

Afghan Security Concerns High Ahead Of Pakistan Summit

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By Ahmed Rashid

A recent border shootout between Pakistani and Afghan government troops in the Pashtun tribal belt has heightened already sharp tensions between the neighboring countries. In an April 22 meeting in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, Afghan President Hamid Karzai may confront Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf with claims that his country's elite Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) continues to secretly support the ousted Taliban militia. After an unprecedented two-day meeting of Afghanistan's feuding military chiefs ended April 20 with a commitment to build a strong national army, Karzai faces another test: observers say he will try to persuade Musharraf to order his ISI agents to arrest Taliban leaders who are using Pakistan as a base.

Despite the progress on creating a national army, Afghanistan's security situation looks shakier than it did shortly after the Taliban fell in late 2001. As reinvigorated Taliban and al Qaeda fighters have targeted both American military bases and reconstruction projects, aid agencies have fled many areas and violence has become more commonplace.

On April 17, Pakistan and Afghanistan accused each other of violating sovereign territory as Afghan and American-led soldiers chased a group of Taliban into Pakistan. Reports said the fighters were retreating after attacking an American base in Khost, Afghanistan. The incident occurred after Afghan officials implicated Islamabad in an ambush in the Pakistani border town of Chaman, when unknown gunmen opened fire on a convoy killing the cousin and injuring the brother of Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai. Kandahar had served as the Taliban's base.

"The Taliban are working and living freely in Pakistan," said Khalid Pashtun, Shirzai's spokesman. Pakistan has strongly denied the charges. But wherever insurrections are coming from, they - along with a generally thin security apparatus - are shaking some peoples' faith in Afghan reconstruction. Reports of Taliban ambushes, rocket attacks and discoveries of large arms caches have become routine, while a bout of mine and car bomb explosions in and around Kabul have heightened fears of lawlessness. In an April 10 address to the nation, Karzai admitted for the first time that "lack of full security and stability" were hindering attempts to rebuild the country.

Designates of the Bush administration have taken measures to reassure Karzai that they will not abandon him. "We will not turn our face from Afghanistan," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the American special envoy to Iraq, who had occupied a similar post in Afghanistan in late 2001. He visited Kabul with Central Command chief General Tommy Franks on April 10.

Sources say Khalilzad also met with ISI officials last week in Islamabad to urge the agency to contain the Taliban and come to an agreement with Karzai about helping stabilize Afghanistan. On April 30, Khalilzad was back in Kabul, offering his colleagues as brokers in any discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Any effort that undermines stability [in Afghanistan], that threatens it, is a challenge to US interests," he said. "If [there] are forces here from the other side, they ought to go out," he added.

At the same time, the military conference sought to create a system for Afghan peacekeeping. Karzai invited the country's warlords and commanders in a bid to launch a \$157 million plan to demobilize and disarm over 100,000 soldiers loyal to warlords around the country. The United Nations developed the plan and Japan and Canada, with the United States and United Kingdom, funded it. But many observers doubt the plan will compel provincial commanders to risk going unarmed in a chaotic country. [For background, see the Eurasia Insight archives].

Meanwhile, American-led troops are running search-and-kill operations after attacks by suspected Taliban elements killed four foreigners, including a Red Cross worker, in a month. Fighters on motorcycles shot two American Special Forces soldiers on March 29 and an Italian tourist on April 8. More than 150 Taliban have been

either captured or killed in actions that have involved heavy bombing and armored and artillery strikes.

The killings, targeting those involved in reconstruction projects, have forced Western non-governmental agencies to pull out their foreign staff from southern Afghanistan, while the United Nations is now considering whether it should do the same. "The Taliban tactics are to pre-empt any attempt by the government to begin major reconstruction projects in the south and prevent central government authority being extended outside Kabul," said a Western diplomat in Kabul.

Officials say that groups of men loyal to Mullah Dadullah Akhund and Mullah Akhtar Usmani - two former Taliban corps commanders and close associates of fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar- are operating in the south. Both commanders oversaw massacres of anti-Taliban forces and ordinary civilians in the late 1990s. Both also reportedly worked closely with al Qaeda and drew support from the ISI in their military offensives at the time. Akhund has said that the Taliban is regrouping.

Meanwhile, skirmishes have erupted in the north and center of the country involving Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups. Experts blame the bitterness of this fighting in part on the slow pace of reconstruction. Some 100 British troops, engineers and aid workers are due to arrive in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the ethnic Uzbek stronghold, by the end of May. They are joining an American-led initiative to deploy a dozen Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) around the country to supplement international peacekeeping forces, who work only in and around Kabul. [For background, see the Eurasia Insight archives]. These teams have set up shop in Bamiyan and Gardez but have not definitively improved security.

Experts warn that only broad-based, well-funded reconstruction will improve safety. "If you want a country to stop being a breeding place for terrorists, you cannot do it by running after individuals," Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations Special Representative to Afghanistan told reporters on April 17. "Fighting terrorism is not about running with a gun and a horse and going after the baddies," he added. NATO is set to take over leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August, but will not send soldiers outside the capital.

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and the author of "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."