

British Troops Will Die For As Long As Bush And Blair Allow It

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By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

Faced with mounting pressure from Nato over Pakistan's alleged harbouring of the Taliban, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf's response was not to arrest Taliban leaders residing in Quetta, but to bomb a religious school hundreds of miles to the north.

European and Nato tolerance levels for Musharraf's two-track policy of hunting down al-Qa'eda, while allowing Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to recruit, plan and arm themselves in Balochistan province, is now at an all-time low.

Yet George Bush and Tony Blair still refuse to call the military's bluff, with the result that Nato troops continue to die every day in Afghanistan.

At least 80 people died in the bombing of a madrassa in the Bajaur tribal agency on the border with Afghanistan on Monday. The government says they were militants being trained by al-Qa'eda, the locals say there were students. American forces in Afghanistan may have been involved in the attack; they almost certainly provided intelligence for it.

The truth may never be known, because for three years the army has barred journalists and human rights investigators from the region - so much for Musharraf's much-vaunted freedom of the press. Anti-American protests are now taking place, led by Islamic fundamentalist parties who at the political level are allies of both the military and the Taliban.

So what is going on in this complex, high-stakes game?

Taliban (and by default al-Qa'eda) base areas are being established in Pakistan's northern tribal agencies and Balochistan, which are spreading to the Afghan side of the border because of a shortage of Nato troops. International terrorists take advantage of such base areas to train, arm and collect funds.

In Kabul, Nato and US military commanders and the United Nations now speak openly of Pakistani collusion with the Taliban. Last week in Brussels, Nato ambassadors devoted two days of secret discussions on what to do with Pakistan.

But Nato knows it can discuss as much as it likes, but, until Bush and Blair are on board, there is nothing they can do. Yet Bush and Blair are determined to continue covering up the immensity of the problem. The Americans do not want to antagonise Musharraf, a key Muslim ally, when the war in Iraq is going so badly and who may be useful if Washington decides to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities.

British policy is even more short sighted. To its credit Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) is giving its fullest cooperation to Britain's MI5 in tracking down British-born Pakistani militants who travel between the two countries. MI5 and the Foreign Office have been seduced by this cooperation and have warned British commanders in Helmand province not to rock the boat by accusing the ISI of helping the Taliban.

Pakistan's strategy has been quite brilliant - offer full cooperation on "one-off" terrorist cases involving a few individuals, but do little to stem the Taliban crossing into Afghanistan or the rapid Talibanisation that is taking place inside Pakistan.

Thus British soldiers in Helmand are held hostage by Blair's refusal to deal with the larger problem, which is the need for Pakistan to crack down hard on all extremism, including the Taliban.

Despite the promises made by Musharraf to Bush and Blair after 9/11, there has been no reform of the madrassas, no serious attempt to deal with extremists and the military remains in political cahoots with the largest Islamic fundamentalist party that aids the Taliban - the Jamiat-e-Ullemas. Next year Musharraf plans to continue his alliance with them when he runs for another five-year term as president.

How long can this go on and how long will Nato troops and Afghans continue to die as long as the Taliban has a safe sanctuary in Pakistan? According to Bush and Blair - indefinitely.

But a revolt in Nato is brewing. Since the spring, when some 10,000 Nato forces took over in southern Afghanistan from US forces, they are suffering three times the casualty rate of American soldiers.

European countries are balking at providing more troops to the Nato force in Afghanistan. Norway, Denmark, Sweden and others have refused to send more troops. France, Germany, Spain and Italy, who have troops in safer parts of Afghanistan, are refusing to send them to the south where British, Canadian and Dutch forces are taking the brunt of the fighting.

European publics want answers as to why the Taliban are back when they were supposed to be finished and why their media is reporting that the Taliban leaders are in Pakistan. Nato faces a crisis and that is why its summit meeting in Riga this month is so critical to its survival.

In recent days, the ISI chief, Lt Gen Ashfaq Kiyani, has briefed worried ambassadors in Islamabad, promising a crackdown on the Taliban and all extremists. Let's hope this signals a decisive strategic change in the military's policy, rather than the ad hoc tactics it has pursued so far.

In the meantime ordinary Afghans are convinced that the US and Britain are not serious about securing Afghanistan, that the Taliban are on their way back to power and nobody has the power or desire to stop them.