

Britain And US Ask For Troops From India And Pakistan For Iraq

Daily Telegraph 09/05/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/ Islamabad

Britain and the US have separately asked for two brigades of troops or 5000 soldiers each from India and Pakistan, to boost their peace keeping operations in Iraq. Although both countries are keen to oblige the coalition forces, they are insisting on the need for a UN cover before they can deploy.

Despite the intense hostility and rivalry between India and Pakistan, the two countries provided troops to the UN forces in Somalia in the mid-1990s. "They worked together in Somalia remarkably well and could do so again in Iraq, we see no problem in that," said a Western military official in Islamabad.

Britain has asked India and Pakistan to provide a brigade each for deploying in Iraq's southern zone which is under British command. Western and Pakistani officials said Britain made the offer before the Americans and within days of the fall of Baghdad.

However senior Western diplomats said that Britain has now scaled down its demand, asking Pakistan for engineers, doctors and other technical staff who would be under military command.

The US has also asked India and Pakistan to provide a brigade each for peace keeping duties in Iraq's central zone which includes Baghdad. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who is visiting the region to try and push forward a peace process between the two countries, will be raising the issue of the supply of troops during his meetings in Islamabad and New Delhi.

Several high ranking US Defense Department and intelligence officials are also traveling with him. However Western diplomats say that India and Pakistan, who are both keen to join the coalition force in Iraq, would need a UN resolution to cover their deployment because of strong anti-US and anti-war feeling at home.

"The army would love to do it because it bring them money and prestige and tightens the alliance with the US," said a senior Pakistani official. "But the government needs some kind of UN mandate, otherwise the Islamic parties will go to town on us and accuse us of abetting US imperialism," he added.

With the uncertainty about when a new UN resolution will be passed on Iraq, Armitage was expected today to discuss with his Pakistani counterparts several options to provide that cover – such as a resolution by the Organization of the Islamic Conference or the Gulf Cooperation Council which are both made up of Muslim countries.

Clearly the US is arm twisting both countries in the hope that their mutual rivalry and mutual desire to be seen as good friends of the US as well as benefit from reconstruction contracts, will make one country blink first.

The US is keen to woo Pakistan because it is an important Muslim country which could persuade other Muslim states to join the US bandwagon in Iraq. India, the world's largest democracy and significant non-aligned nation has major benefits for the US also.