

The Other Front

Wall Street Journal- 11/02/2003

By Ahmed Rashid/ Islamabad

For the last week, American B-1 heavy bombers, fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships have been attacking the largest force of Afghan rebels to have surfaced in nearly a year in southern Afghanistan. The battle, which began on January 27, now involves some 400 U.S. and Afghan government troops, who are looking for the remainder of a force of 80 rebels. At least 18 rebels have been killed so far.

The ominous issue is not that they are there, but that they assembled in Pakistan with heavy weapons, sophisticated communications equipment to set up a clandestine radio station, posters and pamphlets announcing a jihad against U.S. forces and the government of President Hamid Karzai, and enough supplies to set up a base camp in the mountains south of Spin Baldak just 15 miles from the Pakistan border. Their objective was clearly to harass the U.S. 82nd Airborne division camp near Kandahar-some 120 miles to the west.

Hundreds more extremists are mobilizing in Waziristan, in the Pakistani tribal belt adjacent to eastern Afghanistan, for a spring offensive that will calculatedly coincide with a U.S. invasion of Iraq. They come from a variety of groups: a few Arabs from al Qaeda, former Taliban, Afghans loyal to the renegade commander Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as Pakistani extremist groups. The Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and Osama bin Laden are also at large.

In the past few weeks U.S. Special Forces camps along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border have been rocketed almost daily. Mines and rockets have exploded outside the U.S. army headquarters at Bagram outside Kabul. In the capital young men have thrown grenades at guards and vehicles belonging to both the 8000-strong U.S. army and the 4800 soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which provides security in Kabul.

So what is going on? Is Pakistan, from where these attacks are being coordinated and launched, a friend or foe of terrorism?

Pakistan is a frontline U.S. ally against terrorism. President Pervez Musharraf has delivered over 400 al Qaeda terrorists to U.S. security agencies and the majority of al Qaeda leaders now in Guantanamo Bay were arrested by the Pakistanis over the past 14 months. There are some 60,000 Pakistani troops and militia on the Afghanistan border with about a dozen U.S. Special Forces advisers, who are supposed to be stopping anyone trying to cross into Afghanistan.

But Western diplomats in Kabul, Afghan leaders, and secular Pakistani politicians are convinced that Pakistan is now pursuing a dual strategy which constitutes another U-turn on top of the U-turn after Sept. 11, 2001, when Gen. Musharraf dumped the army's support for the Taliban and sided with the U.S.

In a long conversation with President Karzai last month in Kabul, he made clear to me that Pakistan's policy is giving him sleepless nights-despite his excellent personal rapport with Gen. Musharraf, who telephones him frequently. Mr. Karzai says he cannot understand why Gen. Musharraf is allowing these extremists, who have been living in Pakistan since the defeat of the Taliban, to undermine his government and the Pashtun belt; nor can he comprehend why these rogue elements have not been arrested or handed over to the Afghan government.

Western diplomats in Islamabad and Kabul, Afghan officials, and US army officers at Bagram now strongly believe elements of Pakistan's intelligence services and its religious parties are allowing the Taliban to regroup on the Pakistani side of the border. U.S. officers at Bagram say 90% of attacks they face are coming from groups based in Pakistan. "I think the security situation in eastern Afghanistan is going to be a problem for

some time to come just because of the freedom of operating back and forth from the Pakistan border," said Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff at Bagram in an address to U.S. troops on Dec. 21.

Simply put, Pakistan's strategy appears to be to continue hunting down non-Afghan members of al Qaeda hiding in Pakistan, so a level of co-operation with the US continues, while at the same time allowing the Pashtun Taliban and others to maintain their presence in Pakistan.

Pakistan has strongly denied such charges and says it is still a frontline state in the U.S.-led war against terrorism. The U.S. has not raised this issue publicly, fearing that it would destabilize Gen. Musharraf's government and open another front in a Muslim country where anti-Americanism is already high, just when U.S. forces prepare for Iraq.

However, over the weekend of Jan. 26-27, Gen. Tommy Franks-the head of the U.S. Central Command who will lead a possible invasion of Iraq-was in Islamabad for two days of talks with Gen. Musharraf and senior army officers. A British delegation led by Britain's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tom Phillips, was also in town. Western diplomats said that both delegations gingerly raised the issue of the continued Taliban presence in Pakistan.

Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan remains dominated by its bete noir-India. Pakistan is extremely apprehensive of the increasing influence in Afghanistan of India and Russia, who are arming and funding several non-Pashtun warlord armies as well as giving support to the ethnic Tajik defense minister, Mohammed Fahim, who has the largest factional army in the country and is an ally of Mr. Karzai and the U.S. Russia has promised to deliver \$ 100 million dollars worth of weapons to Mr. Fahim's army, which is outside the U.S.-led initiative to build a new multi-ethnic Afghan national army that will be loyal to the central government. Several U.S. demarches to Moscow to stop such arms deliveries have met with no response from the Russians.

Pakistan also wants to retain a major influence in the Pashtun belt in the south and east of Afghanistan, as millions of Pashtuns also live in Pakistan. However, Mr. Karzai, who is himself a Pashtun, laments that Pakistan is not using its influence on the border Pashtuns to deliver them to the central government. Instead, Pakistan's actions are only ensuring that those Pashtun tribal chiefs who have been sitting on the fence since the defeat of the Taliban actually gravitate back to the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Interference in Afghanistan's affairs by all of its neighbors is once again increasing, but while other states-India, Russia, Iran, the Central Asian Republics-back this or that warlord or ethnic group, Pakistan is seen to be once again backing extremists. Pakistan's military has failed to see that its role should be to moderate Pashtun extremism and ensure that they help strengthen Mr. Karzai's hand as he tries to assert himself against Mr. Fahim and provide Afghanistan with a genuinely multi-ethnic government and promote national reconciliation. Instead, while promising support to Mr. Karzai, Pakistan is undermining him and the global effort to erase terrorism from Afghanistan.

The silence of the U.S. and its Western allies is only encouraging Pakistan's Islamic parties, who now govern the North West Frontier Province, to extend an even greater helping hand to Afghan and Pakistani extremists. The Pakistani army has willingly played into their hands, rigging last October's general elections so that the Islamic parties were unprecedentedly successful at the polls, releasing from jail leaders of banned Pakistani terrorist groups, and quietly encouraging them to mount pro-Iraq demonstrations.

All this is part of a larger power play where Gen. Musharraf can claim to the Americans that he needs greater U.S. support because he is threatened by fundamentalists. This is a game that every Pakistani regime since the 1980s has played with Washington, and it has always worked. Western silence on these latest antics of the military is deeply demoralizing for Pakistan's liberal forces and secular democratic parties, not to speak of the hapless Afghans, who want to see stability and economic development.

This article appeared as an Op-ed. Mr. Rashid, a contributing writer at the Journal, is the author of "Taliban" (Yale, 2000) and, most recently, of "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia" (Yale, 2002).