

Afghan President Confronts Pakistani Counterpart Over Suicide Bombers

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By Ahmed Rashid

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's administration, backed by the United States and Britain, is pressuring Pakistan to take action to stop suicide bombings in Afghanistan. During his recent visit to Islamabad, Karzai presented evidence to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf implicating Pakistan in the recruitment, training and equipping of Islamic radical suicide bombers.

Karzai's three-day visit Pakistan ended February 17. On the visit's first day, the Afghan and Pakistani leaders jointly pledged to intensify counter-terrorism activities. At least 30 suicide bombing attacks, carried out by the Taliban and al Qaeda, have killed nearly 100 people in Afghanistan over the past three months. Most of the victims have been Afghan civilians. Anti-Pakistan sentiment has been rising in Afghanistan. There have been dozens of demonstrations in towns across the country, against the alleged support that Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) is giving to the Taliban.

"We have provided President Musharraf with a lot of very detailed information on acts of terrorism being carried out in Afghanistan, and we discussed in great detail what actions Pakistan could now take," Karzai said. "We expect results; we expect that terrorist attacks will decrease."

Karzai made it clear that the United States and Britain had increased diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to sever ties with the Taliban. "There will be thousands of British troops deployed in the south against the Taliban and neither Britain nor Afghanistan is in any mood to tolerate any more casualties," said Karzai. "Britain will be piling on the pressure from now on." About 4,000 British troops began deploying in southern Afghanistan in mid-February. Most of the British soldiers will be stationed in Helmand Province, where the Taliban have conducted increasingly aggressive operations in recent months.

The dossiers given by Karzai to Musharraf included the names and addresses of Pakistani recruiters, trainers and those who equip them with suicide vests and explosives before they are sent into Afghanistan. Much of the recruitment takes place at a radical Islamic bookshop, several mosques and madrassas in the port city of Karachi, while the training is done at safe houses in Quetta and Chaman, in Balochistan province.

"In places like Karachi, Pakistani extremist groups working on behalf of the Taliban for a fee, carry out the recruitment and then bring them to safe houses in Balochistan for training and equipping with vests," said a senior Afghan official who accompanied Karzai. The senior official added that Afghan leaders repeated a request that Pakistani officials take action to detain top Taliban commanders, including Mullah Mohammed Omar, who are known to be living in Pakistan with their families.

Islamabad no longer denies that the Taliban is active on Pakistani territory, but officials insist that the government has nothing to do with it. Musharraf, who usually is vehement in denying any kind of Pakistani connection to terrorist operations, was clearly subdued as a result of the Afghan intelligence given him, evidently combined with behind-the-scenes reprimands issued by the United States and Britain. After his February 15 meeting with Karzai, Musharraf called on "all the progressive political elements in Pakistan" to suppress those who may be abetting the Taliban.

Karzai vowed that Afghan intelligence services had the ability to keep tracking Islamic radicals in Pakistan, even if ISI failed to cooperate and the militants took new measures to conceal their activities. "We will uncover them again, we have the abilities to do so," Karzai said.

Western diplomats said Washington and London have also joined Afghan leaders in stepping up the pressure on the ISI to find and hand over Taliban leaders hiding in Pakistan. Since the September 11 terrorist tragedy, the focus of the US-led anti-terrorist coalition has been to seek Pakistan's help in capturing al Qaeda militants, rather than Taliban suspects. Now that appears to be changing. US satellites are gathering intelligence about Taliban activities in Pakistan rather than just concentrating on al Qaeda. According to Western diplomats, during a recent visit to Islamabad, Gen. John Abizaid, the head of the US Central Command showed the Pakistanis intelligence photos of Taliban training camps at an undisclosed location and asked for them to be shut down.