# Pakistan delays sending troops to Iraq

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Nearly a month after agreeing "in principle" to sending troops to Iraq, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has yet to reach a final arrangement with Washington on the "modalities" of such an arrangement. Behind the drawn-out delays are deep concerns in Islamabad over the potential for a Pakistani force to become bogged down in the US-led occupation, triggering opposition at home.

With the number of US casualties from guerrilla attacks in Iraq growing by the day, the Bush administration has been desperate for other countries to send military contingents—both to legitimise and bolster the strength of its military occupation. During his visit to the US in late June, Musharraf agreed to send some 10,000 Pakistani troops to Iraq.

Washington was particularly keen for support from Pakistan, as well as India, because of the size of the contingents proposed. In the case of New Delhi, the US was looking for up to 17,000 troops, which would have made the Indian presence second only to the US itself. US officials have spent considerable time and energy attempting to pressure and bribe both countries into sending soldiers.

After meeting with Bush at Camp David, Musharraf told the media: "He (Bush) did talk of the Iraq dispute, and we did discuss Pakistan troops. In principle, we would agree, but we are looking at the modalities..." Asked about the "modalities," he indicated that one of them was "the financial package"—in other words, how much money Pakistan would be paid for contributing troops.

At the same time, however, Musharraf expressed his concern about the "perception of Muslim world" and the need for some sort of political camouflage. "We need to see if it [sending troops] can take place under the auspices of the UN, or the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) cover or GCE (Gulf Cooperation Council)," he said.

Musharraf has been walking a political tightrope ever since the US invasion of Afghanistan. Desperate to retain Washington's financial and political support, the military strongman withdrew his backing for the Taliban regime in Kabul and opened Pakistani bases to the US military. Since then, he has bowed to US demands for tougher measures to close the Afghan-Pakistani border and to crack down on Islamic fundamentalist groups.

But any dispatch of Pakistani troops to Iraq is likely to lead to escalating political turmoil at home. In the lead-up to the Iraq invasion, millions of people took part in a series of anti-war protests. Because of the opposition, the Pakistani government was compelled to make limited criticisms of the US war plans and did not support a UN resolution legitimising the invasion.

Opposition parties have expressed opposition to sending troops to Iraq. Kushid Ahmed, a leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami, declared that "this is an alarming situation". JI is the leading party in a six-party alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), that made significant gains in last year's national elections and holds power in the governments of the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan—the two provinces neighbouring Afghanistan. The MMA has called for protests and has threatened to organise a "social boycott" of soldiers' families.

The opposition Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also issued a statement criticising any plan to send a military force to Iraq. But it did not rule out eventually agreeing with such a proposal, stating only: "[S]ince the US went into Iraq without the United Nations' sanction, it would have been appropriate for Islamabad to take a decision after necessary debate and discussion, weighing what would be gained and what would be lost."

Caught between appeasing Washington and popular opposition, Musharraf appears to be dragging his feet on making any decision. A report in the *Dawn* newspaper on July 9 indicated that Islamabad was "making efforts to put together an Islamic force advancing the concept of Muslim brotherhood.... Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh and some North African countries are on board." But nothing has eventuated.

New Delhi's decision last week not to send an Indian

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contingent unless it was part of a UN force makes any Pakistani involvement less likely. In part, Musharraf's decision to agree in principle was bound up with the need to counter growing military and strategic ties between the US and rival India. The US had even offered to place an Indian force in command of northern Iraq and to station a senior Indian officer at US Central Command in Tampa, Florida. With any Indian involvement off the immediate agenda, Musharraf is no longer under the same pressure to match New Delhi.

The governments in both countries are nervous about committing troops to what is more and more nakedly a neo-colonial occupation of Iraq. There are bitter recollections throughout the subcontinent of the way in the British used Indian troops as cannon fodder in its wars.

During the First World War, some 1.5 million people were sent as "volunteers" to the war front from the British colonies on the Indian subcontinent. Some 700,000 of these soldiers were sent to seize and protect oil fields in the Middle East. About 12,000 troops, including about 10,000 Indian soldiers, were killed in Kut in 1916 as part of British operations to seize Mesopotamia, then a province of the Ottoman Empire.

Another 31,000 soldiers died in the four-year campaign to establish British dominance over what became Iraq. During 1920s, at least 1,000 Indian and Arab soldiers died during British operations to suppress resistance to its occupation. India was dotted with the funeral pyres of dead soldiers whose bodies were being returned from the Middle East.

The last thing that Vajpayee or Musharraf want to do is to rekindle these colonial memories by committing troops to a deeply unpopular US occupation of Iraq—particularly one that is protracted and dangerous.

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