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Pakistan adds to US's Afghan woes

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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ISLAMABAD - Despite the threat of arrest, Pakistani lawyers and activists on Thursday began a "long march" from the port city of Karachi to the capital Islamabad in an attempt to force the government to reinstate judges sacked in 2007.

In just a few weeks, the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan will begin another leg of its to-date eight-year-old long march to oust foreign forces from the country.

The tumult in Pakistan, which is increasingly loosening President Asif Ali Zardari's grip on power, and the next round of fighting in Afghanistan - expected to be the fiercest yet - are inextricably linked and are fast spiraling out of control.

On Wednesday, hundreds of lawyers and opposition figures were arrested, and the same fate could befall the marchers. Orders have also been issued for the detention of Nawaz Sharif, head of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party and his brother Shabaz Sharif, former chief minister of Punjab province.

The marchers want Zardari to honor his promise to reinstate the judges who were sacked by former military ruler president General Pervez Musharraf, including Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

In these tense political times, Zardari has little time to cope with the "war on terror".

Ready for a fight

Ahead of the resumption of battle in Afghanistan now that the weather is warmer, the Taliban have a virtual siege all around the capital Kabul. They have significant control in the vital

districts of Wardak, Logar, Parwan and Kapisa.

A second strategic ring to reinforce this siege comprises the provinces of Kunar, Nooristan and Ghazni. The four vital entry and exit routes for the Taliban's supply lines - Nimroz, Herat, Nangarhar and Kandahar - are also heavily manned by the militants.

In addition, after striking peace deals with the Pakistani security forces, the newly formed United Front of Taliban in the Pakistani tribal areas is ready to pump at least 15,000 to 20,000 fresh fighters into Afghanistan. These are expected to start crossing the rugged - and unmanned - border in April.

United States President Barack Obama has promised an additional 17,000 US forces for Afghanistan, in addition to the 38,000 already on the ground, as well as greater numbers for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whose forces now tally about 55,000.

Even as the numbers of the combatants increase, the US is exploring alternative ways to deal with the problem. Unlike the George W Bush administration's war doctrine of hitting Pakistan's tribal areas with Predator drones to take out key militant leaders, Washington is attempting mediation for peace.

United States Vice President Joe Biden, speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Tuesday, claimed that at least 70% of the Taliban's guerrillas in Afghanistan were mercenaries and could be persuaded to lay down their arms. This follows on the US stepping up its calls for outreach to "moderate" elements of the insurgency.

"Five percent of the Taliban is incorrigible, not susceptible to anything other than being defeated," Biden said. "Another 25% or so are not quite sure, in my view, of the intensity of their commitment to the insurgency. Roughly 70% are involved because of the money."

In a weekend New York Times interview, Obama floated the idea of engaging with non-radical members of the insurgency, as Afghanistan heads toward August 20 elections that will test its ability to govern itself.

However, it appears that Washington has already missed the boat. The reason is the all-time high domination of al-Qaeda-influenced militants - the neo-Taliban - who are not willing to make any deal short of the withdrawal of foreign occupation forces and the restoration of the Taliban regime.

Despite the killing of a large number of important al-Qaeda commanders, these hardliners have a strong presence among the Pakistan militants allied with the three main commanders - Mullah Bradar, Sirajuddin Haqqani and Anwarul Haq Mujahid. These three have pledged their allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who has transformed the Taliban into an ultra-conservative force compared to a few years ago when the Taliban were a Pashtun tribal movement.

Interestingly, Washington earlier rejected a similar proposal made by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office which described 80% of the Taliban as reconcilable and 20% as not so. On the basis of this theory, the British Embassy and the [United Nations](#) supported a move to start negotiations with the Taliban in 2007. They sent one UN and one European Union official to Helmand province to hold talks with the Taliban commander there.

Under American pressure, the Afghan government expelled the officers and relations between the US and Britain were tense for a few months. So much so that the appointment of Lord Paddy Ashdown as the UN's special representative for Afghanistan was opposed by the Afghan government under American pressure.

In 2001, before the US invasion of Afghanistan and the ouster of the Taliban, then-Pakistani president Musharraf advised Washington that there were two kinds of Taliban. The one group was militant, the other moderate. He pleaded to engage the moderates, but the Americans said Pakistan was too sympathetic towards the Taliban and rejected the proposal.

After the defeat of the Taliban, Musharraf met [president George W Bush](#) and reportedly pointed out that the US was making a blunder by focussing all of its operations on Kabul and leaving the rest of the country to be tamed by the air force.

Musharraf pointed out that Afghanistan had eight power centers - Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunar and Nooristan, Paktia and Paktika, Khost and Pansher. He suggested that if Bush wanted to consolidate American control, he needed to immediately negotiate with the various warlords in those regions and strike separate deals.

The advice was ignored and the US made deals all over Afghanistan only with commanders associated with the Shura-e-Nazar. This council was formed by the late Ahmad Shah Massoud of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance that was made up of mostly non-Pashtun groups.

The result was that the powerful commanders associated with the Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and those who were allied with the Taliban were overlooked and then melted into the Taliban-led insurgency.

A good example of this is the most powerful commander in the Kunar Valley, Haji Kashmir Khan. He welcomed the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 and went to Kabul along with his loyalist commanders to greet Hamid Karzai, the new president.

However, being a close aide of Hekmatyar, he was not given any positions in Kunar - these went to rival commanders associated with the Shura-e-Nazar. Khan returned disgruntled to his sanctuaries in the mountains and to this day he is Hekmatyar's main protector. Hekmatyar has regrouped the scattered command of the Hezbe-e-Islami and they have carried out several successful operations and form an important part of the insurgency.

In addition, over the years a new generation of fighters has taken over command in many areas. They are ultra-conservative and make a mockery of Biden's claim that 70% of the Taliban could be bought off.

Pakistan's political quagmire

Mian Raza Rabbani, the leader of the House in the [senate](#) and a top member of the lead party in the ruling coalition, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), this week resigned. He was apparently miffed after a close friend and a new entry in the PPP, Farooq Naek, was nominated as the party's candidate for the position of chairman of the senate.

This has been interpreted as the first major sign of dissent against the leadership of Zardari,

who has already developed a series of differences with [Prime Minister](#) Syed Yousuf Raza Gillani, another senior leader of the PPP.

This inter-party unrest could not come at a worse time, given the troubles on the streets with anti-government elements and the rampant militancy in the tribal areas. In effect, all state operations are crippled, including Pakistan's commitment to the "war on terror". The gridlock in Islamabad directly affects neighboring Afghanistan as all containment strategies against the Taliban, directly and indirectly, have to be routed through Pakistan.

The military, due to its extreme unpopularity during the eight-year Musharraf era that ended in 2007, is unlikely to be in any position for "adventurism", such as a coup.

All the same, General Headquarters in Rawalpindi has activated its forces and informed the authorities in Islamabad that it will directly supervise security in Islamabad. This is the first time security has been taken from the Ministry of Interior.

Zardari is in a difficult spot over the reinstatement of the judges, especially ex-chief justice Chaudhry. In an American-brokered deal with Musharraf, Zardari was given a [presidential](#) pardon for all corruption cases that were pending against him, allowing him to take political office. Were Chaudhry to return, he would in all likelihood challenge the presidential order.

American officials are now talking to opposition leader Sharif, Aitzaz Ehsan, the leader of the lawyers' movement, as well as Chaudhry, with a view to the possible ouster of Zardari, who only took office last September.

On Thursday, US envoy Richard Holbrooke called on Gillani at the National Assembly and spoke to him for 15 minutes. According to sources who spoke to Asia Times Online, he expressed concern over the political turmoil and urged the premier to show restraint. Earlier, US [ambassador](#) to Pakistan Anne Peterson met with Sharif.

The US still wants a government comprising secular and liberal political parties to support the "war on terror" and the military surge against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. With first pick Zardari looking more and more like a loser, a change of horses in mid-stream beckons, but such maneuvers in volatile Pakistan are never easy.