

Cheney huddles with Musharraf and Karzai

US faces mounting crisis in Afghanistan

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The suicide attack Tuesday at the gates of the US air base at Bagram, near Kabul, which sent Vice President Cheney racing to a bomb shelter, is only the most visible sign of the deteriorating position of the US-backed puppet regime in Afghanistan.

The Taliban suicide bomber penetrated the outer security perimeter at the huge base, manned by Afghan troops, but was stopped at the inner ring by US troops, then blew himself up, killing nearly two dozen people, most of them Afghan laborers going to work. One US soldier, a US military contractor and a South Korean soldier in the NATO-run occupation force were also killed.

A Taliban spokesman told Reuters news agency that the attack had targeted Cheney specifically. He had stayed overnight at the base because winter weather had blocked travel to the Afghan capital city 25 miles away. After emerging from the bomb shelter, Cheney flew on to Kabul for talks with President Hamid Karzai, then left the country.

US officials initially ridiculed the Taliban claim, suggesting, implausibly, that it was purely a coincidence that the first attack on Bagram in eight months came on the one day the vice president was at the base. It was subsequently confirmed that the delay of Cheney's scheduled meeting with Karzai was widely known in Afghanistan, suggesting that the Taliban was able to react quickly and engineer the terrorist action in a matter of hours.

The Taliban and other fundamentalist Islamic groups fighting the US-backed Karzai regime have greatly increased their attacks inside Afghanistan over the past year. Suicide bombings, once almost unknown in Afghanistan, rose to 27 in 2005, then multiplied five-fold to 139 in 2006. According to Pentagon figures, remotely detonated bombings doubled in 2006, from 783 to 1,677, while armed attacks tripled, rising from 1,558 to 4,542. More than 4,000 people died violent deaths, the vast majority of them Afghan civilians incinerated by US and NATO firepower.

Taliban insurgents have overrun two district capitals in the past month, holding onto the towns rather than abandoning them to US-NATO air strikes and counterattacks. These

include Musa Qala in Helmand province, in the far south, and Barqwa in Farah province, in the southwest.

The Karzai government in Kabul is increasingly unpopular and ineffectual, dominated by corrupt warlords, drug traffickers and reactionary Islamic clerics whose ideology barely differs from that of the Taliban. The most recent action of the Afghan parliament was to pass a resolution, drafted by former mujaheddin fighters and a former general of the Soviet-backed regime of the 1980s, that would grant immunity for war crimes committed in Afghanistan over the past 25 years. Press reports said that the nonbinding resolution sought to include the fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar, as well as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former US ally in the anti-Soviet insurgency who has now taken up arms against the US-NATO occupation.

US officials have expressed increasing concern over the growth of Taliban and Al Qaeda activity across the border in northwest Pakistan, an area known as Waziristan, populated by Pashtu-speaking people who have extensive tribal and ethnic ties to the Pashtun people who make up the largest population group in Afghanistan.

Last September, the military government of General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan signed an agreement with Waziristan tribal leaders calling a halt to military operations in the area in return for vague pledges that the local tribes would keep their distance from the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Afghan officials have openly called this an agreement to tolerate Taliban/Al Qaeda activity, and US officials tacitly agree.

Cheney's trip to the region thus has the character of a last-ditch effort to prop up the Karzai regime in anticipation of an imminent spring offensive by the Taliban, and to issue a warning to Musharraf about the risks of his de facto truce with the insurgent force.

Both Cheney's stops, in Islamabad and Kabul, were unannounced, a sign of the dangerous security conditions in both cities. US reporters were asked not to reveal his arrival in Pakistan until he left the country. The *New York Times* commented, "That appeared to be a reflection of growing

concern about the strength of Qaeda and Taliban forces in the area, and continuing questions about the loyalties of Mr. Musharraf's own intelligence services."

The security for Cheney's trip was tighter than for previous visits to Afghanistan and Pakistan by President Bush and Condoleezza Rice, suggesting that the security situation has worsened considerably. Cheney did not fly on his usual jet, Air Force Two, which was left behind at a US base in Oman, instead boarding a C-17 cargo plane maintained by the South Carolina Air National Guard, named the Spirit of Strom Thurmond, which carried him to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Cheney was accompanied on his visit to both countries by Stephen Kappes, deputy director of the CIA and a veteran of the agency since the days when it first mobilized Osama bin Laden, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and other Islamic fundamentalists to wage war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Press accounts suggested that Kappes came to warn Musharraf about the continuing collaboration of the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI with the Taliban.

The ISI is the original sponsor of the Taliban, which it helped organize in the 1990s to create a pro-Pakistani regime in Kabul. These ties reportedly continue. The *New York Times* published a lengthy account last month of top Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, living under ISI protection in Balochistan, just across the border from the Kandahar province of Afghanistan.

Just after Cheney's meeting with Musharraf, Pakistani officials made a series of public complaints about the US vice president's bullying. "Pakistan does not accept dictation from any side or any source," said one Foreign Ministry spokesman, who also expressed concern that the new Democratic-controlled Congress was discussing "discriminatory legislation" to threaten a cutoff of US aid to Pakistan if there were not more public collaboration with US efforts against Al Qaeda.

One press account suggested that the Bush administration had seriously discussed unilateral cross-border air strikes by US warplanes against Taliban or Al Qaeda training camps in Waziristan. The proposal has been shelved, at least for now, out of concern that such raids could destabilize the Musharraf government and lead to its overthrow by Islamic fundamentalist elements.

Cheney's visit is the culmination of nearly two months of increasing attention to the region on the part of Washington, five years after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. It came ten days after Bush delivered a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank, where he announced a tripling of US military spending in Afghanistan and the deployment of 3,200 additional US troops.

Bush said he would seek congressional approval for an

appropriation of \$11.8 billion over the next two years for Afghanistan, of which \$8.6 billion will go to train and equip the Afghan Army. He ordered the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the Army's 10th Mountain Division to extend its stay in the country for four months. During that time the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, based in Vicenza, Italy, will deploy to Afghanistan, effectively doubling the number of front-line combat troops. Bush also called on other NATO countries to lift current restrictions on the types of combat that their troops deployed to Afghanistan can engage in.

Since NATO took over most combat operations in Afghanistan last fall fighting has intensified, particularly in the Pashtun-populated east and south, the former home base of the Taliban. The NATO mission, entitled the International Security Assistance Force, numbers some 35,500 troops, including 14,000 from the United States. Another 12,000 US troops are deployed in Afghanistan under separate commands, training Afghan troops and conducting counterinsurgency operations and air strikes.

Bush has the full support of the congressional Democrats for the escalation of the US war in Afghanistan, which is, proportionate to the number of troops already there, as great as the escalation that has begun in Iraq. A slew of top Democrats has passed through Afghanistan in the past six weeks, including Senator Hillary Clinton and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Clinton returned from Afghanistan and Iraq calling the US military priorities "upside down," and declaring, in reference to Afghanistan, "We should be adding more American military forces, and we should be requiring the NATO countries to fulfill their commitments to the forces that they had promised us."



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