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U.S. State Department says kidnapped reporter is dead

By Juan O. Tamayo
Knight Ridder Newspapers

(KRT) Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal correspondent kidnapped in Pakistan last month as he investigated radical Muslims' links to international terrorist groups, is dead, the U.S. State Department said Thursday.

The U.S. Embassy in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad "has confirmed today that they have received evidence that ... Pearl is dead," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

Boucher gave no details but The Associated Press quoted two U.S. officials as saying the FBI had received a video showing Pearl's body. Pakistani media have reported he was killed during an escape attempt Jan. 31.

Pearl, a 38-year-old native of Princeton, N.J., became the ninth journalist killed while covering the U.S. war on terrorism. The others died in Afghanistan.

Pearl's wife, Mariane, is six months pregnant with the couple's first child.

The publisher of The Wall Street Journal, Peter Kann, said Pearl's murder "is an act of barbarism that makes a mockery of everything Danny's kidnappers claimed to believe in. They claimed to be Pakistani nationalists, but their actions must surely bring shame on all true Pakistani patriots."

From Beijing, President Bush said: "Laura and I and the American people are deeply saddened to learn about the loss of Daniel Pearl's life. We are really sad for his wife and his parents and his friends and colleagues who have been clinging to hopes for weeks that he would be found alive."

In Washington, Attorney General John Ashcroft extended his "heartfelt thoughts and prayers" to Pearl's family.

"Daniel Pearl's murder serves as a stark reminder that the face

of terrorism is brutal and cruel," Ashcroft said in a prepared statement.

"Daniel Pearl devoted his life to the noble pursuit of informing our free and open society. He paid the ultimate sacrifice for his commitment to that freedom."

He pledged to "bring to justice terrorists who kill innocent Americans."

Boucher, at State, called the murder "an outrage" and said the U.S. and Pakistani governments "remain committed to identifying all the perpetrators of this crime and bringing them to justice."

Apparently addressing speculation that Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence agency, long supportive of radical Muslims, had been less than helpful in investigating the kidnapping, Boucher added that Pakistani authorities "made every effort to locate and free Mr. Pearl."

A Stanford University graduate, Pearl joined the financial daily 12 years ago and reported from Washington, London and Paris before he was named South Asia correspondent last year, based in the Indian city of Bombay.

Pakistani security officials and media reports said he ran into trouble when he started rooting around the Pakistani port city of Karachi for possible links between radical Muslims and Richard Reid, accused of trying to detonate a bomb in his sneakers on a Paris-Miami flight in December.

In early January, Pearl met at the Akbar International Hotel in Islamabad's twin city of Rawalpindi with a man who called himself Bashir Ahmad Shabbir, but who was probably Sheikh Omar Saeed, a British-born radical who studied at the London School of Economics and has a record of perpetrating politically motivated violence.

Saeed spent five years in an Indian prison for kidnapping one

American and three Britons for 11 days in 1994 in a bid to force New Delhi to release an imprisoned leader of Mohammed's Army, a Pakistani group fighting Indian rule over disputed Kashmir. Saeed was freed in 1999 after supporters hijacked an Indian jetliner to Afghanistan and threatened to kill its 155 passengers.

"Shabbir" communicated with Pearl by telephone and e-mail for several days, then told him to meet with another man, Imtiaz Siddique, on Jan. 23 at a restaurant in Karachi. It was a trap.

Pearl called his wife after the meeting to say he would be home by 7 p.m. It would be the last time that the French-born daughter of a Dutch father and Cuban mother would hear from him.

Four days later, e-mails from "kidnapper" announced he had been abducted and included photographs of Pearl, an automatic pistol just inches from his head. Two days later, another e-mail with two more photos branded Pearl a CIA spy and threatened to kill him unless the United States freed all Pakistani suspects held at the Guantanamo Navy base, delivered F-16 jets to Pakistan and released Afghanistan's former Taliban ambassador to Islamabad.

But Pakistani police were making progress in the investigation, sometimes using sophisticated techniques to track down the source of the e-mails, sometimes with harsh measures such as jailing a suspect's wife and children until the suspect surrendered.

On Feb. 5, police arrested three Mohammed's Army members who admitted to sending the ransom e-mails from Internet cafes in Karachi, a city of 14 million on the Arabian Sea.

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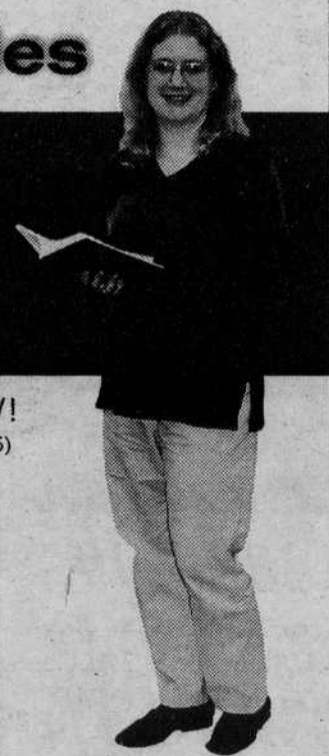
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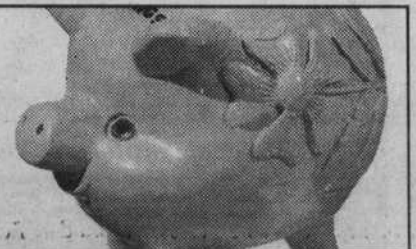
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