

U.S. Puts Musharraf Between Hammer and Anvil on Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

The much-heralded U.S.-led Spring offensive in Afghanistan, under the code-name Operation Mountain Storm, was launched on March 15. The 13,500-strong U.S. troops, storming the mountains in southeastern Afghanistan, have been joined by some 70,000 Pakistani regulars and paramilitary, who moved into the dangerous border terrain of Pakistan where fiercely independent Pushtun tribes live, and allegedly provide shelter to the al-Qaeda and Taliban militia.

Within 48 hours, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Kabul from New Delhi and on his way to Islamabad. Expressing the ongoing commitment of the United States in the rebuilding of Afghanistan, Powell made clear that the Taliban will not be allowed to “turn the clock back.” He also promised an additional grant of \$1 billion to the Kabul government for the present fiscal year, bringing up the total for the year to \$2.2 billion. Most of all, he pressed for holding Afghan elections before the Summer is over.

Fierce Fighting in Store

Operation Mountain Storm drew blood immediately. The U.S.-led troops, including special forces, searched caves southwest of Qalat, the capital of Zabul province, 240 miles southwest of Kabul, U.S. military spokesman Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty reported. He said the U.S. forces surprised eight enemy fighters in a cave complex, prompting a gun battle in which three militiamen were killed and five others were wounded.

Over the preceding week, C-130 cargo planes and Chinook helicopters droned through the nights at the main U.S. airbase in southern Afghanistan, landing and dispatching what base personnel said were greater numbers of Americans and American gear, as the United States picked up the hunt for its top terrorist enemy, Osama bin Laden. Much heavier fighting has been reported in South Waziristan, one of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATAs). Pakistan’s military spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan told newsmen that 15 Frontier Constabulary (FC) troopers and 24 suspected militants and their protectors were killed on March 16 in a gun battle in a village close to South Waziristan’s capital, Wana.

The paramilitary troopers were involved in searching and

arresting suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda militia. “The foreign elements,” Pakistan’s military press release added, “supported by local patrons, engaged the FC troops using heavy and light weapons resulting in the death of 15 troopers and injuries to 8.” The officials expressed surprise at the strength and breadth of the resistance, which they said came from both local and foreign militants. “Their level of training and resilience has surprised us all,” a senior government official in Wana told the *New York Times* on March 16. Dozens of U.S. intelligence officers are now believed to be working with the Pakistan army in the FATA. The government in Islamabad firmly denies such reports, saying it will not allow U.S. troops to enter Pakistani territory.

Resistance Weakened, But Not Dead

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S. troops and special forces were engaged in a number of battles with the Taliban and al-Qaeda militia. There is little doubt that the U.S.-led troops have scattered and weakened the extremists, but the guerrillas have not been destroyed. It was said at the very outset that these extremists, who were welcomed by the tribal groups along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, remained sheltered in the FATA and adjacent southeastern provinces of Afghanistan.

In 2002, the United States had sought “permission” of Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf to bomb the tribal areas of Waziristan and Northern Areas, where 10,000 al-Qaeda terrorists had taken sanctuary, intelligence sources said at the time.

U.S. officials who sounded out Musharraf were reported to have specifically identified the Mahsoud and Khattak tribes as those providing sanctuary to the al-Qaeda men who had fled Afghanistan to escape the manhunt by U.S. troops. But Islamabad turned down the U.S. request, because it felt the move could lead to a revolt by some 100,000 Mahsoud and Khattak soldiers in the Pakistani army.

Lt. Gen. Ali Quli Khan Khattak (ret.), who was overlooked for the army chief’s post by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in favor of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, had conveyed the concerns of the Khattak and Mahsoud tribes to Gen. Mohammed Aziz, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, one

Pakistani report indicated. He also warned about the possibility of a revolt by the tribesmen in the army, should the government accede to the U.S. request.

Musharraf's Headaches

In addition, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the six-party alliance of Islamic radicals, had held nation-wide protests in early January 2003 against President Musharraf's decision to go along with the United States in Afghanistan, in joint military operations in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and in U.S. plans to attack Iraq. The demonstration was important from two aspects. First, President Musharraf needs support of the MMA to keep the democratic forces at bay and douse the anger of the extremists and fundamentalists who consider that Musharraf is acting as a puppet of Washington. Moreover, the MMA is the party politically most powerful in the bordering provinces of FATA.

With a population of 5.8 million, the seven tribal agencies in FATA, all inhabited by the Pushtuns, were created by the British to serve as a buffer between Afghanistan and British India. When the British left in 1947 and Pakistan became a nation, Pakistan's founder and first governor-general, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, made it a point to keep the tribal groups' lives untouched. For almost six decades since, Pakistan has maintained minimal governance in the FATA, and no Pakistani soldier was ever deployed inside that area.

It is evident that President Musharraf is fully aware of the danger he faces by breaching the unwritten law not to disturb peace inside the FATA. On March 15, the day Operation Mountain Storm was launched, he went to Peshawar and organized a mini-council attended by the leaders of the tribes who dwell inside the FATA. He told them that the 500-600 foreign militants who now reside within the FATA must be handed over. If these foreigners are made to surrender with their weapons by the tribal leaders, President Musharraf promised that they would not be handed over to the United States. It has also been reported that Islamabad has met with some success in co-opting the Waziri tribes in the hunt for al-Qaeda militia and its local supporters from South Waziristan. The immediate objective of the force is to capture the three most wanted tribesmen, Neik Muhammad, Muhammad Sharif, and Maulvi Abbas. All three are accused of sheltering al-Qaeda, according to tribal elders and a senior government official, reported by the Pakistani news weekly *The Friday Times*. The troubled South Waziristan Agency borders Afghanistan's restive Paktika province, considered by many as one of the major nests of the al-Qaeda.

The Big Threats

As long as President Musharraf manages to secure some support from the FATA tribes, much of the danger of an all-out tribal uprising can be avoided. But the danger will grow exponentially if the Pakistani troops cannot capture Osama bin Laden, Ayama al-Zawahiri, and other top al-Qaeda and



Taliban leaders. Or, if the "hammer and anvil approach" created by the Pakistani troops in the FATA, with the U.S.-led troops in southeastern Afghanistan, does not produce the desired result. Islamabad's plan is to use its troops to push militants into Afghanistan, where U.S. troops would be waiting for them.

Under such circumstances, it is a certainty that Washington would not only step up pressure on Pakistan to open up its nuclear weapons program for inspection by the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency, but will also demand U.S. troops moving into the FATA to carry out hot pursuit of militants—permission for which had been given to them by the U.S. military at the end of last year, according to U.S. officials (Pakistan denies it). When that happens, President Musharraf will be under grave personal danger, and so will be Pakistan's national unity.

To begin with, between the FATA and Afghanistan lies the disputed Durand Line, which separates Pakistan from Afghanistan. The Durand Line was never accepted as the international border by the Afghans. The problem dates back to 1893, when British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand drew an arbitrary line across the Hindu Kush Mountains and proclaimed it the border between British Indian territory and fiercely independent Afghanistan to the north and west. The trouble was that the line cut through an area peopled by Pushtun tribes which had no wish to be separated from their kinfolk. Afghanistan never accepted the Durand Line and campaigned for creation of a "Pushtunistan" to unite the Pushtun tribes. The British in their day rejected this, and so did Pakistan when it came into being with the partition of British India in 1947. The issue dogged Afghan-Pakistani relationships for the next 50-plus years, leaving both countries in a permanent state of semi-cold war. In 1948, the Pakistan government conducted a plebiscite asking the Pushtuns whether they wanted to join India or Pakistan. Joining Af-

ghanistan was not presented as an option. About 50% of Push-tuns boycotted the poll, and Kabul never recognized it as valid.

Already some trouble along the border has been reported. The Tanai tribe from Afghanistan has reportedly moved the Durand Line eastward by at least a kilometer within Pakistani territory, raising the anger of the North Waziristan tribes.

There are other mounting problems for Musharraf. There has been a rise in Sunni-Shia sectarian violence, with more than 40 people killed and at least 150 wounded in Quetta during the Shia celebration of Ashura on March 2. The killing occurred when bombers and gunmen belonging to Sunni extremist groups attacked a Shia procession.

President Musharraf told reporters that a Libyan member of al-Qaeda was behind two assassination attempts against him in December, and vowed to rid Pakistan's tribal regions of hundreds of suspected foreign terrorists. "The man who organized the suicide attacks against me was from Libya and a member of al-Qaeda," he told a meeting of tribal elders in the northwestern city of Peshawar. The two bombings happened ten days apart in December. On both occasions, Musharraf was traveling in a motorcade in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, near Islamabad. The first attack destroyed a bridge seconds after his vehicle passed, but no one was hurt. In the second attack, suicide bombers who tried to ram into his vehicle, killed 16 people.

Polls in Washington's Mind

It is unlikely that the United States is in any mood to make life less stressful for President Musharraf. Secretary Powell's visit to Pakistan at this juncture was observed as a sign that the United States is giving Musharraf an ultimatum: Deliver Osama now, or else. It is also evident that Washington is now focussed on its own timetable. It wants Osama before the Presidential elections in November, and also would like to see the Afghan elections go through in June, although Afghan President Hamid Karzai's March 18 statement indicates that polls cannot be held before August. According to Karzai, the projected delay is due to slowness in voter registration.

Washington believes that holding elections would improve the image of the White House not only in the United States, which, of course, is of prime importance to the incumbent administration, but also to some of its allies fighting the "war against terrorism." As a result, Washington is not only ready to put al-Qaeda and the Taliban between the "hammer and the anvil," but also its good friend, President Musharraf, to achieve its prime objectives.

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