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'Sharif met Osama, received funds to topple Benazir'

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Lahore : A former official of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has alleged that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif met Osama bin Laden and received funds from him to topple rival Benazir Bhutto's government.

"Nawaz Sharif met Osama bin Laden on at least three occasions and was desperately seeking financial assistance," Khalid Khawaja told news website Adnkronos International (AKI) in an interview, Pakistan Today reported.

Khawaja, a retired officer of the Pakistan Air Force who was in the ISI in the late 80s, rejected a recent denial by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz that its leader had only sought political cooperation from bin Laden.

"Osama is above all this politicking," said Khawaja, adding: "He is a great man and will remain great."

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal president Qazi Hussain Ahmed had said in a recent interview that Sharif had repeatedly met bin Laden, who had offered him money to topple the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government in 1990.

Khawaja, who developed a friendship with bin Laden while fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, told AKI that the Al Qaeda head wanted the "secular" PPP government overthrown to ensure that Pakistan continued supporting the Afghan jihad.

Khawaja claimed that bin Laden gave him funds, which he personally delivered to Sharif, AKI reported.

"Sharif insisted that I arrange a direct meeting with the 'sheikh', which I did in Saudi Arabia. Nawaz met Osama thrice in Saudi Arabia," Khawaja said. However, he did not indicate when precisely the meeting took place.

Giving a graphic account, he said the "most historic meeting" between the two men was held at the Green Palace Hotel in Madinah. "Osama asked Nawaz to devote himself to 'jehad in Kashmir'. Nawaz immediately said: 'I love jehad.'"

"Osama smiled, and said: 'Yes, you may love jehad, but your love for jehad is this much,' pointing to a small portion of a nearby pillar. 'Your love for your children is this much,' he said, pointing to a larger portion of the pillar. 'And your love for your parents is this much,' he continued, pointing towards the largest portion."

Sharif's weakness for his family members and his family business interests was well known. Khawaja said that such arguments were "beyond the comprehension" of Sharif, who kept asking, in Punjabi, "Manya key nai manya? (Has he agreed or not?)".

The former prime minister was hoping for a grant of Pakistan Rs.500 million. Although bin Laden gave a smaller amount, Khawaja said he arranged for Sharif to meet the Saudi royal family, which pledged political support for him and kept its word until he was dislodged by President Pervez Musharraf in 1999, AKI reported. It was the royal family that secured Sharif's pardon and exile to Saudi Arabia.

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