

Pakistani Cauldron Bubbles Over

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite accommodating all of Washington's demands to help the United States to fight its war on terrorism, Pakistan's President-cum-Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, is not sleeping well. With two assassination attempts, and the suspected assassin, a junior Air Force officer, having "escaped" from his Pakistani prison, President Musharraf is now virtually living in a bunker. Meanwhile, tribesmen along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders are at war with the Pakistani Army, the gas fields are under attack by the Baloch tribes, and in the Northern Territories, where Pakistan meets Afghanistan, China, and the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, Wahabi and Sunni militants are baying for Shi'ite Ismaili blood.

Of all the crises that are keeping President Musharraf awake at night, it is the crisis in Balochistan that has staggered him the most. On Jan. 18, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, a Citigroup banker and a favorite of Wall Street, called a special meeting of the Cabinet to review the law and order situation in Balochistan. The meeting, which will include the Interior Ministry, is to discuss Balochistan, as well as take a closer look at the growing terrorism activities centered on the troubled Sui gas fields.

Musharraf Threatens Baloch Tribes

From a safe distance away from the Sui gas fields, President Musharraf, during an interview with Geo Television, issued a warning to the Baloch tribes:

"Don't push us. . . . It is not the 1970s, and this time you won't even know what has hit you."

Musharraf was referring to the crushing of a Baloch secessionist movement in the 1970s by the then-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto used the Army and Air Force to bomb his own people to submission. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which was fomenting trouble at the time, was fragmented, and its leaders fled to safer havens in Britain, the Gulf states, and the United States. The Baloch movement at the time was inspired by the Bangladeshi liberation movement which separated East Pakistan from Pakistan in 1972, and by the humiliation suffered by the Pakistani Army when more than 90,000 Pakistani soldiers had surrendered to the Indian Army in Dhaka.

What President Musharraf reminded the Baloch, is that those conditions do not exist now. Pakistan is now a good ally

of the United States, and the Pakistan Army is strong and sound. There is no indication, however, that the tribes are frightened by President's strong words.

On the other hand, it is evident that the Baloch tribes have noticed that a ruthless military campaign by the Pakistani military against the Uighur, Uzbek, Chechen, Kazak, and Arab survivors operating from South Waziristan along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders, has not been successful. Violent attacks on the Army continue to be reported. Already more than 200 Pakistani military and paramilitary officers have lost their lives, and some observers have begun to refer to South Waziristan as a "mini-Iraq."

The South Waziristan campaign was goaded on by the United States, urging Islamabad to take control of the area where the al-Qaeda and other anti-American militia live and recruit. In Balochistan, however, the sources of this particular trouble were different.

The Baloch Crisis

The latest crisis in Balochistan was triggered by a gang rape of a female doctor by an Army captain and three soldiers—reportedly all from the Punjab province—belonging to the Defense Security Guards (DSG) in the Sui gas fields. Since an Army officer was involved in the case, DSG hushed it up and shifted the doctor to Karachi. Subsequently, reports indicate, she was not allowed to meet anybody, so that nobody would know the reality. The incident, and the way the matter was hushed up, enraged the Baloch tribes. According to Pakistani media reports, the incident set off skirmishes between Pakistani security forces and insurgent Bugti tribesmen in the province's natural gas-rich Sui region. The gun fights and ambushes led to the death of at least eight paramilitary security men. Islamabad has ignored the gang-rape incident, and claims the tribesmen want more royalties from the gas taken from their lands.

As it is, the Bugti chieftain Sardar Akbar Khan Bugti is paid 70 million Pakistani rupees annually by oil and gas exploration companies in Balochistan as payola, so that they can carry out work in the Sui fields peacefully, Online news agency reported. Around 250 of the engineers employed by the companies reportedly belong to the Bugti tribes, and the exploration companies are not allowed to recruit unskilled manpower for their projects from outside Sui areas, reports claim.

As a result of these skirmishes, natural gas supplies to industry, transport, power plants, and for household use have been badly disrupted across the country, following the closure of processing facilities at Sui, some 350 km southeast of the Balochistan provincial capital, Quetta. The state-run gas plant was severely damaged when it came under attack from armed tribesmen on Jan. 11. Sui is the biggest of 24 gas fields in the country, producing 1 billion cubic feet of gas per day—about 45% of Pakistan's total production.

While the major Baloch tribes such as the Bugtis and



Marris are using their muscle to extract the most from Islamabad, it would be absurd to believe that the BLA is not involved. For instance, many members of this generation of the BLA had left the country when Bhutto rained bombs and bullets on the Baloch to tame them in the mid-1970s. Reports indicate that some of them went to the Persian

Gulf, and had joined the local police and security forces, acquiring in the process some expertise in the use of arms, ammunition, and explosives, and have since returned to Balochistan. It is these elements which constitute the hard core of the BLA.

The BLA was blamed for eight explosions in Quetta on

Pakistan's Independence Day on Aug. 14, 2004; the ambush of a group of seven Pakistani Army officers shopping in the Khuzdar area on Aug 1, killing five of them; the unsuccessful attempt to kill Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Yousef on Aug. 2; frequent disruptions of gas and oil supplies to Punjab by blowing up the pipelines; and blowing up the Sui local airport. But very little detail about who their leaders are, and what the strength of their cadres is, is public knowledge. This makes the cleaning up operation more difficult. Reports indicate that, if the Pakistani military chooses to hit the Baloch with yet another heavy hammer, the situation may turn virtually uncontrollable.

Whether or not Islamabad acknowledges the existence of such conditions, the evidence is pervasive. According to a noted Pakistani journalist, Syed Saleem Shahzad, al-Qaeda activities along Balochistan's border with Afghanistan have made things dicier. The BLA has come to believe that the American presence in Balochistan, and elsewhere, has provided President Musharraf an added fillip not to work out any arrangement with the Baloch. The latest round of troubles will be seized upon by Islamabad to wipe out the rebels once and for all, and populate the thinly populated province with the Punjabis and Army personnel, the BLA claims.

In order to counter Islamabad's moves, the rebels themselves see this as an opportunity to deliver a knockout blow to Pakistan's ruling establishment and its close friend, the United States, in Balochistan.

Syed Saleem Shahzad points out that with its deep, warm sea waters, extremely rich mineral resources, and strategic location, Balochistan had been the center of many regional and international intrigues for almost half a century. With the Cold War over, new players that include Iran, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, India, and the United States have new agendas in the region, ranging from a proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, oil and gas exploration, and a deep sea port to military bases, Shahzad says.

Americans in Their Midst

Pakistan is once more playing a frontline-state role in the U.S.-led "war on terror," by providing bases and facilities for the United States in Balochistan to monitor the Taliban and the ethnic Baloch part of eastern Iran. China is assisting in building a deepwater port at Gwadar in Balochistan that will cater to large ships. The port will be the one nearest to the Central Asian states that will have the potential to attract international traffic, which previously went to Bandar Abbas in Iran, to Oman, or to the United Arab Emirates.

Shahzad believes Islamabad is now left with no option but to wield the big stick against the Baloch. The days of dialogue and payouts are over. There are also indications that the United States needs Pakistan to help it change the regime in Tehran. One of the ways to subvert Iran is through eastern Iran, using the Pakistani Baloch tribal links to the Iranian-Baloch on the other side of the border. This had been done



President Pervez Musharraf, already jeopardized by mounting internal pressures from within Pakistan, will only see his problems exacerbated by the role the Cheney-Bush gang wants him to play in Iran and Afghanistan.

before in the late 1970s, and it seems that the war-hungry U.S. neo-conservatives are pressing for it.

Shahzad could be right about the exigency of the Americans. Based on exclusive information he has gathered, he claims Pakistan has provided extensive facilities to special United Kingdom and U.S. forces in Pakistan's port city of Karachi, which in many ways resembles the Iranian towns of Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, and other urban centers. Special Forces from the United States and Britain have staged unannounced commando exercises in Karachi. With its maze of high-rise buildings, communication networks, and the division of the city (Sher-i-Bala and Sher-i-Payien), Tehran and Karachi are very similar, Shahzad pointed out.

On Jan. 11, the troops conducted anti-hijacking exercises on a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) aircraft at an isolated yard several kilometers from the main terminal and runway, although they were provided with detailed maps of the airport.

While confirming the exercises, a spokesman of the Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Col. Tahir Idrees Malik, said they were anti-terrorist drills. He said it was an honor for Pakistan to be able to give training "to these friendly countries." This is the first time in the history of Pakistan that the Armed Forces, including the Army, have been known to stage exercises in urban areas.

Violence Elsewhere

President Musharraf's plan to accommodate London's and Washington's demands could very well push Pakistan

over the edge. The Pakistani government, a coalition of a number of political parties under Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, survives with a thin majority in the National Assembly. The Balochistan episode has already jeopardized the majority government's rule. One of the coalition partners, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), has hinted that the party may quit the government over the issue of launching Army operations in Balochistan. Addressing the party workers from London by telephone, the MQM chief said the military was preparing for an operation in Balochistan which the Muttahida opposed.

In addition, in the strategically important Northern Territories of Pakistan, which border China and Afghanistan, and include a part of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, Sunni militants shot and killed an Ismaili leader, Agha Ziauddin, on Jan. 8. Ziauddin's killing sparked riots that left at least 15 dead. In December, two Sunni militants were arrested in connection with the killing that same month of two employees of an Aga Khan aid agency in the remote northern town of Chitral, which borders Afghanistan.

The Ismailis are a branch of the Shi'ite Muslim sect which considers Aga Khan as their Imam. The Ismailis live in large numbers in Pakistan's Northern Territories, as well as in nearby Tajikistan's Pamir plateau. About 350,000 Ismailis live in Tajikistan, and most of them reside in the Pamirs in

the Gorno-Badakshan region of the country. In the adjoining Xinjiang region of China, a large number of Ismailis live in virtual isolation from the Aga Khan-run international community.

Pakistan's Sunni militants, trained in an orthodox Deobandi school of Islam, work hand-in-glove with the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. In fact, the political arm of the Sunni militants in Pakistan, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JII) and its student wing Islamic Jamiat Tulaba (IJT), are financed generously from Saudi Arabia. The JII have been infiltrating the Pakistani military in large numbers since the 1980s, and played a very important role in bringing the Taliban militants to power in Afghanistan in 1996.

North of Balochistan, where Afghanistan meets Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, the vast mountainous region remains out of bounds for non-locals. The main town of South Waziristan, Wana, looks like a military garrison. Reports pour out almost daily of skirmishes, land-mine explosions, and use of heavy artillery and occasional aerial bombing, making it a deadly conflict zone.

In Kabul, the Afghan President and the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, an important member in Washington's powerful neo-conservative cabal, have decided to bring in most of the earlier-banned Taliban into the government. This would allow some disgruntled Afghan Pushtuns to give up weapons and join the Kabul government.

But most of the militants who are battling the Pakistani Army in the tribal areas are foreign and local tribal militants. The foreigners have nothing to do with the Taliban, but had boarded the bandwagon because all were under attack from the Americans. These foreigners have no place to go, and they are very well armed and trained.

At the same time, the local tribesmen, who had sheltered the foreign militants, have come under rocket and missile attack from fellow Pakistanis. To begin with, these tribesmen had lived all their lives independently, and no ruler in Islamabad ever tried to impose his or her will on them. Only following the invasion of Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001 by the Americans, did Islamabad, under intense pressure from Washington, send the military inside the tribal areas. The skirmishes that ensued over the months have killed many tribesmen, hardening their attitude against Islamabad. Battle-hardened tribesmen have taken the military action as an attack on their sovereignty, and have been putting up stiff resistance.

Some analysts say it is a no-win situation for the Pakistani troops. They cannot abandon the operation half-way, and now have to use bombers and helicopter gunships against what was earlier described as a "handful of foreign militants and some local miscreants." Observers point out that relations between the Pakistani authorities and local tribesmen have deteriorated to such an extent that the troops may remain bogged down long after all the foreign militants have been eliminated or flushed out of the region.

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