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Mansoor Ijaz: a super spy struggling with debt

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ISLAMABAD: The first day of cross-examination of the memo issue's principal instigator, Mansoor Ijaz, revealed an unusual profile of the man – a super spy having ties with two-dozen intelligence agencies around the world over a career of 25 years, grappling with litigation over unpaid debt in the United States, in some cases over relatively small amounts.

Zahid Bukhari, counsel for former ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani, pounded Ijaz with questions that Memo Commission head, Justice Faez Issa, initially deemed irrelevant to the memo investigation. But the entire memo affair depended on Mansoor Ijaz's credibility, Bukhari said, and emphasised that the man could not be trusted and needed to be questioned.

While Justice Issa and Mansoor Ijaz wanted to focus solely on the record of BlackBerry Messenger chat messages exchanged between Ijaz and Haqqani, the lawyer wanted to establish that anything put on the record by Ijaz with his own explanation and interpretation must not be accepted prima facie. After all, the chat messages are either cryptic or say nothing explicit pertaining to the memo, he said. Ijaz's efforts to link the former ambassador's chitchat with him to the memo he sent to the US joint chiefs of staff chairman in May 2011 could not succeed, he added.

Ijaz confirmed, in response to a question asked by Bukhari, that he had 'links' with two dozen intelligence services around the world, though he refused to identify the countries whose intelligence services were his friends. He also refused to explain the nature of his contacts. Ijaz acknowledged introducing Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) leader Yasin Malik to the then deputy chief (later chief) of India's RAW, but refuted the assertion that it had been done under false pretences.

“Malik is a liar,” Ijaz said in the same tone in which he describes Haqqani, former US National Security Adviser General James Jones and almost anybody who questions his account of events. But he seemed to be proud of his links with India’s RAW – a fact unlikely to be appreciated by those of his sponsors who see him as somehow defending Pakistan’s interest through revelations about the memo.

Ijaz claimed his secret intelligence-related activities were undertaken as a “private citizen of the US” and he claimed that he paid for his part-time spy work from his own pocket. But Bukhari proceeded to question Ijaz in detail about several judgments against him in New York courts that showed him as lagging behind or unable to pay his debts.

Spies or people with credible links with intelligence services usually avoid litigation. Mansoor Ijaz does not have the kind of money he claims to have, raising questions about why then he acts as a man with intelligence ties, acting behind the scenes to write memos that are routinely discarded.

“Ijaz is an agent of several intelligence agencies and enemies of Pakistan,” Bukhari said, adding he would prove all his charges. “The Memo is Mansoor Ijaz’s brainchild,” he added.

Ijaz admitted that he had defaulted on a payment of \$1.4 million to Banca Sammarinese de Ivestimento (BSI) of San Marino and had been charged with fraud by the bank in a New York court. He said the fraud charges were false, giving a long explanation that blamed the bank for lending him more than it was allowed to. He said the court judgement simply asked him to pay the money he accepted he owed, and did not pronounce him criminal in the fake case against him. But Ijaz accepted he had still not paid the \$1.4 million he owed Banca Sammarinese, though the court judgement was made in 2010.

Ijaz also admitted he owed \$2 million on his apartment to a mortgage company in New York, where his ex-wife and daughter live, and that he was under court orders about another \$160,000 on account of the same property, but that was “a family matter” so he would not discuss it. Bukhari read a list of other court orders against Ijaz over non-payment of various dues, but the self-proclaimed tycoon said he did not know of all cases against him as a trustee handled his financial matters. He did not deny the inference that he faced many challenges to his tycoon image.

Bukhari, however, did not ask the obvious questions, “If you face court orders over unpaid debts, why and how do you spend your time writing memos on foreign policy and pursuing claims relating to them? And what is that career of 25 years that renders you incapable of paying your debts, while pretending to be a citizen diplomat?”

The counsel asked Ijaz about an article he had written on May 3, 2011, in the Financial Times, in which he had accused the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of protecting and backing Osama bin Laden. Ijaz accepted he did so, without seeing the irony of how, after saying that, he could justify working with ISI Director General Ahmed Shuja Pasha to condemn Husain Haqqani. But such contradictions do not seem to bother Ijaz. Bukhari made the point that Ijaz accused the ISI to get his name in the media and then agreed to cooperate with it, again for publicity.

“Pakistan and ISI acted like ‘babysitter’ for Osama Bin Laden,” Ijaz read out from his article. “Pakistan has almost certainly acted as a knowing babysitter, watching over the terror master so he (Osama bin Laden) would do no further harm –as long as the babysitting fees were sufficient and recurring,” he continued.

Ijaz tried to turn the tables on Haqqani by saying the former ambassador had agreed with the contents of the said article, once again referring to BlackBerry chats as evidence.

He also said at one point that “Haqqani, on at least three to four occasions during telephonic conversations, had told me that he (Haqqani) knew everything in my CIA file,” suggesting the former ambassador had his own intelligence links. But like many of his claims about alleged telephone conversations, this one too is unlikely to be proved.

Bukhari also pointed out that most of Ijaz’s articles were against Pakistan’s nuclear programme and its intelligence agencies, which brings into question his motive in accusing President Zardari and Ambassador Haqqani over the memo issue.

Ijaz’s confrontational style on this subject is unlikely to win him many friends among Pakistanis. On another matter, he backtracked from his earlier claim and said whatever he had stated about the US raid in Abbottabad on May 2, might not be correct. “I received a secret transcript, which I forwarded to the commission,” Ijaz said, adding that he was not sure about the authenticity of the information of the said transcript. But the willingness to present as evidence an unauthenticated document he got in the email, where many hoaxes routinely circulate, do not make Mansoor Ijaz seem very credible either.

Ijaz had said in his testimony on March 1 that there was possibility of a military coup in Pakistan after the United States (US) military operation in Abbottabad and Husain Haqqani’s fears in that regard were not baseless. He had also said that he had a ‘transcript’, what he then claimed to be an intelligence report, carried the data of conversation between Pakistani air traffic control and the pilots of US helicopters that carried out Abbottabad Operation. But now he acknowledges the document is unauthentic.

In the course of the cross-examination, Ijaz ended up supporting Haqqani’s assertion that he (Haqqani) could not present his BlackBerry PIN code without finding his discarded handsets. This led to a chuckle in the courtroom, with Haqqani remarking that “at least on this issue Ijaz is telling the truth.”

Bukhari wondered aloud why Ijaz retained his discarded BlackBerry sets even after having replaced them. “Unless he planned to use them for the purpose of making accusations, why would anyone retain and backup BBM chat on a handset that he had stopped using?” he asked. Most people throw or give away an old mobile phone handset once they acquire a new one. “Why didn’t Ijaz?”