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Pakistan: CIA man has no immunity

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A Pakistani court has said a CIA contractor facing trial over the fatal shooting of two men does not have diplomatic immunity.

The court in the eastern city of Lahore also adjourned hearing of the case where Raymond Davis, 36, is being tried until March 8.

Thursday's decision is at least a temporary blow to the US, which insists Davis was considered a diplomat and was acting in self-defence against the dead men, whom he called robbers.

The US had retained a retired judge, Zahid Hussain Bokhari, who is also a former government prosecutor, to help with the Davis case.

The issue of immunity is also being considered by the Lahore high court, which could override the trial court's decision.

Asad Manzoor Butt, a lawyer for the families of the two men, said: "The court adjourned the hearing until March 8 because Mr Bokhari [the retired judge] said he needs time to complete papers for the case."

The case has further inflamed anti-American sentiment in Pakistan and is testing the often-strained ties between the allies.

Last month an influential US senator, John Kerry, apologised to the Pakistani government over the shooting but Barack Obama, the US president, has said Davis enjoys diplomatic immunity under the Vienna Conventions.

"We expect Pakistan ... to abide by the same convention," Obama said.

Along with the two men Davis shot, a third Pakistani was killed when struck by a US car rushing to aid the American on January 27 in Lahore.

The US embassy in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, has yet to comment on the decision.

The decision came a day after Pakistani Taliban fighters shot dead a government minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, who was also the only Christian in the cabinet, for his criticism of a law that mandates the death penalty for insulting Islam.

Religious parties, which have been campaigning vociferously to prevent any reform of the blasphemy law, have also called for Davis to be hanged.

Suicide bombing

In other news from Pakistan, a suicide car bomb targeting police killed at least nine people and wounded 30 others in a troubled northwestern town on Thursday, police said.

"The bomber ... blew himself up when a police patrol went close to the car for a security check in Hangu town," Abdul Rasheed, a senior local police official, told the AFP news agency.

"Six people including three policemen were killed and 30 wounded in the attack, which targeted the police."

Rasheed said the bomber was carrying some 300kg of explosives in his vehicle which he blew up in the middle of a densely populated area of Hangu, which lies some 150km south of Peshawar.

He said that the impact of the blast destroyed 10 houses.

Hangu has a history of sectarian clashes between Pakistan's majority Sunni Muslims and the minority Shias and is located near the tribal belt.

Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked fighters attack daily across northwest Pakistan and the tribal belt on the Afghan border that the US has branded the most dangerous place on earth.