

Opinion

Taliban's Power Display

► By Pir-Mohammad Mollazehi

NATO's Commander in Afghanistan General Dan McNeil has increased his forces in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border due to the contingent peace agreement between Pakistan and the militia dubbed as Pakistani Taliban and the possibility of the new rounds of attacks of Afghanistan Taliban.

There are indications hinting at the progress of peace negotiations between Pakistani Taliban Leader Baitullah Mehsud and the government of Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani. It seems that General McNeil believes that when the local Taliban do not feel challenged by the Pakistani government and army, they will voice more support for Afghanistan's Taliban and Al-Qaeda and intensify war in the Afghan border areas. This is how the general justifies increasing his forces in the border area.

The issue of compromise between the tribes known as local Taliban and the Pakistani government is an extensive project that pursues diverse objectives. With the withdrawal of Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League from the federal cabinet, the coalition with People's Party is in doubt and this in itself can be an issue linked to developments in tribal areas. Islamabad faces a radical group in tribal areas which is not conceived as completely local and which is supported by foreign forces. It is clear that no country accepts the responsibility of supporting the local Taliban. Nevertheless, it seems that there is a much stronger regional and international current than the tribal radicalism in Pakistan. This interpretation exists that transferring radicalism linked to Afghanistan's Taliban and Al-Qaeda to Pashtun areas is less costly for the world as otherwise other countries would have to pay the price. Thus, the developments linked to local Taliban taking place in tribal areas transcend regional considerations and more invisible hands are behind them.

Hence, the solution to this dilemma also transcends the region and cannot be found in Afghanistan and Pakistan alone. Furthermore, it must be recalled that developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan are intertwined and any solution must heed both countries' interests, as otherwise, it is doomed. Separating Pakistani Taliban from Afghan Taliban and separating both currents from Al-Qaeda do not comply with the existing realities. In the Taliban's eyes, compromise with the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan is only the first phase as the group's final target is reviving an Islamic rulership with each Muslim state being part of this system. Consequently, the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan do not have the needed legitimacy in this line of thinking.

If a conscious mind views the contingent compromise between the local Taliban and Islamabad from this angle, it can be asserted that the agreement is just the preliminary phase of the show of power by Taliban, which is equipped with radicalism and it cannot be thought as endurable.

Pakistan Expects

Resolution of Judges Dispute

Pakistan's coalition government will survive a dispute over restoring judges fired by President Pervez Musharraf that resulted in Nawaz Sharif's party quitting the alliance, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said.

Gilani said he hasn't accepted the May 13 resignations of nine Pakistan Muslim League ministers because he expects them to rejoin as soon as the judges are reinstated, the official Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

"There is no doubt in my mind, there is no doubt in Nawaz Sharif's mind and there is no doubt in the mind of any political party that these deposed judges will have to be reinstated at the earliest," APP cited Gilani as saying Monday in Egypt, where he attended the World Economic Forum.

Legal officials will soon come up with recommendations on solving issues including how to restore Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, APP quoted Gilani as saying.

► Zardari Acquitted

Meanwhile a Pakistani court acquitted Zardari of a decade-old drug-smuggling charge on Monday, his lawyer said, the last outstanding criminal case against him, Reuters said.

He was accused of drug trafficking in 1997 by the government of then prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Latif Khosa, Zardari's lawyer, said he had asked a court in the eastern city of Lahore to acquit his client because the charge was politically-motivated and had not been proven.

"I told the court that dragging out this case would be an abuse of the law. It's fake and fabricated. I pleaded to the court that this black chapter be closed and Mr Zardari be respectfully acquitted. The court accepted my plea," Khosa said.

Courts have in recent weeks cleared Zardari of several criminal cases including one of conspiracy to kill his estranged brother-in-law, Murtaza Bhutto, whom police shot dead in 1996.

Several corruption cases against Zardari in Pakistani courts and abroad have also been quashed under an ordinance introduced by Musharraf late last year which granted amnesty to Bhutto, Zardari and several other politicians.

Bush Apologizes Over Qur'an Shooting

US President George W. Bush has apologized to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki over the shooting of a Qur'an by an American soldier near Baghdad, state television announced on Tuesday.

"The prime minister received an apology from US President George W. Bush on the incident of shooting of a Qur'an by a US soldier," Al-Iraqia television said.

US military authorities in Iraq have apologized to the local community west of Baghdad where the staff sergeant fired at the Qur'an during shooting practice on May 11.

The unidentified soldier, who pumped bullets into the Muslim holy book and wrote an expletive inside, has since been expelled from his unit and sent home.

The American military described the incident as "both serious and deeply troubling," but stressed it was an "isolated incident and a result of one soldier's actions".

Muslim Iraqi Islamic Party headed by Vice President Tareq Al-Hashemi on Monday demanded government action against the soldier.

The desecration of the Qur'an was also strongly condemned by the Association of Muslim Scholars, which represents more than 3,000 mosques, and which held both the US military and Iraqi government responsible.



News Diary

THURSDAY, MAY 22



■ BRDO, Slovenia - EU Troika meeting in Ukraine.



■ KARNATAKA, India - The third and concluding phase of Legislative Assembly elections in the Indian state of Karnataka.

Lebanese Rivals Running Out of Time



► Lebanese independent MP Michel Murr (2nd r) walks with Lebanon's opposition Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (c), as the head of the Hezbollah delegation, MP Mohammed Raad (l) walks to the venue of talks in Doha.

Arab mediators have set Wednesday as a deadline for rival Lebanese leaders to agree on one of two proposals they have put forward to end a political crisis that has brought the country to the brink of a new civil war.

Lebanese leaders meeting in Qatar have yet to respond to the Arab proposals and one side has asked for more time, Ahmad Abdullah Al-Mahmoud, Qatari Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, told reporters.

"The committee approved (that request) giving until tomorrow," he said, reading a statement.

He said details of the proposals would not be disclosed.

► Serious Setback

Rival Lebanese leaders were running out of time on Tuesday to clinch an agreement to end their 18-month-old political crisis, with Arab mediators set to leave the talks within hours.

Qatari-led Arab mediators worked until the early hours of the morning to salvage the negotiations between the government and opposition after a serious setback on Monday.

"We are in a last ditch effort to reach a deal," a senior Arab diplomat said on Tuesday, Reuters reported.

The talks in Doha, which aim to prevent Lebanon sliding back into sectarian strife, follow the Arab League's intervention last week to end the country's worst domestic fighting since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The pressure is on for rival Lebanese parties to make progress before their host leaves, though some delegates said the talks could be resumed if a deal was in sight.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani made proposals on Sunday on power-sharing in a new government and the rivals had been expected to hammer out a compromise over a new election law on Monday.

Agreement on these points would pave the way for parliament to elect army commander General Michel Suleiman as president, a post that has been vacant since November.

But a statement issued by opposition leaders after a meeting on Monday restated their existing demands, disappointing the ruling camp and casting a pall over talks.

► Deadlock

The latest discussions remained deadlocked over the division of Beirut's electoral constituencies—the bedrock of support for Saad Al-Hariri.

An opposition delegate said Hezbollah had rejected an offer for veto power in a new government in return for concessions on the electoral law.

Electoral divisions in any law are seen as fundamental to the outcome of parliamentary polls in 2009.

No timetable has been set for the talks but Arab officials have made it clear that they will not stay indefinitely in Doha.

"I hope that we reach agreement because we all have other commitments ... and we cannot abandon them and also not reach a solution here," said Arab League chief Amr Moussa on Monday. "In all cases, we are leaving tomorrow. Personally, I am leaving."