Lyari at a time when political alignment or realignment is taking place for top slots of DMC South. A night before, some miscreants had thrown a hand grenade, which landed near a parked mobile van of the Chakiwara police. The police were also looking into the possibility that the suspects might have wanted to target PPP UC chairman's office but threw away a grenade on seeing the police standing nearby.

On 26th January 2016; the Rangers arrested six suspects of terrorist activities in Karachi, including four officials of the Fisherman Cooperative

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Society [FCS] who were allegedly working as facilitators of Lyari gangsters; they were Saleem Deedak, Mehar Bux, Mohammad Saeed Baloch and Dil Murad of Kalri area. The suspects were moved to the Rangers HQ for interrogation and later taken to an Anti-Terrorism Court [ATC], which allowed their preventive detention for 90 days.

The initial interrogation showed that the four were affiliated with the Aziz Jan Baloch and Baba Ladla groups of Lyari and were working as their facilitators. They further disclosed that on orders of Uzair Baloch they had recruited 150 men who belonged to the Lyari gang war. They admitted providing funds to the Baloch Liberation Army. The Rangers spokesman said criminals of the Lyari gang war and Baloch Liberation Army purchased weapons with funds provided by the suspects to carry out acts of terrorism in Karachi and Balochistan.

The four also allegedly provided millions of rupees acquired through corruption to well-known political personalities of Sindh. They were nominated in murder FIRs at different police stations of Karachi but the cases were taken back on political grounds.

A larger number of civil society activists and residents of Lyari organised a protest outside the Karachi Press Club in the afternoon demanding immediate release of their Fisher Folk organisation. The Rangers did not bring Saeed Baloch, who was also Secretary General of the FCS's labour union, to court, so some people of Lyari jointly organised the protest to press the government for his release. The groups also went to the Sindh High Court [SHC] against that alleged illegal detention. Fatima Majeed, the PFF's Vice-Chairperson, demanded a transparent inquiry into the case saying:

"Saeed Baloch is a prominent civil society activist who has been struggling for fisherfolk's rights since the inception of the PFF. There is some misunderstanding and the Rangers should investigate it properly."

Karamat Ali, Director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, said *bureaucrats in government institutions were involved in corruption*, while Baloch was the Secretary General of the FCS's labour union. *"How can a trade unionist be part of embezzling the funds?"* he questioned.

The FCS' troubles started when the provincial government appointed Dr Nisar Morai, close aide to the PPP leader Mr Zardari, as its Chairman in January 2014, replacing the previous one through illegal means. It was a general perception that in the fishing industry, a myriad of problems, in-

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cluding corruption, extortion and security, followed that controversial appointment.

Rangers had arrested Sultan Qamar Siddiqui, the Acting Chairman of the FCS, on 17th June 2015 and two days later arrested its two Directors, Muhammad Khan Chachar and Rana Shahid, over their alleged involvement in taking extortion money, killings, corruption and funding Lyari's criminal syndicates.

Nisar Morai had already left the country during the same days but before the crackdown, fearing arrest.

On 22nd February 2016; Pakistan police killed at least 12 terrorists involved in target killings and seized a large cache of arms in Karachi. SSP Malir, Rao Anwar told the media reporters that:

"Eight suspected militants were killed in the Pipri area while four others were later shot dead in Gadap on the outskirts of the city. They all belonged to outlawed militant outfits and opened fire on the raiding parties of police when they raided their hideouts on creditable tip-offs.

In Pipri, the militants were heavily armed and opened fire after which the police retaliated and killed eight of them; four other terrorists fled the scene in the cover of darkness but were chased down to Gadap where another encounter took place and they were also killed by the police."

The raids were conducted after information provided by two arrested high profile terrorists, Naeem Bukhari and Farooq Bhatti, adding that the deceased men belonged to *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent* [AQIS] and *Lashkar e Jhangvi* [LeJ]. Police had recovered heavy cache of suicide vests, explosives and hand grenades from the hideout in Pipri; two policemen were wounded in the exchange.

On 7th May 2016; unknown assailants gunned down social media campaigner and civil society activist Khurram Zaki, 40, in Karachi; four suspects riding on two motorcycles opened fire on Zaki while he was eating dinner at a restaurant in Sector-11B of North Karachi. The activist was killed, and two others – journalist Rao Khalid and bystander Aslam – were critically wounded in the attack.

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A former journalist, Zaki was an active campaigner for human rights and was the editor of the website and Facebook page 'Let Us Build Pakistan' [LUBP] which claimed to "spread liberal religious views and condemned extremism in all forms".

Zaki was last in the media limelight alongside activist Jibran Nasir in a campaign against Lal Masjid cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz for inciting hatred against Shia Muslims. The campaigners had managed to get a case registered against Maulana Abdul Aziz.

A spokesperson of Majlis Wahdat Muslimeen [MWM] said that Khurram Zaki was not only a prominent civil society activist but also a religious scholar who tended to attend programmes on various TV channels; they believed that banned sectarian outfits, most probably the Taliban, were involved in this gruesome murder.

SC ON BILL BOARDS ISSUE:

On 11th March 2016; the Supreme Court [SC] asked two Cantonment Boards in Karachi to take down illegal billboards on *Sharae Faisal* within 24 hours.

The apex court larger bench, headed by Justice Amir Hani Muslim and comprising justices Sh Azmat Saeed and Khilji Arif Hussain, expressed annoyance that its earlier directives in the case of illegal billboards along the city's main artery were not implemented even though the deadline had passed. The bench was hearing the Karachi law and order *suo motu* case at the Karachi registry.

The proceedings were initiated on an application by the Karachi Cantonment Board, which had challenged the Sindh High Court order that had declared excessive advertisement tax imposed by the board on private outdoor advertisement boards, as illegal.

[On 21 August 2015, the apex court had ordered the 17 civic agencies, including the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation [KMC], the Cantonment Boards, Defence Housing Authority and Civil Aviation Authority [CAA], to remove all the outdoor advertising hoardings that violated the regulations.]

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During that day's [11th March 2016] proceedings, the bench came down hard on the representatives of Karachi and Faisal Cantonment Boards in whose jurisdictions oversized hoardings were still not removed.

Justice Hani observed that the court had repeatedly issued directives in this regard but giant outdoor advertising boards were still present atop commercial plazas and on the footpaths along the thoroughfare and confronted whether or not they met the regulations in respect of their size, etc.

Taking serious notice of failure of authorities in complying with the court's repeated orders, the bench members ordered clearing the rooftops and footpaths along the city's main thoroughfare within a day. Next day, the chief executive officers [CEOs] of the two cantonment boards personally appeared in court with written progress and compliance.

The bench also directed the representative of Karachi's Commander of the Pakistan Navy to submit a statement regarding removal of such illegal signboards from their limits. Notices were also issued to the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General to submit replies of the federal government regarding powers of the cantonment boards to impose and recover the advertisement tax. The same SC bench:

-also restrained the provincial government from transferring the province's top land revenue officer without prior permission from the court.
-also ordered the senior member of the Board of Revenue [BoR] to probe the utilisation of Rs:4 billion for the registration and verification of unregistered state lands in Karachi.

[Rs:4 billion were to be utilised by BoR to get record of state lands in the city verified through outsourced projects, which failed to match the 1985 records available on micro-film.]

The SC had directed the senior member, Rizwan Memon, to probe how this large amount of public money was utilised, as the private firm had failed to successfully perform the task of compiling properties' record.

Finding the turf war between mafias supported by political groups to illegally occupy state lands, the apex court had in 2011 ordered a survey of all the unregistered precious state properties in the port city.

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On 5th May 2016; The Supreme Court [SC] maintained that there was no law that permits installing outdoor advertising billboards and signboards on 'public property' and ordered the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation [KMC], the Defence Housing Authority [DHA] and all the cantonment boards to remove these billboards and hoardings across the city by 30th June then.

Amendments were also proposed in existing bylaws applicable beyond 'public properties' to achieve city-wide uniformity and ensure safety measures for citizens.

The stakeholders ordered to remove the illegal signboards included KMC, district municipal corporations [DMCs], DHA, all cantonment boards, Station Headquarters Corps 5, Karachi Commander Naval HQ and Civil Aviation Authority [CAA].

These directives were contained in the order issued after a three-member larger bench, headed by Justice Mian Saqib Nisar, heard the matter regarding outdoor display of commercial hoardings and billboards at the SC's Karachi registry. The other members were justices Amir Hani Muslim and Khilji Arif Hussain.

During those proceedings, an interim report was placed before the SC bench about a meeting held in the commissioner's office with the object to achieve city-wide uniformity for installation of the billboards. The report reflected that all the stakeholders, who attended the meetings, proposed amendments to the respective bylaws regarding the billboards' size, positioning and other issues.

The bench was told on behalf of the government, that no billboards or hoardings of any nature could be allowed or installed on public properties. The SC bench observed in its order:

"There is no law which permits KMC, DMCs [district municipal corporations], cantonment boards or any other agency in Karachi to install billboards or hoardings on a public property; such an act on the part of [the] permission-granting agency is against the civil rights of the citizens".

The bench further ordered that the hoardings, which had been installed on public properties under any licence or lease, should be uprooted by June 30 by the advertising agencies concerned, which owned the poles or displaying materials, or by the contractors, if they owned such material,

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or by the authorities under whose permission the billboards were installed.

The judges explained in detail as to what type of property could come under the definition of 'public property'. The Supreme Court [SC] observed that the term 'public property' has wide meaning and, therefore, the judges clarified it in order to avoid any ambiguity. The term 'public property' shall include the following places:

1. Roads
2. Sidewalks
3. Islands in the centre of a road or service lane
4. Overhead bridges and underpasses
5. Overhead pedestrian walkways or bridges
6. Roundabouts
7. Green belts or dividers between a road
8. Pedestrian lanes
9. *Nullahs* (storm water drains) and the banks of *nullahs*.

SC ON BAHRIA TOWN KARACHI:

On 24th April 2016; the historian Gul Hasan Kalamati said that water and electricity meant for Karachi were being redirected to Bahria Town and DHA City. Mr Kalamati was one of the many speakers invited by the Irtiqa Institute of Social Science to talk on the military farms in Okara and the Bahria Town.

The title of the meeting was '*snatching from the needy to give to the greedy: a meeting to condemn atrocities committed by the government by dispossessing people from their centuries old tenancy or ownership*'. Mr Kalamati compared the Bahria Town to the East India Company of four centuries back in the sub-continent.

Under the Land Acquisition Act, *Goths, villages and the Goth Abad* Scheme, which have been registered, cannot be sold or given away. That was what Orangi Pilot Project's Perween Rahman had been working on when she was shot dead in March 2013.

The background facts were:

[On 2nd July 2015; *the Pakistan Rangers, during a meeting of the apex committee on 14th May 2015, told that the Sindh government had allotted 44,000 acres of government land along the Super Highway to Bahria Town, a leading real estate firm of Malik Riaz.*

On the other hand, Bahria Town flatly rejected the Rangers claim.

A letter addressed on 9th June that year by the Bahria Town's corporate office in Rawalpindi to Maj Gen Bilal Akbar, DG Rangers Sindh, said:

"Not a single acre of government land has been allotted to or purchased by the Bahria Town.

The above figure of 44,000 acres is incorrect, baseless and frivolous. We had purchased the land from private parties and paid all duties and taxes."

Bahria Town had also placed its plea before the Supreme Court; 'the real estate firm owns 40,000 acres land in different cities across the country.'

A legal aide to Malik Riaz told the media that the Rangers information was incorrect; someone might have passed incorrect information to Rangers. According to him, Bahria Town had purchased a total of 7,631 acres in Karachi to date.

A senior official of Bahria Town, Col Khalilur Rehman, said the real estate firm had purchased the land from private owners at prices ranging from Rs:850,000 to Rs:6 million per acre. The letter dated 9th June 2015, sent to the Rangers DG requesting "correction" of their record had not been replied till then.]

On 1st August 2016; the Supreme Court restrained Bahria Town from undertaking any development activity on the state land allotted to it by the Malir Development Authority [MDA] illegally and gave two months to the National Accountability Bureau [NAB] to complete its investigation into the matter.

A two-judge bench comprising Justices Amir Hani Muslim and Mushir Alam gave the directions at the court's Karachi Registry while hearing a set of applications against illegal allotment of state land and adjustment of land in 43 Dehs [means villages] by the MDA. The land in question involved the under-construction Bahria Town project located about nine kilometres from Toll Plaza on the Karachi-Hyderabad super highway.

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The NAB Prosecutor General filed an interim report in a sealed envelope along with a copy of the survey report prepared by the Directorate of Survey of Pakistan, Ministry of Defence, which was taken on record.

[According to the sealed survey report, the total land consolidated by the MDA and handed over to Bahria Town measured 9,385.185 acres; Bahria Town had developed 386.276 acres of land which was not yet consolidated by the MDA.

The survey report also showed some other portions of state land that had been developed by Bahria Town despite the fact that they had not been consolidated by the MDA. The total land developed / under development but not consolidated by the MDA came to make 2,771.79 acres.]

The bench inquired the Chief Secretary, senior member Board of Revenue, and the Advocate General of Sindh to satisfy it under which law the MDA was competent to exchange private land with the land falling in the area reserved as corridor. The three officials, however, could not offer any explanation and submitted that no such powers were available with the MDA to allot or exchange the private land with the state land.

The bench observed that it had come on record that no portion of the land pertaining to the subject matter was ever allotted under Section 10(4) of the Colonisation of Government Lands Act 1894, by the Sindh government to the MDA. The bench restrained the Bahria Town from undertaking any development activity in areas demarcated in the survey report.

The MDA was also restrained from consolidating any further portion of the private land for the Bahria Town or any other private enterprise under the garb of exchange of land in exercise of their powers conferred on them under the MDA Act or the rules framed there-under.

The bench also restricted the Board of Revenue from dealing with the land of the MDA or any other Authority which was the subject matter of these proceedings in any manner whatsoever; the court ordered:

"In order to ensure that no further construction or development activity is carried out on the land specified hereinabove, we direct the NAB authorities through the Prosecutor General that they should immediately if possible by tomorrow obtain Google Earth maps / images of the entire land stated to be in possession of the Bahria Town as per the survey report and submit the same for record."

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Meanwhile, the chief of Bahria Town Malik Riaz Hussain claimed that the Supreme Court had not imposed any restriction on development of his projects. In his tweets, he called it "*misreporting of facts*" by the media and vowed to continue the development of the mighty project. On social media he pasted:

"Bahria Town will continue all construction & related activities on the consolidated land 9385 acre. Twisted facts are product of cynical minds. We've been facing this mafia from day one & will continue to do so to safeguard development & investment in Pakistan."

CJ SHC's SON KIDNAPPED:

On 20th June 2016; Barrister Awais Ali Shah, son of SHC CJ Sajjad Ali Shah, was kidnapped by masked men in front of a Clifton superstore. However, police and other law enforcement agencies remained unaware of his kidnapping until his family reported it hours later. Mr Shah had left the SHC for Clifton to meet a friend, but did not reach there and his phone remained switched off; he was kidnapped on his way, the police confirmed later. Apparently, there was no evidence available that Mr Shah was kidnapped but the police suspected so.

The provincial administration had taken a "serious note" of the incident; a high-level meeting remained in progress for days to discuss the issue periodically. Barrister Shah was recently hired by over 700 sacked employees of the Karachi Port Trust to plead their case. "*Leave no stone unturned for his safe recovery,*" the chief minister told the administration.

On 19th July 2016; Awais Ali Shah, kidnapped son of Sindh HC's CJ Sajjad Ali Shah, was recovered after an intelligence based operation in Tank district of Khyber PK. Director General ISPR Lt Gen Asim Bajwa disclosed Shah's recovery through a pre-dawn tweet. Three terrorists were also killed during the operation.

Rangers personnel drove Shah to his home morning as people in the neighbourhood distributed sweets to celebrate his recovery. He was transported to Faisal Base Karachi from Tank in a special aircraft and later despatched to his home under tight security. The Rangers had announced a reward of Rs:2,500,000 for credible information regarding the whereabouts of Barrister Awais Ali Shah.

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Speaking to journalists as he was reunited with his son, SHC CJ Sajjad Ali Shah hailed the armed forces for the successful recovery of his son; adding that the army chief had been personally monitoring the team formed by DG ISI to recover his son. The PPP's provincial government played no role for the recovery. Gen Raheel Sharif called the CJ at 3 in the night and told him about the recovery of his son. The CJ said:

"He was kind enough to let me talk to my son when I asked, and he was kind enough to arrange a plane and got him here from Tank. I've absolutely no idea about which group was behind the kidnapping. All I know at this time is that my son is back."

DG ISPR Gen Asim Bajwa announced that chief of the army staff [COAS] commended efforts of the Intelligence and security forces for successful operation; adding that:

"COAS commended efforts of Int & security forces for successful operation. COAS also called & congratulated CJ Sind on recovery of his son."

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also congratulated the CJ Sajjad Ali Shah on the recovery of his son and praised security forces. A statement issued by PM's office said:

"The Prime Minister lauded the role of intelligence agencies and security forces in recovering Mr Awais Shah and said that the professional and operational excellence of our security forces has made it possible for which they deserve immense appreciation."

Pakistan had seen high profile kidnapping of Shahbaz Taseer, son of former Punjab governor late Salman Taseer, and Ali Haider Gilani, son of former Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani before the abduction of Barrister Awais Shah over the last five years.

Taseer was held in captivity for four and a half years before being recovered from Kuchlak, Balochistan in March 2016 by the Pak-Army, while Gilani was recovered during an operation jointly carried out by US and Afghan forces in Ghazni district of Afghanistan in May 2016.

However; the real cause of the said kidnapping was that the CJ of the SHC was hearing important cases concerning with Zardari's intimate team.

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Journalist Asad Kharal revealed shocking facts about the abduction and recovery of Awais Shah. He claimed that Awais Shah, after abduction, was shifted to very high-profile Sindh government official's residence in Gulshan-e-Hadid, Karachi, and on the same night transferred to Thatta via National Highway in a van of Thatta police station. After a week, Awais Shah was shifted to Larkana.

Meanwhile, talks and dealing started with three parties to shift the victim to North Waziristan. High officials of the Sindh government were involved in facilitating the abductors and providing safe passage to them from Sindh to Khyber PK then to FATA.

Army intelligence agencies were receiving information from different sources through cyber means and local human intelligence. They finally received a clue about the presence of the victim in Dera Ismail Khan as the cyber crime cell of ISI was tapping all calls to Afghanistan and Waziristan.

According to sources, some very close friends of former President Asif Zardari, who was also present in a meeting at Dubai, had planned abduction of Awais Shah. Senator Dr Abdul Qayum Soomro was among the planners; he was previously a very close friend of Maulana Fazlur Rahman. He used connections through Maulana Fazlur Rahman to activate Taliban and assured them of complete support.

In this regard, an amount of \$500,000 was paid to the group and the payment was made in Dubai in the shape of cash and three cheques including two cheques of HSBC Banks Dubai Branch, and one cheque of Allied Bank Limited [ABL].

The sole purpose of the abduction was only to force the Sindh High Court chief justice, army and rangers to release Dr Asim, let Ayan Ali flee Pakistan and drop all cases against Awais Muzaffar Tippi and Faryal Talpur. It also aimed to defame the army and Rangers and force them to accept terms of the PPP and surety from the army to allow safe arrival of Asif Zardari to start agitation against the government.

It was a political game and orchestrated by enemies of Pakistan to destabilise the country and defame the armed forces and police for their political gains. One Asad Kharal, a front man of Tariq Sial, brother of Sindh Home Minister Sohail Anwer Sial, played a key role in the abduction. He led the police van in a vehicle with tinted glasses to shift Awais Shah from Karachi to Larkana.

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He handed over Awais Shah to Matni Group of the Mehsud tribe. When the Rangers attempted to arrest Asad Kharal to recover Awais Shah, he was freed from their custody after stiff resistance and allowed to flee. Fearing consequences, Asif Zardari ordered Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah and Sindh Home Minister Sohail Anwer Sial to make sure Asad Kharal was given in police custody as soon as possible to conceal the real facts from ISI and Rangers.

Sindh Home Minister Sohail Anwer Sial also called a meeting of top-ranking police officials on 8th July 2016 to ensure the compliance of Asif Zardari's orders to save the mastermind behind the abduction of Awais Shah.

Former IG Police Tehsin Anwar Shah, a veteran police officer, placed his comments on internet media:

"CJ of Pakistan has expressed his annoyance on the kidnapping of son of CJ Sindh; distrust on the performance of LEAs; dissatisfaction on the measures for his recovery; observed that the kidnapping has caused insecurity among the judges and their families; and ordered to recover Awais Shah. Every sane person will agree with the CJP.

I wish the Lordships feel the pain for the families of 60 thousand innocent civilians killed by the terrorists and hundreds of Police and Army officers who laid their life in the line of fire while caring for the human rights of the criminals in bail matters and disposal of cases ending in acquittals."

Another former IG police Zafar Qureshi commented:

"Agree with MR Tehseen Shah. His Lordship has felt the heat when a son of a judge has been kidnapped.

Would his lordship like to see the rate of conviction of such horrendous crimes. How many judges have been shown the door for poor performance and dubious character? – not even one during the last two decades in whole of Pakistan."

AMJAD SABRI QAWWAL KILLED:

UK's daily 'the Guardian' dated 23rd June 2016;

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One of Pakistan's most famous and respected musicians, celebrated for devotional songs from a centuries-old mystic tradition, Amjad Sabri, was shot dead by Taliban gunmen in Karachi. Thousands paid their respects, throwing rose petals over an ambulance carrying his coffin. Sabri used to perform *Qawwali* music by the Sufi tradition, an Islamic practice opposed by extremists.

Amjad Sabri, 45, was shot by two men on a motorbike as he drove through a congested area of Karachi. A relative travelling with the musician was injured but survived. TTP spokesman Qari Saifullah Mehsud, claimed responsibility for the killing and said Amjad Sabri was targeted because the group considered his music blasphemous.

The attack happened a day after a homeopathic doctor from the Ahmadi minority was killed in the same city, and two days after masked men seized the son of a top provincial judge, fuelling concerns about violence and extremism in Pakistan's economic capital.

[Earlier, on 19th May 2014; the Islamabad High Court during the hearing over a blasphemy petition filed by the Shuhada Foundation issued notices to all those party to the case; the respondents were Federal Information Secretary, CEO of ARY TV, anchors Mubashir Lucman, Nida Yasir and Shaisata Lodhi, Amjad Sabri Qawwal, poet Aqeel Mohsin Naqvi, Chairman PEMRA and Council of Islamic Ideology [CII] plus others. The issue of alleged blasphemy in one Geo TV's morning show was being highlighted negatively.

The petition also put the onus on Qawwal Amjad Sabri and poet Aqeel Mohsin Naqvi for the blasphemy row while seeking to ban the Qawwali that caused the issue. An FIR had been registered by the police against Geo TV channel owner Mir Shakeelur Rehman, its morning programme host Shaista Lodhi, actress Veena Malik and her husband Asad Bashir Khattak.

The case was registered under PPC's sections 295-A [deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs], 295-C [use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Prophet (PBUH)] and 298-A [use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of holy personages]. The suspects were also booked under Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act.]

But both the music, and the shrines at which *qawwalis* are often performed, have long been a target for religious conservatives who shun all

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forms of music and consider the shrines unorthodox. Dozens of sites have been targeted in attacks by the TTP since a decade. The murder of a popular singer from a famous and well-loved musical dynasty was a clear warning to others trying to celebrate *qawwali*; the intelligentsia held:

"These attacks have a chilling effect on the pluralism and diversity of religious practice and cultural expression in this part of the world. That is very worrying. Whenever something like this happens, you are a step closer to anarchy at the state level and sponsored by the state itself."

Colleagues and fans denounced the Taliban for targeting a man who devoted his life and work to religion. Invariably all held that Amjad Sabri was a true lover of God. His mission of love was tragically cut short by those who spread hate all around, and it was a great loss for all Pakistanis.

Karachi, home to 20 million people, is plagued by political, ethnic and sectarian violence. In September 2013, government launched an operation to clear out militants and criminal groups; it reduced the scale of the violence overall, but there was growing concern about such targeted killings by the extremists.

There were demonstrations overnight in Lahore and Islamabad, condemning the killing of Sabri as he was equally known and respected in the whole sub continent including India. He had derived his fame from the mark that his father, Ghulam Farid Sabri, left on this genre by composing some of the most memorable *Qawwalis* from the late-1960s to the mid-1990s. Amjad Sabri was particularly renowned for performing a song associated with his father and uncle called "*Bhar Do Jholi Meri.....*" (Fill My Bag...).

Amjad Sabri belonged to above mentioned dynasty of legendary performers, and was known for reworking classics popularised by his father and uncle. He regularly appeared on national television, and had been performing daily during *Ramadan* and other holy occasions.

The songs Sabri used to perform were part of a Sufi tradition dating back to the 13th century. Known as *Qawwalis*, steeped in mysticism and sometimes based on mystic poetry, still they are a key part of the spiritual life of millions of Muslims across south Asia and enjoyed by wider audiences of many faiths.

The spiritual songs are a lyrical expression of love with a divine being, kept in time to the beat of Eastern musical instruments such as the "*Tabla*" drums and harmonium. The devotional music, which dates back several

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centuries, is also known as "*the music of the shrines*", and has a special place in the indigenous Islamic faith of the Indian sub-continent.

The early Muslim preachers who came to India tended to assimilate with the local culture, and created a more tolerant and colourful version of the religion, unlike the revivalist creed of today's extremists.

The shrines of those preachers became sites of pilgrimage for followers from across the religious divide, while devotional music and dance, liked equally in the Hindu faith, too, became a part of the ritual. *Qawwali* music had begun as spiritual music performed at the shrines of Sufi saints, but has now become a popular commercial music genre as well.

The Sabri family's association with music dates back to the 17th Century, but Amjad Sabri was the only one among his siblings to take on the mantle of the family tradition. Many of his fans worry that this may be the end of a chapter in *Qawwali* singing.

In the mid-1990s, the Sabri Brothers released "*Ya Mustapha....*" on the American label Xenophile, which paired this *qawwali* party's soulful singing with saxophones. The young Amjad Sabri sings in the chorus of this recording.

Sabri also reached out to audiences through the big screen. He appeared in the 2008 Bollywood drama *Halla Bol....* (Raise Your Voice....).

The Sabri family's own history in *qawwali* goes back centuries. The family claims (though it has been contested) that they are descended from Mian Tansen, a legendary court musician in the service of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, who spread his empire across almost all of the Indian subcontinent in the late 16th century, and whose patronage of the arts and literature were at the heart of a unique Mughal culture.

Like the internationally known titan of *qawwali*, *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan*, the Sabri Brothers recorded for Peter Gabriel's Real World label. Asghari Begum, Amjad Sabri's mother, told the media that approximately six months ago, three men burst open the front door of the family's residence, then left after realizing that the singer was not at home.

The BBC of 23rd June 2016 added:

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"Karachi has never seen so many people come out for a funeral. A river of human faces, from all walks of life, filled up Liaquatabad's main avenue.

One reason for this huge attendance may be because Amjad Sabri was so well known across the country. Sabri was also a friendly character."

Another unusual thing was the presence of women, who are normally never a part of funeral processions. Dozens of women lined up along the pavement and a nearby pedestrian bridge. Several loud announcements were made asking the women to climb down from the bridge as it could break but of no avail; women aged 17 to 70 years were there in that mourning march.

Referring to 'Daily Pakistan' dated 29th June 2016: Sindh Rangers started investigating a promising lead in connection with Amjad Sabri's assassination, claiming that the singer might have been killed for agreeing to perform at a political party's fund raising campaign in the US.

The news was disclosed by renowned journalist Najam Sethi in his GEO TV program *Aapas Ki Baat* of a day earlier. On the show, Sethi revealed that the law enforcement agency had been investigating whether the singer's murder had anything to do with his performance at a Pak Sar Zameen party fund raising campaign in the US.

According to Sethi, Sabri was invited by the PSP to perform in the US at one of its fund-raising events.

Sabri accepted the offer, neglecting warnings given by the London's MQM in Karachi for not performing in the concert; while being a professional who could perform for any party on invitation. According to Sethi, at least one million dollars was collected at the PSP fundraiser, after which Sabri began receiving life threats from unknown persons.

The TTP Hakimullah Mehsud group — aka the Pakistani Taliban [TTP] — claimed responsibility for Sabri's death, saying that they carried out the assassination *"for blasphemy."* Sabri's assassination by the TPP was the latest in a string of high-profile attacks; the group had also been accused of being the force behind the assassination of Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, in December 2007, as well as the infamous shooting of schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in October 2012.

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A few hours after Sabri's murder, gunmen fired at the car of the Sufi Qawal's friend, *Farhan Ali Waris*, a well-known religious personality from the Shiite community, in the Teen Hati area near Liaquatabad.

Waris, known for his rendition of *Nohas* on TV channels, had just got off at his home when the car came under attack by the gunmen on a motorcycle. He later narrated:

"They probably thought I was in the car but fortunately I had got off at my home. My security guard got suspicious when the gunmen approached the car and he opened fire on them and they ran away."

Referring to 'the Nation' dated 30th August 2016 and 'Samaa' TV news of even date:

"...renowned Qawwal Amjad Sabri was killed by a group comprising members of a banned 'Sunni' sectarian outfit and a political party of Karachi for not paying them 'Bhatta' [extortion]."

Two members of the said group who assigned the killers were arrested by a special unit of Karachi police and efforts were on to arrest the real killers. Earlier, it was claimed by media that Imran Siddiqui, an MQM worker and an employee of District Municipal Corporation, was arrested from Surjani Town who confessed to killing Sabri and also revealed the names of his accomplices.

The police, however, corrected and confirmed that Siddiqui was arrested in another case but it was misreported that he was involved in Sabri's murder. The fact remained that some workers of MQM and LeJ, who claimed having connected with the said two outfits, had formed a gang on their own to commit crimes and make money apart from the activities of their original organizations, if true. This group had threatened Amjad Sabri and demanded Rs:50 million extortion and after refusal they killed.

Sources claimed it as Shahzad Mullah; Mullah was former sector in-charge of MQM in Liaquatabad, disclosed that a six-member team, comprising two MQM workers, was formed for that high-profile murder; the suspect's cell phone had also been retrieved. The MQM worker had confessed that he shot dead the noted *qawwal* for not paying extortion to the party.

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A local TV channel claimed that as many as 40 cases had already been registered against Shehzad Mullah.

On 7th November 2016; the actual murderers of celebrated late Qawwali singer Amjad Sabri were arrested, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah announced during a news conference. The Chief Minister Sindh told:

“The CTD headed by Raja Umar Khattab made a major breakthrough and arrested two people from Liaquatabad called Ishaq alias Bobby and Asim alias Capri.

Huge quantity of weapons is also recovered including the weapons used in Sabri’s assassination. After a probe and forensic investigation, we found proof of involvement in 28 cases.

The men are affiliated with the Lashkar e Jhangvi [LeJ] Naeem Bukhari group; there is no affiliation with any political party, it is a proscribed organisation.

Asim alias Capri was Amjad Sabri’s neighbour. We have not found any motive [behind the murder] as yet, but it seems sectarian to us because Sabri used to visit frequent majalis and sama’a gatherings all over the country.”

Meanwhile, Karachi police claimed to have solved four more high-profile cases. Counter Terrorism Department [CTD] carried out raids across Karachi and arrested five criminals who were involved in the murder of police and military police personnel and those who attacked a *Majlis* in the Nazimabad area. A large cache of arms and ammunition was also recovered from the criminals.