

Nato Backs Down Over Pakistan Ultimatum

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By Ahmed Rashid / Islamabad

Key Nato countries have decided not to issue a diplomatic ultimatum to Pakistan which demanded that it ends its support for the Taliban and arrests leaders living in Pakistan.

Nato is placing all its hopes on a critical three-way meeting at the White House on Sept 27 when President Bush is due to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Two months ago senior diplomats from four Nato countries (Britain, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands), whose troops are fighting an estimated 8,000 Taliban in southern Afghanistan, urged their governments collectively to issue a *démarche* to Pakistan's military regime.

They want it to arrest those Taliban commanders openly operating out of Quetta, capital of Baluchistan province, which adjoins Afghanistan.

However, after a fierce debate on the issue the *démarche* was cancelled, with Nato members divided on whether or not to pressurize Pakistan.

Britain cited co-operation with Pakistani intelligence in uncovering the recent terrorist plot to attack planes departing London airports.

But a Western ambassador in Islamabad said there was a consensus among Nato, US and UK intelligence officers in Afghanistan that Quetta is "the command and control centre for Taliban planning, logistics, and recruitment in Afghanistan".

Pakistan denies that it is sponsoring the Taliban. But for the first time since 2001 President Musharraf admitted this week in Brussels that the Taliban are using Pakistani soil to carry out attacks in Afghanistan.

The recent intense fighting in southern Afghanistan is partly a Taliban attempt to carve out a safe haven where its leaders can reside during the winter months when fighting winds down.