

ARTICLES
Little Incentive To Nab Bin Laden

International Herald Tribune - 12/07/2005

By Ahmed Rashid / Lahore, Pakistan

The terrifying spectacle of a great city once again plunged into chaos and grief underlines one of the more glaring failures of the U.S.-led war on terrorism: the failure to capture Osama bin Laden.

Washington has mainly itself to blame. By transferring resources, satellite surveillance and manpower to Iraq, the United States not only took the pressure off bin Laden, but also gave the Taliban, Al Qaeda, drug barons and warlords time and space to reconstitute themselves in Afghanistan, where insurgent attacks are causing the bloodiest summer since 2001.

But there are good reasons why some of America's frustration over this situation has recently been directed at Pakistan, which is feeling increasing U.S. pressure to get serious in catching bin Laden.

Gone are the days when U.S. officials said vaguely that bin Laden was somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Vice President Dick Cheney and the CIA director, Porter Goss, have said that they know where bin Laden is and that he is not in Afghanistan - implying he is in Pakistan. Zalmay Khalilzad, the former U.S. ambassador to Kabul who is now the U.S. envoy in Baghdad, has been more blunt and said that bin Laden is in Pakistan.

President Pervez Musharraf's army has captured 500 Al Qaeda militants and handed them over to the United States, and has lost more than 500 soldiers fighting Al Qaeda in the rugged tribal areas. But the reality is that Musharraf has little incentive to catch bin Laden - and it may even be in the military's interest to keep him alive, without necessarily knowing where he is.

Pakistan's military fears that its alliance with the United States is a short-term one, based on cooperating in the war on terrorism, while Washington's long-term ally in the region is India, Pakistan's rival, with which the United States signed a 10-year strategic defense pact on June 29. According to this logic, America cannot dump Pakistan as long as the war on terrorism continues and bin Laden remains to be captured.

The Pakistani Army is also angry at President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan for giving India a strategic foothold in his country and at the Americans for doing nothing to stop it. Pakistan's government claims that India is using Afghan soil to support an insurgency by nationalists in Baluchistan Province.

Pakistan's military is keen to maintain its political influence on the Afghan Pashtun population in eastern Afghanistan, something it has done since 1989 and is loath to give up.

So turning a blind eye to bin Laden's whereabouts and to Taliban recruitment inside Pakistan gives the army leverage over both Washington and Kabul. That leverage was evident during last year's presidential elections in Afghanistan: Only after a private meeting between Musharraf and President George W. Bush did Taliban attacks mysteriously cease for the duration of the elections.

At the same time, Musharraf's own political survival partially depends on not catching bin Laden. Pakistan is witnessing far greater anti-Americanism and sympathy for bin Laden than ever existed in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. The army's top brass has no interest in provoking the terrorist mayhem and increased extremism that would certainly follow if bin Laden is caught or killed on Pakistani soil.

Meanwhile Musharraf has kept the fundamentalists at home on his side by allying himself with Pakistan's largest Islamic fundamentalist parties, who idealize bin Laden and rule the two provinces bordering Afghanistan. If bin Laden were caught, the fundamentalists might break that alliance and leave Musharraf politically isolated.

So where is bin Laden? Mostly likely he is hiding wherever the Pakistan Army is not deployed in its thousands. In the northern areas, bordering China and Afghanistan, the Karakorum mountains merge into the Pamir range, providing a scarcely populated, high-altitude hiding ground. In Baluchistan, the army's presence is minimal and the Taliban are active. A third possibility is Pakistan's large cities, where all senior Al Qaeda operatives caught so far have been found.

The carnage in London on Thursday may be a long way from the machinations of South Asian politics, but the fact is that until the world's leaders take into account the fears that drive Pakistan's leaders and military - including the perceived threat from India - terrorism and extremism will continue to find fertile ground there.