

Secret White House meeting plans US military escalation in Pakistan

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7 January 2008

Top members of the Bush administration together with US military commanders and intelligence chiefs met in secret at the White House Friday to draw up plans for stepped-up military intervention in Pakistan, the *New York Times* reported Sunday.

Citing unnamed senior administration officials, the *Times* report indicates that the administration is aiming to exploit what it sees as a new opportunity opened up by last month's assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

"Several of the participants in the meeting argued that the threat to the government of President Pervez Musharraf was now so grave that both Mr. Musharraf and Pakistan's new military leadership were likely to give the United States more latitude," according to the officials cited by the *Times*. The report continues, "At the White House and the Pentagon, officials see an opportunity in the changing power structure for the Americans to advocate for the expanded authority in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed country."

Participating in the meeting were Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, Bush's national security advisor Stephen Hadley and senior intelligence officials. The meeting was unannounced and the White House and other government agencies refused to discuss it.

The plans for military escalation in Pakistan, according to the *Times*, include the utilization of both the CIA and forces of the US military's Special Operations Command.

Officially, Washington has only 50 troops in Pakistan, engaged in training Pakistani forces. Sources familiar with US operations, however, have reported that the American soldiers are already participating in attacks carried out by the Pakistani military in the tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan.

Moreover, the US has waged a number of unilateral attacks under the guise of its "war on terrorism," striking alleged Taliban targets inside Pakistan with missiles, artillery and mortars fired by American occupation troops deployed across the border in Afghanistan. In one incident, US forces participated in an October 2006 air strike against a madrassa in the Bajaur region bordering Afghanistan, killing 80 people.

US Special Forces troops have also reportedly been given permission to engage in the "hot pursuit" of anti-occupation forces from Afghanistan fleeing across the border, without prior

permission from Islamabad.

These attacks have provoked widespread anger inside Pakistan and increased support for Islamist militants in the tribal areas, which are inhabited by tribes that are mainly Pashtun—also the majority ethnic group in neighboring Afghanistan—and which have fiercely guarded their independence from the central government.

The plans for a major escalation of the US military intervention in Pakistan have been prepared with a concerted propaganda campaign echoing the Musharraf regime's dubious claim that Bhutto's assassination was the work of Al Qaeda, with the aim of turning her death into a justification for stepping up the "global war on terror."

This has been joined by claims that Al Qaeda has made a strategic shift in its operations, targeting Pakistan for destabilization. Typical was the remark made late last month by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who said, "Al Qaeda right now seems to have turned its face toward Pakistan and attacks on the Pakistani government and people."

The apparent aim is to create the impression that some central terrorist command has given orders for militants to converge on Pakistan. In reality, the conflict within the country has been building up for the last seven years, since the US war to overthrow the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and has been stoked by repeated US and Pakistani military interventions in the tribal areas.

As for "attacks on the Pakistani people," these have been carried out repeatedly by Washington's main ally, the country's military strongman Musharraf. Within Pakistan itself, large sections of the population view him and the military as the most likely suspects in the murder of Bhutto.

The central purpose of any US military escalation in Pakistan's tribal area will not be to hunt down Al Qaeda terrorists, but rather to attack the population, which is widely sympathetic to those resisting the US occupation in Afghanistan and has provided both safe haven and fighters for the Afghan anti-occupation forces. At the same time, it will be aimed at propping up Musharraf's corrupt and repressive regime, which Washington has long viewed as a principal ally in the pursuit of its geo-strategic interests in Central Asia.

The overwhelming majority of the Pakistani population is

hostile to US policy in the region and already sees Washington as the protector for the unpopular Musharraf. Any American intervention is bound, in the end, to have the opposite effect of strengthening Musharraf's grip on power. It is certain to provoke widespread anger and increasing upheavals.

It is for this reason that the Musharraf government has publicly insisted that it has never given permission for US attacks on targets inside Pakistan and has denounced talk of unilateral American military action inside the country as irresponsible and dangerous. While these routine denials are largely for public consumption, they reflect the extreme sensitivity of the Pakistani regime over the potential for these actions to unleash a political explosion.

At a press conference last Thursday, Musharraf reiterated warnings about military action in the tribal area. Speaking about Baitullah Mehsud, a tribal leader whom the Pakistani regime has accused of ordering the Bhutto assassination, Musharraf declared, "He is in South Waziristan agency, and let me tell you, getting him in that place means battling thousands of people, hundreds of people who are his followers, the Mehsud tribe, if you get to him, and it will mean collateral damage."

The Pakistani military, which includes a large section of ethnic Pashtuns and has had close ties with the militias in the region, going back to the CIA-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, is deeply divided over Washington's demand to turn the border areas into a free-fire zone.

The *Times* article on the White House meetings follows a number of media reports indicating that the plans for a more aggressive US military intervention in Pakistan had been under discussion for some time before the Bhutto assassination. That event is now seen as a useful pretext for accelerating their implementation.

The chief of the US Special Operations Command, Adm. Eric Olson, has flown to Pakistan three times since August, meeting with Musharraf and senior Pakistani commanders and visiting the headquarters of the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary force drawn from the country's border tribes.

US Central Command Commander Adm. William Fallon praised Pakistan's counterterrorism operations in an interview with Voice of America last month, while suggesting that an agreement for expanded US operations had already been reached.

"What we've seen in the last several months is more of a willingness to use their regular army units" in the border areas, Fallon said. "And this is where, I think, we can help a lot from the US in providing the kind of training and assistance and mentoring based on our experience with insurgencies recently and with the terrorist problem in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think we share a lot with them, and we'll look forward to doing that."

Washington Post national security columnist William Arkin,

in a piece published the day before Bhutto's assassination, cited Pentagon sources as saying the beefed up US military presence will be "on the ground in Pakistan by early in the new year."

That the drive towards military intervention in Pakistan enjoys bipartisan support was driven home by Saturday night's debate between Democratic presidential candidates in New Hampshire.

Asked whether he stood by an earlier speech in which he voiced support for unilateral US military strikes against alleged Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan, Senator Barack Obama replied, "I absolutely do stand by it." He added, "My job as commander in chief will be to make sure that we strike anybody who would do America harm when we have actionable intelligence to do so."

Obama went on to refer to the Musharraf regime as "a legitimate government that we're working with," even claiming that it was working to "encourage democracy."

Obama's principal rivals for the nomination—Senator Hillary Clinton and ex-Senator John Edwards—echoed his threat of unilateral military strikes against Pakistan.

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