

The needle and the damage done: Abbottabad Commission on CIA's bogus vaccination campaign

by Robin Davies

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Al Jazeera has obtained and on 8 July [published](#) [pdf] in full the final report of the [Abbottabad Commission](#), which was appointed by the government of Pakistan to investigate how Osama bin Laden came to be living unnoticed in the city of Abbottabad in northeastern Pakistan, and how the US was able to mount a successful assault on his compound on the night of 1-2 May 2011. Media summaries of the report's findings have highlighted its scathing criticism of "the incompetence and negligence of Pakistan's intelligence and security services", as well as bin Laden's apparent belief that wearing a cowboy hat in the garden would make him less conspicuous to passing drones.

The report also covers the unhappy matter of the CIA's use of a [fake hepatitis B vaccination campaign](#) in an attempt, reportedly unsuccessful, to gain DNA samples from people in the compound. The campaign was run by a Pakistani doctor named Shakil (or Shakeel) Afridi, subsequently jailed for treason (ostensibly for offences unrelated to the US raid). Afridi is a [colourful](#) character and, according to the commission itself, an unreliable witness. However, it is not in dispute that Afridi was recruited by the CIA to run the vaccination campaign. This has been acknowledged by senior US administration figures, including the then Defense Secretary [Leon Panetta](#).

Afridi claimed in testimony to the commission, a transcript of which was [leaked](#) last year, that his recruitment by a CIA operative was facilitated by the then country director for Save the Children, an Australian national. Save the Children has vehemently [denied](#) this, including in testimony to the commission from its current country director. There appears to be no evidence for Afridi's allegation, or for his related claim that he was employed by Save the Children in Pakistan. Much of his testimony on other points is contradictory, implausible and similarly unsupported by evidence.

General statements by others testifying before the commission also included allegations against NGOs and/or USAID—though of a more sweeping kind. According to the testimony of the Director-General of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), "there was clear evidence, despite the US ban [on using NGOs for clandestine activities], that the CIA still used many NGOs, including

Save the Children, for its activities. The CIA was extremely worried that its nexus with NGOs might be publicly exposed. In fact the Director CIA had personally requested the DG ISI not to expose Save the Children's role in its activities in Pakistan." (p. 201) And, according to Pakistan's Secretary of Defence, "the CIA operated in diverse ways including cultivation of human resources, using contractors, NGOs, multinational companies, USAID programs, intelligence personnel in the guise of diplomats, etc." (p. 221)

Though the entire body of the commission's report adduces nothing in particular as evidence against Save the Children, or for that matter against other NGOs or USAID, it still finds that "the US government's decision to allow the CIA to use USAID which in turn used Save the Children in Pakistan for the planning of the US assassination mission of May 2, has done incalculable harm to the environment in which perfectly respectable and indeed renowned NGOs seek to assist the government in discharging its development and humanitarian obligations to the people of Pakistan". (p. 329) On this basis, it recommends that "the security establishment" should in future be involved in the process of foreign NGO registration and the vetting of proposed NGO international staff appointments (p. 124)

Whatever the facts of the matter—and it should be emphatically underlined that there is no evidence of involvement by foreign NGOs or by USAID in facilitating preparations for the US assault on bin Laden's compound—the Abbottabad Commission is quite right about one thing. Incalculable harm has been done to the reputation of development agencies everywhere as a result of the US government's decision, publicly-acknowledged and in some quarters **celebrated**, to gather intelligence by means of a bogus vaccination campaign. If there were any doubt about this, it need only be pointed out that the government of Pakistan has recently had to **suspend** a UN-supported polio vaccination campaign in northwestern Pakistan, following attacks on health workers whom militants allege to be spying for the US.

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