

US demands crackdown by Pakistani government along Afghanistan border

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The three-day visit to Washington this week by Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has set the stage for a violent escalation of the Afghanistan war into ethnic Pashtun Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. Gilani was beset with accusations that the FATA were harbouring terrorists and anti-US Islamists fighting American and NATO troops over the border and demands that his government launch a crackdown. If it does not, the Pakistani leader was reminded that the US would unilaterally attack alleged insurgent safe havens inside his country.

Just hours before Gilani went into talks with President Bush on Monday, an unmanned US military Predator aircraft launched missile strikes against a housing complex in Azam Warsak, a village close to the Afghanistan border, but over five kilometres inside South Waziristan, one of the largest of the seven agencies in the FATA.

The timing was not accidental. As the two leaders sat down in the White House, Bush would have been able to confront Gilani with information that the air strike had reportedly killed Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar, an Egyptian-born Al Qaeda leader on the US government's list of the 37 most-wanted terrorists. The killing would have been exploited to lend credence to the allegation that Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network are being sheltered by Pashtun tribesmen and operating unhindered by the Pakistani military.

Presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain also spoke with Gilani and reportedly made similar demands for Pakistani action along the border.

Pakistan has repeatedly protested against unilateral US strikes inside its territory, denouncing them as violations of its national sovereignty. Gilani revealed later that his government had not been informed of, and had not approved, Monday's operation.

This fact did not prevent Bush from striding out of the talks declaring how much the US "supports the sovereignty of Pakistan". Gilani played his part in the diplomatic charade, stating that his government was "committed to fight against those extremists and terrorists who are destroying and making the world not safe".

In reality, Gilani heads an unstable coalition of parties that has no desire for a confrontation with the Pashtun tribes in the FATA. Since winning elections in February and taking office from supporters of US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, his government has pursued a policy of truces and negotiations with militants in the border region, not military operations. This was

reaffirmed as his government's stance as recently as last week.

The pressure on Gilani to change policy was taken to a new level on Tuesday with a front page story in the *New York Times*. The newspaper published claims that Stephen R. Kappes, a top CIA figure, had been sent to Islamabad on July 12 to "confront Pakistan's top officials" with evidence that members of the country's secret service, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), were aiding the Islamist Pashtun warlord, Jalaluddin Haqqani. A June Pentagon report on the war in Afghanistan named Haqqani as one of the principal actors in the growing anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan.

Kappes accompanied Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen during his talks with Pakistani government and military leaders. An unnamed senior US official told the *Times*: "It was a very pointed message saying 'Look, we know there's a connection, not just with Haqqani, but also other bad guys and the ISI, and we think you could do more and we want you to do more about it.'"

The fact that there are long-standing links between the ISI and Haqqani, as well as other Pashtun powerbrokers, is hardly a revelation, and especially not to the CIA. US intelligence played a major role in forging and financing such links during the 1980s, when the ISI served as the conduit for American money and weapons to flow to the Islamists waging a guerilla war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Haqqani played a major role in integrating Islamist volunteers from around the world, brought to Pakistan by men like Osama bin Laden, into the anti-Soviet insurgency.

Washington Post reporter Steve Coll described in his book *Ghost Wars* the nexus of relations that existed between Haqqani, bin Laden, the ISI and the CIA during the Islamist push to overthrow the pro-Moscow government after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1988.

Coll wrote: "He [Haqqani] was in frequent contact with bin Laden and with the ISI's brigadiers. For their part, Pakistani intelligence and the CIA came to rely on Haqqani for testing and experimentation with new weapons systems and tactics. Haqqani was so favored with supplies that he was in a position to broker them and to help equip the Arab volunteers gathering in his region. The CIA officers working from Islamabad regarded him as a proven commander who could put a lot of men under arms at short notice. Haqqani had the CIA's full support."

The Afghan war ended with Haqqani and other radical Islamists

firmly embedded in the bases and training camps they had established throughout the FATA. Along with other Pashtun warlords, Haqqani backed the fundamentalist Taliban regime that took power in Afghanistan in 1996 and served in its government. Since the US invasion in October 2001, Haqqani is believed to have been a major organiser of the anti-US insurgency. Between 2004 and 2006, his forces beat back Pakistani government troops who were sent into Waziristan by Musharraf. Following heavy casualties and unrest among Pashtun soldiers, the dictatorship agreed to a truce.

Sporadic clashes have taken place since between the Pakistani military and the various Taliban-linked warlords, who have spent the past several years tightening their grip over the FATA. Their influence has also spread widely throughout the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), which has a majority Pashtun population of some 21 million, including several million Afghan refugees. Significant fighting has been taking place since last November in the Swat Valley, once the premier tourist district of Pakistan but now a frontline in the low-level civil war between the government and the Islamists.

Gilani rejected the *New York Times* claims against the ISI as “unbelievable” and praised the intelligence agency as a “great institution” during an interview with PBS’s “News Hour” program. The significance of the accusations, however, would not have passed him by. This is the first time that the White House and the CIA have used the American media to openly allege that the Pakistani military is abetting the guerilla war against the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Moreover, the claims give succor to allegations by the Afghan government that the ISI was involved in the attempt to assassinate President Hamid Karzai in April as well as the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul last month. Elements of the ISI are, without any question, hostile to the close relations developing between the US-backed Afghan regime and India, the main rival of the Pakistani elite. Those ties are set to deepen next week, when Karzai travels to New Delhi for a range of talks on security and economic matters.

The *New York Times* article amounts to a threat that the US ruling elite could rapidly mount a campaign to reassign Pakistan from the category “ally” to that of “terrorist-sponsoring nation” or “rogue state” if it does not initiate a full-scale offensive against the Islamists and curb any destabilisation of Afghanistan being directed by the ISI.

The Bush administration, with the support of Congressional leaders, is placing economic pressure on Pakistan as well. Coinciding with Gilani’s Washington visit, Democrat Joseph Biden and Republican Richard Lugar secured the approval of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee for an aid package that triples funding to Pakistan to \$15 billion over 10 years, including \$7.5 billion over the next five years for development projects. Contained in the legislation, however, is a stipulation that all military aid to Pakistan will be withheld unless the State Department certifies that the Pakistani military is making “concerted efforts” against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The US media is already reporting that a Pakistani military operation is in preparation. On Tuesday, the *Los Angeles Times*

reported that the XI Corp of the Pakistani army, comprising two infantry divisions, will be deployed over the coming weeks into the FATA to reinforce the poorly-armed paramilitary Frontier Corp, which is responsible for security in the region. The *New York Times*, in the same report that alleged ISI collusion with Haqqani, revealed that Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, acting US commander in South West Asia, made an unannounced visit to North Waziristan on Monday for meetings with the commanders of the XI Corp and the Frontier Corp. Gilani sidestepped a question by “News Hour” as to whether the reports were true.

Gilani has been placed on the horns of a dilemma. There is next to no popular support in Pakistan for full-scale civil war against the Pashtun tribes on behalf of American imperialism, and even stronger opposition to any unilateral US operations inside the country. Divisions that opened up in the Pakistani armed forces during the last offensive will almost certainly flare again, particularly among the large number of ethnic Pashtun officers and soldiers, who are recruited from NWFP. A half-hearted attempt by the government last week to place the ISI under greater civilian control fell apart within hours, due to resistance from the military.

If Pakistan does not take action, the prospect exists of US cross-border operations in open defiance of Islamabad’s opposition—in other words, war with Pakistan. Indicative of the fears and discussions in Pakistani political circles, Ameer Bhutto, vice-chairman of the Sindh National Front, which served in the previous pro-Musharraf government, wrote in the *News International* on Tuesday:

“If President Musharraf could not stand before Colin Powell’s ultimatum in 2001, there is no reason to believe that he or Prime Minister Gilani can make a stand now. Sporadic US air raids have been continuing [for] some time and there is reportedly significant American troop build-up at the Pakistani-Afghan border recently. American authorities have also confirmed that the US intends to boost its troop presence in Afghanistan in the current year. This, read with President George Bush’s assessment that Taliban and Al Qaeda activities in Pakistan pose the greatest threat and challenge to US security interests, makes it impossible to escape the conclusion that, after Afghanistan and Iraq, Pakistan’s turn has now come.”



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