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Pakistan denies it allowed US to question bin Laden's widows

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Islamabad - Pakistan on Tuesday denied it had received any formal request from US officials for permission to question three widows of Osama bin Laden.

Bin Laden's two Saudi wives, one Yemeni spouse and several children were captured on May 2 by Pakistani intelligence agencies after US commandoes left his compound in the north-western city of Abbottabad with the al-Qaeda chief's body.

A report on CBS News television Monday in the United States cited US officials as saying that Pakistan had granted their government access to the three widows.

'The USA has not so far formally requested to have access to bin Laden's widows,' Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir said. 'We will consider the issue when they put up a formal request.'

US embassy spokesman Alberto Rodriguez said he was not aware whether the US had requested access to the women.

'I have also seen the media reports, but I have no information,' he said.

Interviews with bin Laden's wives were expected to provide valuable information about who aided the chief terrorist in finding shelter near a Pakistani military academy for five years and also answer the question of whether bin Laden was actively leading al-Qaeda.

Amal al-Sadeh, the youngest of the three widows and a Yemeni national, provided some information during investigations by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, some of which was leaked to the local media.

Dawn newspaper last week cited Pakistani officials as saying al-Sadeh told them bin Laden had left the country's mountainous region along the Afghan border in 2003.

He lived with his family in a small village in Abbottabad's adjoining district of Haripur for two and half years before moving to the compound, his last hideout, where he stayed for five years, it said.

Al-Sadeh, 29, was married to bin Laden in 2000 when she was 18 as his fifth wife and was brought to Kandahar to join her husband, Time magazine reported.

She moved to Yemen after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan, only to return to Pakistan and join bin Laden later on, the report said.

Al-Sadeh was shot in the leg by US soldiers when she tried to defend her husband during the May 2 raid on the hideout.

The other two captured wives have been identified as Umm-e-Hamza and Umm-e-Khalid.

As per Arabic tradition, a mother is named as the mother of the eldest son. Umm-e-Hamza might be the mother of bin Laden's eldest son, Hamza bin Laden, a potential future head of al-Qaeda.

Umm-e-Khalid might be the mother of Osama's son Khalid bin Laden, who died in the US operation together with his father.

Pakistan is making efforts to repatriate bin Laden's widows and children back to their respective countries.

The Yemen Times reported Saturday that al-Sadeh would be sent back to her motherland.

Pakistan's deputy ambassador to Yemen, Diyar Khan, told the newspaper that bin Laden's family would be sent back to their home countries when initial inquiries were completed.

Pakistani media reports suggested that Interior Minister Rehman Malik discussed the issue of a possible repatriation of bin Laden's two wives and children with Saudi officials during his visit to Riyadh last week.

There has been no official confirmation of the reports.

Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Ministry said over the weekend that no foreign country had yet made contact with Islamabad for repatriation of bin Laden's family members.