Why is Bush refusing to negotiate with the Taliban?

Jerry White
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President Bush is flatly rejecting offers from the Taliban government to hand Osama bin Laden over for trial if the United States stops bombing Afghanistan and provides proof that the Saudi exile was involved in the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington.

On Sunday, Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Maulvi Abdul Kabir told a group of international journalists in Jalalabad that if the US stopped bombing Afghanistan, "We would be ready to hand him over." Kabir called for negotiations, saying, "If proof is provided, a third country could be chosen which is under the influence of neither the United States nor the Taliban."

Bush rejected the offer out of hand. Speaking to reporters on Sunday, just minutes after returning with top national security advisers from his Camp David retreat, Bush declared, "They must not have heard. There are no negotiations. This is non-negotiable."

This is not the first offer the Taliban leadership has made to negotiate the possible transfer of bin Laden. On the eve of the war, the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, said bin Laden would be handed over if proof of his involvement in the terror attacks were presented. Bush rejected that offer and proceeded to launch the bombing campaign.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* reported that a faction of the Taliban leadership had met secretly with Pakistani officials the day before and said they would try to negotiate the handover of bin Laden if the US stopped bombing for two or three days. The *Times* reported, however, that Pakistani and US officials were doubtful the overture would resolve the crisis because Bush "has said repeatedly that he will not negotiate, or even discuss, terms for the handover of Mr. bin Laden."

At the onset of the crisis, the US government said it was preparing to launch a war against Afghanistan because the Taliban refused to surrender bin Laden. Yet when the Afghan regime makes reasonable offers to do precisely that, the US response is to dismiss the offers and reject any form of negotiation.

From a purely practical standpoint, the issuing of demands combined with a posture of "no negotiations" is absurd. Even if the Taliban wanted to meet the US demands, how could they do so without entering into discussions with Washington? The US modus operandi of presenting ultimatums while refusing to negotiate can only mean that the Bush administration is not seriously interested in obtaining compliance. It is acting in bad faith.

The Taliban has asked for proof of bin Laden's involvement in the September 11 attacks. What is unreasonable about insisting that the US back up its claims by presenting solid evidence? Some two weeks prior to launching the war, Secretary of State Colin Powell promised to make public an evidentiary case against the man whom the US accuses of masterminding last month's attacks. But the Bush administration reneged on this pledge.

One can only imagine the response of the American government if another country demanded that it hand over a US resident on murder charges, while refusing to disclose its evidence against the person in question.

Speaking on the White House lawn Sunday, Bush reiterated his position that the US is not obliged to provide any proof of bin Laden's involvement. "There is no need to discuss innocence or guilt," he said. "We know he's guilty. Turn him over. If they want us to stop our military operations, they've just got to meet my conditions," Bush said.

In other words, not only the Taliban, but the entire world must accept on faith Washington's accusations against bin Laden. But the world has every right to ask:

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if you have the evidence, why don't you show it?

There is no question that bin Laden welcomed the September 11 attacks. This in itself establishes the deeply reactionary and anti-working class character of his ultra-nationalist politics. It does not, however, prove that he is responsible for the hijack-bombings that killed more than 5,000 people.

The Bush administration has not explained on what grounds of international law it is demanding that a government hand over an individual to the US without any form of due process. In crimes far less significant than the September 11 attacks, the police are required to obtain warrants, present evidence, etc. In this case, whose dimensions should demand the most scrupulous observation of legal norms and the most meticulous investigation of the facts, Bush insists there is no need to discuss bin Laden's innocence or guilt, and demands he be handed over simply on the US president's say-so. This is the type of ultimatum colonial governments used to issue to their possessions in Africa and Asia.

The US maintains a double-standard when it comes to its own international responsibilities. Washington upholds as a basic principle that it is not bound by the provisions of the World Court, nor obligated to hand over any of its citizens to face criminal charges at The Hague. In 1986 the World Court ruled that the US had violated international law by mining the waters of Nicaragua and arming the Contras. The US simply ignored the ruling, saying the World Court had no jurisdiction in the matter.

In addition to the handing over of bin Laden, Bush has issued a series of demands that the Taliban cannot possibly meet. This includes giving the US "full access" to what it claims are terrorist training camps, i.e., allowing the US to militarily occupy Afghanistan. Knowing the Taliban cannot accede to such a demand, the Bush administration intends to achieve its aim of occupying the country by dropping bombs, carrying out assassinations and terrorizing the Afghan population.

The latest actions of the Bush administration underscore the fact that the events of September 11, however horrendous, are not the cause of the US military intervention in Central Asia. Rather, they have been used as a pretext.

The American government is pursuing a different agenda than the one it has presented to the people of the US and the world. It has seized upon last month's tragedy to implement longstanding plans to impose American hegemony in the oil-rich region. The last thing the White House wants is a deal with the Taliban that could undercut these aims.

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