

# US launches huge military operation to capture bin Laden

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In a desperate bid to produce a public relations “success” in the war on terrorism before the US presidential election, the Bush administration is orchestrating a major land and air military offensive on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with the professed aim of capturing top Al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden.

With Bush’s poll ratings plummeting, the White House is anxious to register an apparent victory, no matter how illusory, in order to divert the deepening hostility to the destruction of jobs and social conditions at home, and to the worsening quagmire confronting US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But its stepped-up aggression is likely to further fuel popular resistance to US forces in Afghanistan, as well as the tottering puppet administration headed by Hamid Karzai in Kabul and the widely hated Pakistani military regime of General Pervez Musharraf.

According to US military officials, the spring offensive will climax in April or May. It seeks to create a “hammer-and-anvil” effect to trap Al Qaeda fighters between US forces operating from the Afghan side and Pakistani troops advancing from the semi-autonomous tribal lands that extend along the north-western Pakistan border.

Lieutenant-Colonel Matthew Beevers, a US military spokesman in Kabul, told journalists last week that a “renewed sense of urgency” is firing the search for bin Laden. His comments followed earlier military claims that bin Laden had been forced across the border from Pakistan, was now “boxed in” and would be captured before the end of the year.

On the Afghan side of the mountainous border region, the Pentagon is deploying elements of the 11,000 troops it has in Afghanistan as well as a secret commando unit from Iraq. Known as Task Force 121, it consists of Army Delta Force soldiers and Navy SEALs, transported on helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Military sources have credited the unit with last December’s seizure of Saddam Hussein. They told reporters its assigned task is to move into the mountains, practice missions and wait for military and CIA intelligence to provide the locations of targets.

Coalition troops have already begun house-to-house searches in the town of Khost and its outskirts, with reports appearing in the region’s media that many suspects have been rounded up. The main immediate targets of the operations are said to be Afghan resistance leaders Jalaluddin Haqqani and Saifullah Mansoor and their followers, estimated to number between 2,000 and 2,500, spread across the Khost, Paktia, Paktika and Gardez areas of north-eastern Afghanistan.

Citing “well-placed sources,” *Asia Times* has reported that in coming weeks, the operation “is gradually expected to increase in intensity and size” and spread to all major Afghan cities including Jalalabad, Asadabad, Gardez, Zabul and Kandahar. The newspaper

described it as a looming “all-out war”.

Reports in Britain’s *Sunday Express* claimed that US and British troops were also hunting for bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar in an area across the border near Pakistan’s Baluchistan province. Pakistan’s armed forces rejected suggestions that any foreign troops were operating in the country. Residents of Pakistan’s North West Province, however, have witnessed US “spy” plane flights over the region, giving credence to media reports that Musharraf’s government has allowed the US to use air bases, including Kohat and Bannu, for surveillance purposes.

Under intense pressure from Washington, Musharraf has massed more than 70,000 troops along the 2,500-kilometre border region, escalating attacks on local villages and preparing for a large-scale assault. The mobilisation includes paramilitary forces, regular soldiers and specially trained commandos, Pakistan’s military spokesman General Shaukat Sultan said. Their current searches are focussed on South and North Waziristan, two of the seven tribal regions that have for years been virtual “no-go areas” for Pakistan’s military.

In a glimpse of what is to come, the US military praised the Pakistani army for a sweep through three villages, Karkai, Kaloosha and Azam, near the town of Wana, some 250 kilometres west of Pakistan’s capital Islamabad, last week. Troops, backed by artillery and helicopter gunships, conducted house-to-house searches and blew up houses to punish uncooperative villagers who refused to hand over suspects.

Commandos detained 25 alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban supporters, and interrogated them throughout the night. Pakistani authorities later disowned initial reports, citing diplomatic sources, that a son of Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of bin Laden’s associates, was among the detainees.

The Pakistani military said the operation was launched after militants had ignored a February 20 deadline to surrender. Musharraf’s regime is using methods pioneered by the British army and colonial authorities during their military campaigns in Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Whole tribes have been threatened with repercussions for failing to give up fugitives, a variant of tactics used by the British.

Opposition politicians condemned the raid, accusing Musharraf of breaking a longstanding understanding to respect the autonomy of the tribal territories and of compromising national sovereignty to appease Washington. Liaqt Baloch, deputy president of the conservative Islamic party Jamaat-I-Islami, said: “It is very dangerous. We always think that in the tribal regions we can depend on [local] loyalty, but after this action they could turn against Pakistan.”

Baloch echoed the belief of many Pakistanis that the military assault

is designed to produce an intelligence success ahead of the US elections in November. "There's a strong link between the activity in the tribal areas and the US election," he said. "This isn't anti-terrorism; it's just a political action to bolster support for Bush in the United States."

Hamid Gul, a retired general who headed Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency during the late 1980s, said Musharraf was giving up some of Pakistan's sovereignty in the hope of preventing US troops from being used in hot pursuit across the Afghan border. "Pervez Musharraf is trying to preempt [hot pursuit] by showing the US: 'Look we're doing everything we can here'".

In an attempt to ward off such criticism, Musharraf made a remarkable comment last week, alluding to the pressure being applied by Washington. He told religious leaders that Pakistan had to cooperate with the US to avoid becoming a target of the war on terrorism. Here was a risk that the US "would start bombing" Pakistan if the country continued to be perceived as one that harboured terrorists, he said.

His remarks point to the backroom intimidation and bullying being employed by the Bush administration in order to push Musharraf's already unstable regime into launching the unprecedented military operations throughout the frontier region. Four previous military operations in the tribal lands in the wake of September 2001 met stubborn resistance.

Musharraf's complicity in the US operation helps explain why the White House has thus far continued to support the Pakistani military following last month's statement that its chief scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, had marketed the country's nuclear weapons technology to countries such as Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Some in US ruling circles have berated Bush for his blatant double standard in invading Iraq, ostensibly to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, while excusing Pakistan. A February 6 editorial in the *Washington Post* expressed disbelief that Bush had not imposed sanctions on Pakistan. "Stopping Pakistan's proliferation is vital to US security," it insisted. "It cannot be left to Mr Musharraf to decide how or whether it will be done."

But, as the *Post* editorial observed, Bush's dilemma is that he has banked his entire policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan on Musharraf.

The timing of the US-instigated military campaign appears to be driven by several factors. One is the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, where attacks by Taliban and other resistance groups are escalating. Recent months have seen an upsurge in attacks on aid workers and reconstruction contractors, with more than 550 civilians killed since August. Large areas of the south and west are under Taliban or warlord control, forcing Western agencies to confine their activities largely to Kabul and Kandahar.

Last Wednesday, just a day after the launching of the raids on either side of the border, five people working on a UN-sponsored election project were killed in an ambush about 25 kilometres north of Kabul. Two gunmen stopped a car carrying eight employees of the Sanayee Development Foundation, a non-government organisation (NGO) that had been working in the area for six months to set up a local shura, or consultative forum, as part of efforts to stage elections across the country in June.

A UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) spokesman Manoel de Almeida e Silva described it as "one more of these security incidents that are absolutely unacceptable". Barbara Stapleton, advocacy officer of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, said: "This is an extremely serious incident which is very, very

shocking to the NGO community.... This is very worrying in the lead up to elections that seem to be being pushed ahead, come what may, in a society which is highly militarised and in which a security vacuum exists."

It was the worst such attack since the overthrow of the Taliban government in late 2001, and came just hours before US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Afghanistan for talks on security issues with US commanders, NATO peacekeeping officers and acting president Karzai.

Despite Washington's claims to be making progress in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld flew into Kandahar and Kabul under tight security. His C-130 aircraft made steep "tactical" descents to avoid possible threats from shoulder-fired missiles, heavily-armed Apache helicopters circled overhead and military vehicles blocked off roads.

Two days earlier, armed groups opened fire on a helicopter crew and passengers working for the Louis Berger Group, a US aid contractor, near the southern city of Kandahar, killing the Australian pilot, Mark Burdorf. Berger's major contract is the repair of the 500-kilometre road from Kabul to Kandahar, a project that is vital for military as well as civilian purposes. According to eye-witness accounts, the gunmen acted with the evident support of local residents.

The lack of security is further exposing the fraud of the Bush administration's claims that democratic president and parliamentary elections will be conducted in June. Voter registration is meant to be taking place under the guns of US troops, augmented by 6,000 NATO "peacekeepers" who are helping to prop up the beleaguered Karzai administration. But public support is so low that since December UN agencies have registered only about 1 million of the country's 10.5 million eligible voters.

In January's State of the Union address, setting the tone for his re-election campaign, Bush declared that almost two-thirds of the known leadership of Al Qaeda had been either captured or killed. His boast was central to his assertion that the war on terrorism had "made the world a safer place". The bid to capture or kill bin Laden is clearly aimed at providing a further boost to Bush's electoral fortunes.

Washington's "war on terrorism" was never about making the world a safer place. The Bush administration utilised the September 11 attacks on the US to advance longheld ambitions to dominate Central Asia and the Middle East through the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In the process it has only heightened the danger of further conflict and war and enabled Islamic fundamentalists, such as bin Laden, to exploit the deep-seated hatred felt by many in the region to US militarism and neo-colonialism.



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