

US seeks Pakistani military support for Afghan and Iraqi occupations

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Bogged down in a deepening quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration has made a series of appeals to Pakistan for military and political assistance in both countries. However, any steps by President Pervez Musharraf to accede to the US requests will only further fuel opposition within Pakistan and compound the political difficulties his regime confronts.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca issued the demands during her visit to Pakistan and the region last week. It was Rocca's second visit to Islamabad in three months. The previous one in March was with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, highlighting the degree to which the Bush administration is relying on the military strongman Musharraf.

The first item on Rocca's agenda was to call for further Pakistani military assistance in preventing guerrillas opposed to the US-backed regime in Kabul from operating along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The Bush administration is not only concerned about the continuing attacks on US and other troops in Afghanistan but is desperate for a "victory" in the so-called war on terrorism. According to US intelligence, high-level Al Qaeda members, including Osama bin Laden and his alleged lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri, are hiding in the mountainous border areas.

At Washington's insistence, the Pakistani military mounted a huge operation involving more than 70,000 heavily-armed troops in the tribal border areas in February and March. The aim was to capture or kill "foreign" and "Al Qaeda" fighters, or drive them across the border into Afghanistan, where thousands of US troops were mobilised. However, the operation proved to be a disaster: no major Al Qaeda figures were captured, officially at least 50 Pakistani troops were killed in fierce fighting with local tribal militia, and a number of officers and soldiers refused to fight.

The operation stirred up sharp opposition in these semi-autonomous areas, which traditionally have been out-of-bounds to the Pakistani security forces. In a face-saving measure, Musharraf reached an agreement with local tribal leaders on April 25 to register foreigners, who would be

allowed to stay in the tribal areas as long as they agreed to end resistance activities in Afghanistan. To date, no foreign fighters have been registered.

Washington has been critical of the plan and of Pakistan's failure to do more to hunt down opponents of the Kabul regime. Rocca's visit coincided with another statement made by the US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalizad objecting to the "continued presence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan". According to the *Dawn* newspaper, Rocca called on Musharraf to implement "a viable strategy to take care of the problem of foreign fighters" in tribal areas.

In the wake of Rocca's visit, the Pakistani army is again deploying troops to the border areas. An article in the *Asia Times* this week commented: "Fresh contingents of Pakistani armed forces have been sent to Wana (South Waziristan), Miranshah (North Waziristan) and Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan in North West Frontier Province, but officials close to the military say they fear they are 'walking into a death trap'...

"The official figure for casualties in the [earlier] South Waziristan operation is 50 soldiers killed, but conversations with tribals in the area—even allowing for exaggeration—indicate this figure could be 10 times higher... Stories abound of Pakistani officials being kidnapped, although the government has only confirmed 12. Scores were released after negotiations."

Facing a deteriorating political and military situation in Iraq, Rocca revived the US call for a "contribution of Pakistani troops to the international coalition force for Iraq". Last June, Musharraf agreed "in principle" to the dispatch of 10,000 soldiers to Iraq but, as opposition inside Pakistan mounted, backed away from the promise, insisting that the occupation be placed under UN control. Commenting on the latest request, Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan declared that "sending troops to Iraq now is a non-issue".

Rocca also urged Musharraf to support a UN Security Council resolution being proposed to legitimise the so-called handover of Iraqi sovereignty due to take place on June 30.

Washington needs Pakistan's vote as a current non-permanent member of the Security Council. More broadly, the Bush administration is desperately looking for any political support for its neo-colonial occupation of Iraq, particularly from a Muslim nation.

Musharraf's backing for the "war on terrorism" has, however, already provoked widespread opposition inside Pakistan. In the 2002 general elections, the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) made significant gains by exploiting the anger at the US military intervention in Afghanistan and the impending invasion of Iraq. The hostility was particularly marked in the border areas, where the MMA now controls two of the provincial assemblies.

In a speech at the University of Pennsylvania before her visit, Rocca referred to the political price being paid by Musharraf. "Pakistan's cooperation in the global war on terror has had costs for Islamabad and for the country's social fabric," she declared. Washington has offered a number of bribes to Musharraf, who is presiding over a deteriorating economy and growing social polarisation. Rocca indicated that President Bush would ask Congress for the first \$600 million of a five-year \$3 billion assistance package for Pakistan. The White House is also proceeding with plans to make Pakistan a major non-NATO ally—a status that qualifies countries for US military assistance.

Just as important from Musharraf's standpoint, the Bush administration has dropped all criticisms of the military strongman's anti-democratic methods. General Musharraf ousted the elected government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif and seized power in a military coup in 1999. After Sharif was tried and jailed on a series of trumped-up charges, the former prime minister was eventually permitted to go into exile with his family.

Over the past five years, Musharraf has sought to consolidate his position through a series of undemocratic constitutional changes that concentrate sweeping powers in the office of the president. The elections in 2002 were widely regarded as rigged.

Last month, Musharraf pushed the National Security Council bill (NSC) through parliament. The NSC is part of the Legal Framework Ordinance (LFO) aimed at legitimising the dictatorship. Musharraf promised the MMA last year that he would stand down as head of the army. But as chairman of the NSC, which is dominated by the military heads, he will continue to wield considerable power, including the ability to dissolve parliament.

While Washington initially offered token criticisms of the military coup, even these were ended after Musharraf in 2001 dropped Islamabad's previous support for the Taliban regime and actively backed the US military operations in

Afghanistan. In a bid to further boost Musharraf, the US is now urging the British Commonwealth countries to overturn their 1999 decision to expel Pakistan.

The Bush administration turns a blind eye to the flagrant abuse of democratic rights in Pakistan. Significantly, on the same day that Rocca arrived in Islamabad, the regime deported Shahbaz Sharif, the brother of the deposed prime minister and president of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), just hours after he landed in Pakistan. According to the *Dawn* newspaper, the US State Department admitted it had been informed but declined to comment, declaring the deportation to be an "internal matter".

Pakistani security forces baton-charged and tear-gassed PML-N members who had come to the Lahore airport to show their support for Shahbaz. More than a thousand were arrested. The *Nation* newspaper commented that "the government reaction created the impression that Shahbaz was an earthquake, which might well topple it". So tenuous is Musharraf's hold on power that he fears any opposition.

On April 22, Makhdoom Javed Hashmi was sentenced to a 23-year jail term and fined 42,000 rupees on bogus charges of sedition. Hashmi is another PML-N leader who is prominent in the 15-party opposition coalition known as the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD). The alliance includes the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of another former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, who is in self-imposed exile.

Hashmi was charged over a letter written by a military officer on official letterhead critical of Musharraf and his alliance with Washington. The government immediately declared the letter to be a forgery and instituted legal action against Hashmi. The trial took place in the Adyala prison and the sentence was handed down in closed session, with the media barred. PML-N spokesman Siddiqui Farooq denounced the verdict as proof that the "judiciary is in Musharraf's clutches".

While the European Union called for Hashmi to be released, Washington brushed off his jailing, declaring that the case would have been properly tried. Just as the Bush administration tramples on basic democratic rights in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the US itself, on a daily basis, so it has not the slightest hesitation in propping up a military dictator in Pakistan—as long as he continues to support US economic and strategic interests.



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