

Pentagon chief says US ready to deploy combat troops in Pakistan

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26 January 2008

The United States is “ready, willing and able” to deploy American combat troops in Pakistan for joint military operations in the country’s troubled border region, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday.

The public statement about an American intervention in Pakistan appeared aimed at pressuring the regime of President Pervez Musharraf into accepting a more direct US role in the suppression of internal opposition, which is linked to the growing resistance to the American-led occupation of neighboring Afghanistan.

According to media reports, the Bush administration has conducted extensive top-level discussions on the crisis in Pakistan and drawn up plans for a US intervention in the wake of last month’s assassination of Pakistan Peoples Party leader and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The administration reportedly sees the political crisis in the aftermath of the political killing as an opportunity to expand its influence in the country.

Washington’s stepped-up pressure on Pakistan is developing in the context of increasing fighting between tribal forces and government troops in a region bordering Afghanistan. The government has reported that more than 200 fighters and 30 government soldiers have died during three weeks of violence in the South Waziristan region.

Gates’s statement came in response to a reporter’s question at a Pentagon news conference. “We remain ready, willing and able to assist the Pakistanis and to partner with them to provide additional training, to conduct joint operations, should they desire to do so,” the defense secretary said.

While Gates acknowledged that the Pakistani regime has yet to request such aid, he stressed that “this is clearly an evolving issue.” He added, “What we have

tried to communicate to the Pakistanis and essentially what we are saying here is we are prepared to look at a range of cooperation with them in a number of different areas, but at this point it’s their nickel and we await proposals or suggestions from them.”

Gates said that American forces could be used in “going after Al Qaeda in the border area,” while claiming that such an operation would involve “a very small number of troops.” Asked what he meant by “a very small number,” Gates refused to comment.

He also declined a response to a question about whether American troops were already crossing the border from Afghanistan—where more than 28,000 are presently deployed—in pursuit of fighters resisting the US occupation. In 2002, the then chief of the US Central Command, Gen. Tommy Franks, said that Pakistan had agreed to allow US troops to engage in “hot pursuit” of forces fleeing across the border. Washington has also acknowledged the presence of 50 US military “advisors” supposedly engaged in the training of Pakistani forces. According to some reports, these troops have also participated in combat operation alongside Pakistani units.

The defense secretary said that Washington is “concerned about the reestablishment of Al Qaeda safe havens in the border area.” In what amounted to a justification for US intervention in the name of the “global war on terror,” he added: “I think it would be unrealistic to assume that all of the planning that they’re doing is focused strictly on Pakistan. So I think that that is a continuing threat to Europe as well as to us.”

The remarks from the defense secretary followed a visit to Pakistan earlier in the week by the top US military official in the region, the chief of Central Command, Adm. William Fallon. While in Pakistan,

Fallon held talks with the officer who succeeded Musharraf after the military strongman relinquished his role as army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. While the two made little public comment during the visit, according to a written statement, they discussed “the overall security situation in the region.”

According to the Associated Press, on the eve of his trip to Pakistan, Fallon issued a secret order to US military commanders to draft plans for long-term operations in Pakistan aimed at propping up the existing regime and combating the internal insurgency that is threatening the government.

Citing an unnamed “senior defense official,” the news agency said that the plan was to extend until 2015.

During a meeting in Florida with Middle Eastern defense chiefs held a week before his trip to Pakistan, Fallon told the media that the increased fighting in the country was leading the government to become more inclined to accept a US presence.

“They see they’ve got real problems internally,” he said. “My sense is an increased willingness to address these problems, and we’re going to try to help them.” He added that US aid would be “more robust.”

Meanwhile, Musharraf met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland Thursday. It represented the highest level contact between Islamabad and Washington since the Bhutto assassination. Rice praised Musharraf in advance of the meeting as a “good ally in the war on terrorism.” While declaring US concern for a “free and fair election” in Pakistan next month, she stressed that the administration had no intention of curtailing the billions of dollars in military aid that has propped up Musharraf’s dictatorship.

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For his part, Musharraf publicly opposed proposals for a stepped-up US military intervention in Pakistan.

“This cannot be done by US forces,” Musharraf told a meeting in Davos. “Please don’t think that the US forces have some kind of magic wand and they’ll come and lead to success.... They have their hands full in Afghanistan.”

The Pakistani ruler claimed that his regime opposed any foreign presence in the country. He added in relation to a US military intervention, “The man in the

street will not allow this—he will come out and agitate.”

Whether Musharraf’s statements are for public consumption or he is genuinely dragging his feet on accepting an expanded US military presence for fear of provoking even greater internal unrest in Pakistan is not clear.

There are indications, however, that Washington may be preparing an alternative to Musharraf. The *Washington Post* reported Thursday that the Pakistani president “is increasingly losing support from major constituencies, including his traditional military base, amid growing questions in both Pakistan and the United States about his ability to govern.”

The paper cited a statement issued by the Ex-Servicemen’s Society, a group that includes retired military commanders and security chiefs with extensive ties to the active military, calling for Musharraf’s immediate resignation. It also noted that the new military commander, General Kiyani, has issued an order forbidding any military officers from meeting the president without his approval and is preparing to withdraw officers from civilian posts in the Musharraf government.

According to the *Post*, “US intelligence officials have told agencies in Washington for the first time that the Pakistani leader may be beyond political rescue or long-term relevance.”



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