
Afghanistan

Major Setback for The Bush Administration

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Bush Administration's war on terrorism has run aground in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by two recent incidents—one in Pakistan's province of Balochistan, bordering Afghanistan, on July 4; and four days later, an attack on the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul. In the July 8 incident, about 2,000 Afghans protesting a Pakistani troop incursion in the adjacent provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar in southeast Afghanistan, stormed the Pakistani Embassy.

These two incidents adequately demonstrate that two of America's so-called "best allies"—and arguably two of the most unstable—cannot be controlled from Washington any longer, and may soon be at one another's throats.

The United States is under a great deal of strain not only in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan. It is only a matter of time until Washington's neo-conservative-led policies come crashing down. But from the look of things, it very well could be Afghanistan and Pakistan where the first shoe will drop.

What is evident is that while the Taliban had spread the politics of hatred in Afghanistan during their five years (1996-2001) of mindless bigotry, the Americans have done no better. In fact, it seems that the situation on the ground has gotten worse, and violence and hatred have become the order of the day, not only in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan as well.

The implications of these incidents are serious for the region. The American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the subsequent development of resistance within these countries against the U.S.-led forces, have begun to catalyze within the region the violent forces that were earlier marginalized. The nationalists, drug traffickers, gun runners, and extremist Islamic orthodox forces are in the process of gelling together against the United States, forming a heady and a dangerous mix.

The leading power in the region, India, is becoming increasingly uneasy, in the belief that Washington can no longer be trusted vis-à-vis Islamabad and its policies toward India. Not too long ago New Delhi was flush with confidence that the Americans would control the terrorists in Pakistan, leading to a solution to the five-decades-old, blood-letting Kashmir dispute. Such trust led to New Delhi's hesitant agreement to start afresh talks with Islamabad, despite Pakistan's unflin-

willingness to carry on terrorist attacks within the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir. Observers have noted that the dangerous situation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the American inability to tackle the terrorists residing in Pakistan and acting against India, have led to New Delhi changing its mind again. It is evident that the much-expected talks between New Delhi and Islamabad may now be delayed, and may not even take place.

The Quetta Killing

The two recent violent incidents are important because they are not mere blips in the context of the war on terrorism, but are reflections of how foolish the American policies have become vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan, and how dangerous the situation is now on the ground.

The July 4 incident occurred when Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was in Paris on the last leg of a high-profile, 18-day trip that took him to London, Washington, Berlin, and Paris. It is difficult to comprehend why President Musharraf chose to leave Pakistan, which is widely proclaimed the headquarters of world terrorism, for such a long period of time. What happened on July 4 and July 8 raises questions about whether the Bush Administration has any understanding of the gravity of the situation, or whether it has been taken in by its own propaganda.

In Quetta, the capital city of Balochistan, about 2,000 Shi'ite Muslims were praying at the Jama Masjid-o-Imambargah Kalaan Isna Ashri. It was Friday, the holiest day of the week for all Muslims, when three armed terrorists, including a suicide bomber, attacked the mosque. The attack resulted in the deaths of at least 53 people, and 57 others were injured. The attack was orchestrated by Wahaabite Sunnis, most likely belonging to the Sipah-e-Sahaba, a killer Pakistani Sunni sect heavily infiltrated by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. The victims were mostly Hazara Shi'as, belonging to Afghanistan's Hazara region who had settled in Balochistan ages ago. The incident has been brushed aside in Washington as yet another incident of Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict. A few things which could throw some light on what the incident reflects were left deliberately un-

said. This was the second major attack on the Hazara Shi'as in Quetta. On June 8, thirteen police trainees belonging to the Hazara Shi'a community were killed. There was no apparent effort by Islamabad to go after the Sunni killers.

At the same time, the killing of the Hazaras by the Wahabite Sunnis came as no surprise. During their reign in Afghanistan, the Taliban, which were made up of Wahabite Sunnis backed by Pakistan's orthodox Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and other Islamic political groups, were involved in the mass slaughter of Hazara Shi'as in Herat province. Hazaras subsequently provided intelligence to the Northern Alliance political grouping within Afghanistan and to the United States on the whereabouts of the Taliban and al-Qaeda militia that Washington sought to eliminate. The Shi'as did not protest against the invasion of Afghanistan, or the invasion of Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein. However, they do strongly resent the U.S. policy toward Iran, the leading Shi'a nation in the world. And the Shi'as in Iraq are no longer looking at the United States as a liberator, but more as an occupier of the holy land of Iraq.

According to Indian intelligence, the arrest of Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, a top al-Qaeda functionary, in Rawalpindi, was made possible by the Shi'as of Quetta. Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, like many other al-Qaeda members, had been in hiding in Quetta and had fled to Rawalpindi when the Americans closed in on him. As a retaliatory measure, it is said, Pakistani orthodox Sunni groups, such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), helped by the Pakistani ISI, the Taliban, and the al-Qaeda functionaries hiding in the province, had planned the July 4 massacre. It is also important to note that the Hazara Shi'as are most likely in touch with Iran, and that the anti-Iran, neo-conservative crowd that is dictating the Bush Administration's Middle East policies was partly responsible for the Balochistan incident.

The attack on Hazara Shi'as by the Pakistani ISI-aided Sunni groups has raised concerns among policymakers in New Delhi, Moscow, and elsewhere. Iran is very much a part of the regional power structure, and the U.S.-Pakistan nexus against Iran has always been a subject of great suspicion among the well-wishers of Tehran. Moreover, the shrill voices of the American neo-conservatives barking for regime change in Tehran, and their alliance with the Iraqi-leftist Mujahideen-e-Khalq, a group branded by the United States as terrorists, have all added to regional anxieties.

The Kabul Incident

On July 8, while about 2,000 Afghans protested at the Pakistani Embassy, elsewhere in Kabul, about 1,000 Afghans, led by the country's central bank governor Anwar Ul-haq Ahady, demonstrated against Pakistan. The demonstrators were protesting against an alleged intrusion by Pakistani troops 40 kilometers inside Afghanistan, in the bordering Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. The Pakistani troops, under

the guidance of American troops, were allegedly involved in an operation to comb the bordering areas to nab al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants.

The protestors at the Pakistani Embassy went wild. They climbed the embassy walls and smashed windows. Within a few hours, Islamabad announced the closure of the Embassy, despite apologies extended by Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The incident is the culmination of an ongoing feud between Kabul and Islamabad. Kabul has repeatedly claimed that the anti-American and anti-Afghan al-Qaeda, Taliban, and Sunni fundamentalists backed by the ISI, were operating against Kabul, and Islamabad was doing little to stop them. Washington has put pressure on Pakistan to hunt for the al-Qaeda and Taliban militia. For 18 months, President Musharraf had kept the Americans at bay. But now he has agreed to joint operations along the Pakistan-Afghan border, despite stiff opposition to the policy by the Islamic fundamentalist groups within Pakistan and a section of the Pakistani Army.

The opposition to U.S.-Pakistan joint military operations surfaced at a very high level. While President Musharraf was away and the joint operation was under way, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee of the Pakistani Army, Gen. Mohammad Aziz Khan, told newsmen that "America is the number-one enemy of the Muslim world and is conspiring against Muslim nations all over the world." He cautioned his boss, President Musharraf, saying that those wearing a "uniform" should not participate in politics. Although Gen. Mohammad Aziz Khan—the key person behind President Musharraf's coming to power through a bloodless coup on Oct. 12, 1999, toppling the duly-elected government of Mian Nawaz Sharif—is no longer in command of any Army division, it is evident that he still has followers inside the Army.

It is anybody's guess what all these feuds will lead to. But what is certain, is that the fire that has been lit cannot be extinguished by those who are playing with fire. Washington is seeking help from the anti-Karzai Pakistani ISI, while pretending to stabilize Karzai's regime. American operatives within Afghanistan are strengthening the drug-running warlords who continue to defy the Washington-backed Karzai regime, by providing them arms and protection to their poppy crop.

The neo-conservatives in Washington are encouraging the slaughter of the Shi'as in Pakistan to appease the ISI and President Musharraf. But in the process al-Qaeda and the Taliban are gaining ground, because they are the ones who want the Hazara Shi'as in Pakistan eliminated. The policy is strengthening the orthodox Wahabi Sunnis and creating divisive forces within the Pakistani Army.

There is no doubt that by pursuing such a policy, Washington is cutting off its own feet. But for regional leaders, it is even worse. Reckless and corrupt corporate executive-style politicians in Washington, with little knowledge of the history and culture of the region, are unleashing killers under the pretext of stabilizing and rebuilding Afghanistan.