

Musharaff gives go-ahead for US military operations in Pakistan

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Under intense pressure from Washington, Pakistan's military strongman General Pervez Musharraf has given the green light for US troops to operate inside the country alongside local army forces in pursuing so-called Al Qaeda and Taliban suspects.

The first operation on April 26 was a joint raid on a religious school in Darpa Khel village in northwestern Pakistan near the Afghan border. According to Pakistani officials, 24 US Special Forces soldiers, backed by Apache attack helicopters, joined some 200 paramilitary troops in storming a seminary founded by the Taliban's former Tribal Affairs Minister, Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani. Five people were detained for "suspected links" to the Taliban or Al Qaeda.

The raid provoked an angry response from local tribesmen who have close links with ethnic Pashtuns in the south and east of Afghanistan. A group of several hundred demonstrated in front of a government office to protest the military operation. A local cleric Maulvi Abdul Hafeez told *Associated Press*: "In order to prevent these kinds of raids in future, we have started consulting other tribal elders and clerics. We will not let the American forces operate in our areas."

The Pentagon did not officially confirm the US military activity inside Pakistan. Nevertheless, the raid coincided with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's trip to the region and came one day after he warned that the US would not allow Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters to flee across Afghanistan's borders. The day after the raid he told a group of US and allied soldiers at the Bagram air base north of Kabul that he regarded Afghanistan as "a proving ground" for the US military. "The Afghanistan theatre has been the first one, but it won't be the last," he said.

The US administration had been pushing for more than a month for American forces to be permitted to operate in Pakistan. Major General Franklin Hagenbeck, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, publicly called for US troops to have the right of "hot pursuit" across the Pakistani border. He was speaking in March in the aftermath of Operation Anaconda in eastern Afghanistan, during which hundreds of alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters, along with a number of civilians, were killed.

Hagenbeck's proposal immediately provoked protests from

the tribal areas in Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan. Not only are there strong ethnic ties with Afghan tribesmen across the border but these regions have previously enjoyed a degree of political autonomy. The Federally Administered Tribal Area consists of seven tribal agencies with their own councils, courts and law to administer an estimated five million people. Pakistani troops were only permitted into the areas last December through a mixture of bribes and bullying.

Local leaders warned against any US troops entering the area. A tribal chief Shakirullah Jan Kokikhel told the *New York Times* that the US invasion of Afghanistan had provoked considerable opposition. A number of his men had crossed the border to fight on the Taliban side. "Unfortunately, we did not have the means and resources to fight such a large and sophisticated army like the Americans," he said, adding: "There was a time, when Russia was in power, we liked Americans. Now we hate Americans."

Musharraf, whose hold on political power remains tenuous, was concerned about the potential backlash from Pashtun tribesmen. By abandoning the Taliban regime and supporting US attacks on Afghanistan, he has already eroded his own power base—in the military and among Islamic fundamentalist groups. At the same time, however, Musharraf cannot afford to alienate the Bush administration, which has provided his regime with significant economic and political backing.

US pressure for Musharraf to act intensified after a hand grenade attack on a Protestant church in Islamabad in March, which killed five people, including two Americans. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca immediately flew to Pakistan to meet Musharraf, cutting short a trip to India. The head of the US Central Command, General Tommy Franks, also met the Pakistani leader in the same week.

The character of the discussions was indicated in the US media, which questioned Musharraf's sincerity in reining in fundamentalist groups. A number of articles pointed to the release of detained Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad leaders and their followers, as well as the Pakistani leader's failure to implement a promised crackdown on Islamic religious schools. It soon became apparent that Musharraf was compelled to make further concessions in his talks with Rocca and Franks.

In particular, the Pakistani authorities gave a free hand to the FBI and CIA to hunt down suspects. On March 27, FBI and Pakistani security forces arrested senior Al Qaeda leader Abu Zubaidah, along with others, in a raid in a house in Faisalabad. On the basis of documents and computer discs seized, Pakistani officials claimed that Al Qaeda and Taliban were regrouping in the Afghan-Pakistan border areas—vaguely referring to a broad sweep of territory covering three provinces in Afghanistan and four of Pakistan’s seven tribal agencies.

Within Pakistan, the police dragnet has continued. The day after Zubaidah was detained, police raided another “hideout” in the city of Lahore and arrested another 40 Al Qaeda “suspects”. According to an *Associated Press* report, about 100 people had been rounded up, with some of the raids directly involving CIA and FBI agents. The arrests, particularly of Zubaidah, added to the pressure on Musharraf to agree to US military operations inside Pakistan to prevent any “regroupment”.

An article in *USA Today* on April 18 gave details of extensive aid to Pakistani security forces on the border with Afghanistan. “[A] Justice Department team is rolling out a \$73 million program to strengthen and integrate the disparate forces along the frontier Afghanistan. Those forces include 28,000 provincial and tribal police and 12,000 army troops,” it stated.

The US assistance was reported to include all-terrain vehicles, helicopters, radio communications gear and criminal-investigation training as well as sophisticated electronic surveillance equipment including “global-positioning trackers and software imaging systems, anti-bugging devices, concealed cameras with remote-recording capability, cell phone direction finders, call interceptors and voice analysers.”

The activities of US military and civilian teams inside Pakistan along the border were part of the preparation for the major military operation currently underway in Afghanistan itself, involving around 1,000 US, British and Australian troops. According to one report: “Pakistan... had already been alerted to seal its border along Afghanistan Paktia province. An American communication and intelligence centre has been set up in the tribal area on the Pakistani side to help coordinate the operation.”

A Pentagon official told the *Washington Post*: “Plans for a US-led offensive along the Afghan-Pakistan border call for the Pakistani military and US Special Forces to sweep through villages and mountain passes in western Pakistan, flushing out fugitive Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters and driving them toward US and allied forces waiting across the border.”

Just who is being attacked and killed by the US-led forces is not clear. US officials and media refer to “Al Qaeda and Taliban forces” indiscriminately without any supporting evidence. Those being pursued are just as likely to be local Pashtun tribesmen who have become increasingly hostile to the US presence and the UN-imposed regime in Kabul. Their anger has been heightened by months of US bombing and military

operations that have led to the death of civilians and the destruction of homes.

A journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* writing from Gardez in eastern Afghanistan noted in mid-April: “This is Pashtun country. Many people here are hostile to foreigners and sympathetic to the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. In their view, the Americans are Christian invaders who installed an interim government in Kabul dominated by the Pashtuns’ ethnic rivals, Tajiks from the north... Even with the enemy on the run, the Americans and their Afghan allies are confronting a wellspring of sympathy that allows the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces to feed and arm themselves while they regroup. Unsigned leaflets, known as shabnama, or ‘night letters’ have appeared urging Afghans to kill or kidnap foreign—especially American—journalists, troops or aid workers.”

An article in the *Washington Post* on April 25 reported that US forces were facing a growing number of assaults by small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades by groups of 15 or smaller. “The Al Qaeda attacks frequently are launched from within larger groups of bystanders of the streets of villages and towns such as Khost making the decision to counterattack difficult, officials said.” Sporadic attacks have taken place around Kabul itself including on the airport, forcing US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld to divert to Bagram.

An *Associated Press* article last weekend from Pashtun tribal areas inside Pakistan found growing hostility there in the wake of the April 26 raid on a religious school. “People are very angry. They have closed down the bazaars in Miran Shah before. They don’t want the Americans here. Anything can happen,” a member of the local tribal security force said. At another town, hundreds of heavily armed tribesmen gathered on Saturday to listen to religious leaders. “We will not allow any American or Pakistani soldier to enter our madrassas [religious schools]. It is against our tradition, against our religion,” Mohammed Dinda told his audience.



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