

NATO warns Pakistan's Musharraf to end covert support for Taliban

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The British general commanding NATO troops in Afghanistan, Lieutenant-General David Richards, held talks with Pakistan's military president General Pervez Musharraf on October 9. According to spokesmen for the two military leaders, the meeting was "routine," but material leaked beforehand refutes such claims.

Richards flew to Islamabad primarily to convince Musharraf to rein in his military intelligence service, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, which NATO leaders believe is training Taliban fighters to attack the alliance's troops in Afghanistan. Richards was also expected to deliver the demand that key Taliban leaders living in Pakistan be arrested.

According to the October 8 issue of the *Sunday Times*, the evidence compiled by US, NATO and Afghan intelligence is purported to include satellite pictures and videos of training camps for Taliban soldiers and suicide bombers inside Pakistan. Among the evidence is an address in Quetta where Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, is said to live.

The *Times* reported that captured Taliban fighters and failed suicide bombers have confirmed that they were trained by the Pakistani intelligence service.

Before leaving for Islamabad, Richards told reporters that Musharraf had publicly acknowledged "a Taliban problem on the Pakistan side of the border. Undoubtedly something has got to happen."

He added pointedly, "We've got to accept that the Pakistan government is not omnipotent and it isn't easy, but it has to be done and we're working very hard on it. I'm very confident that the Pakistan government's intent is clear and they will be delivering on it."

Other unnamed military personnel felt at liberty to be less diplomatic about Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan. One British officer told the *Times*, "I feel real vitriol seeing our boys dying because of Pakistan."

A senior US commander added, "We just can't ignore it any more. Musharraf's got to prove which side he is on."

Musharraf is a leader assailed on all sides. Hamid Karzai, the US-appointed leader of Afghanistan, has repeatedly complained of Pakistan's role in providing a haven for Taliban fighters, saying they have openly run camps in Karachi and Quetta, close to the Afghan border. "There is an open campaign by Pakistan against Afghanistan and the presence of coalition troops here," he said recently.

In the past, Pakistan has stated that it wants Afghanistan to recognise the Durand Line, the 2,640-km (1,610-miles)-long border between the two countries. Afghan leaders say the British-drawn, colonial-era border line robs Afghanistan of Pashtun territory now inside Pakistan. No Afghan government, including the Pashtun-

dominated Taliban regime that was recognised by Pakistan, has accepted the division.

In Washington, two weeks ago, with US President Bush acting as intermediary, Musharraf had a tense meeting with Karzai. Revelations made earlier by Musharraf—contained in his newly published memoirs—that then US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had warned Pakistan's intelligence director that Pakistan should "Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age," if its leaders did not tow Washington's line on the "war on terror," cast a shadow over the proceedings.

Also during the visit, Karzai handed Pakistan the names and addresses of alleged handlers of suicide bombers using a camp near Peshawar, in Pakistan, that had been infiltrated by an Afghan informer. Last week, a rubbish bag was discovered in the camp containing his body with a note warning other tribesman against spying for the US.

During Musharraf's trip to Britain, a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair on September 28 was overshadowed by the leaked Ministry of Defence (MoD) document suggesting that Pakistan's ISI was supporting the Taliban. The BBC quoted the document as saying, "Pakistan is not currently stable but on the edge of chaos."

Musharraf angrily denied the allegations. "I totally, 200 percent, reject it," he said. "ISI is a disciplined force, breaking the back of Al Qaeda."

"These aspersions against ISI are by vested interests, and by those who don't understand ground realities," the Pakistani leader told BBC *Newsnight*.

Musharraf has since then conceded that "some retired ISI generals" may be involved in aiding the Taliban. He also said Britain should take more responsibility for the July 7 London bombers, some of whom traveled to Pakistan before carrying out the attacks.

"There's no doubt that the London [bombers]...have some way or other come to Pakistan," he said. "But let us not absolve the United Kingdom from their responsibilities. Youngsters...happen to come to Pakistan for a month or two months, and you put the entire blame on these two months...and don't talk about the 27 years or whatever they are suffering in your country."

The MoD document is thought to have been written by a UK intelligence official at the Defence Academy, who interviewed academics and figures in the Pakistani army to prepare a briefing about the country and "global anti-terrorism efforts."

It claimed that ISI, while supposedly combating terrorism, had secretly supported a coalition of religious parties known as the MNA and thus effectively backed the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

"Indirectly Pakistan, through ISI, has been supporting terrorism and

extremism, whether in London on 7/7 or in Afghanistan or Iraq,” the paper said.

The report recommended using military links between the British and Pakistani armies to persuade Musharraf—who took power in a coup in 1999—to accept free elections and pressure the army to dismantle the ISI.

“Pakistan is existing on the edge of chaos,” the document states, arguing that Musharraf does not stand for stability, but rather that a move to civilian rule “might in fact be the only way to retain and improve stability, avoiding collapse and anarchy.”

In some areas, the paper is opposed to elements of Downing Street’s foreign policy, suggesting that “the UK has followed US policies on the global war on terror at the perceived exclusion of its own interests.”

The MoD officer suggests the Pentagon lacks a strategic big idea, and that “the US/UK cannot begin to turn the tide until they identify the real enemies...and seek to put in place a better and more just vision.”

It goes on to state that British forces in Iraq “are effectively being held hostage.... [W]e are now fighting (and arguably losing or potentially losing) on two fronts.”

Downing Street reassured Musharraf that the leaked document “did not reflect the views of the government,” but this would have been cold comfort for both the Pakistani leader and Blair himself. The leak must have come from the upper echelons of the military, with the aim not only of placing maximum pressure on the Pakistani leader but also of pressing for a shift in British policy in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

On returning home after his trip to Washington and London, Musharraf was greeted by a report from the Indian police implicating Pakistani Intelligence in the Mumbai train blasts that killed 186 people in July. The report claimed evidence of involvement of Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. “The whole attack was planned by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence and carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba and their operatives in India,” said A.N. Roy, Mumbai’s police chief.

Pakistan retorted that India should not point fingers without evidence. “It is baseless, it is irresponsible and [done] out of habit,” said Tasnim Aslam, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman.

The worsening military and political situation in Afghanistan has now threatened to poison relations with Musharraf’s regime, which is viewed by both London and Washington as an unreliable ally. General Richards, who following the handover of control of the eastern parts of the country from US command earlier this month, now heads 33,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan.

He has warned that the country was at a tipping point, and that Afghans were likely to switch their allegiance to resurgent Taliban militants if there were no visible improvements in ordinary people’s lives in the next six months. “They will say, ‘We do not want the Taliban, but then we would rather have that austere and unpleasant life that that might involve than another five years of fighting,’ “ he said.

According to a NATO and Afghan army intelligence report following Operation Medusa last month, the Taliban had collected 1 million rounds of ammunition in the Panjwai district of southern Kandahar province before the fighting.

The fighters had fired off some 2,000 rocket-propelled grenades and 1,000 mortar shells during the battle, the report says. The cost of Taliban ammunition stocks alone was estimated at \$5 million. NATO officials insist that such amounts of money and preparations would be impossible without outside support.

The importance of Pakistani “rear bases” was also underlined during NATO’s Operation Medusa, when NATO intelligence detected Taliban troop movements and the evacuation of wounded fighters into Pakistan’s northern tribal belt.

There is also growing unease amongst NATO commanders and Afghan politicians following Musharraf’s September 5 agreement with pro-Taliban elements in the tribal region of Waziristan. The truce was justified by Musharraf as a way to quell cross-border incursions into Afghanistan, but it has apparently had the opposite effect of creating a safe haven for the Taliban to regroup and launch fresh offensives against Western and Afghan troops.

A US military spokesman, Colonel John Paradis, said US soldiers had reported a “twofold, in some cases threefold” increase in attacks along the border since the deal was signed “especially in the southeast areas across from North Waziristan.”

Claims that the tribesmen signed the deal only after receiving approval from the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Omar, have exacerbated the controversy.

Musharraf has in fact done his utmost to curry favour with the US and Britain. He has publicly backed US-led “anti-terrorism” efforts since the September 11 attacks, despite strong opposition from within Pakistan that twice resulted in assassination attempts. The Pakistani army has been forced, under US pressure, to go into tribal border regions with Afghanistan that have never in the past been under effective control by central government.

The regime’s clampdown on its own people in the name of the “war on terror” has drawn stronger than usual complaints from human rights groups. According to an Amnesty International report released September 29, Pakistani authorities have recently abducted hundreds of people, accused them of terrorist links and held them in secret locations or handed them over to US agents.

But in the context of a worsening military crisis for NATO in Afghanistan, this is no longer considered good enough. The leaked MoD document speculates openly about a possible coup to replace Musharraf. It says that 2007 is to be “the crunch year,” in which international pressure for a move against Musharraf may meet up with the Pakistani military’s attempts to retain control of the country through the ISI and political proxies.

Musharraf’s revelations of US threats in his memoirs reflected feelings he may be rewarded for his loyalty and his antagonising of his own people with a stab in the back by Washington. The MoD report and the threats made against him by Richards confirm that such plans for regime change are being actively considered, even at the cost of destabilising one of the West’s most important regional allies.



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