

Musharraf Vows To Turn Fighting Talk Into Action

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

It took six years in the making but when it came it was still an unexpected summons. For during that time I have been refused an interview with President Pervez Musharraf and for the past two years not even invited to his press conferences.

In a quarter of a century as a journalist I have never had a problem meeting a Pakistani head of state. After September 2001 and the success of my book *Taliban* I met many western leaders and foreign ministers.

But, despite many requests, a meeting with Gen Musharraf, the head of my own country, eluded me. The

Commando turned general who became army chief and ultimately president had no desire to grant me an interview.

So when I met him in the flesh for the first time on Thursday I discovered - six years after everyone else - why he enjoys the trust of the likes of President George W Bush and Tony Blair. The man is unabashedly charming and persuasive.

Our scheduled half-hour meeting turned into two hours 20 minutes of conversation, even though it was his birthday.

In recent months, however, his sincerity has been severely doubted. So I asked him what almost every concerned Pakistani would if they had the chance: why his fighting words and pledges to curb Islamic extremism at home have not matched his actions?

After last month's London bombings Gen Musharraf promised another crackdown against extremists. He arrested 800 militants and asked 1,400 foreign students attending madrassas - Islamic schools - to leave the country. But there have been many such crackdowns and extremism only seems to be gaining ground.

He admitted that previously hands were tied, either because of the 10-month-long confrontation with India in 2002 or the last general elections or political insecurities at home and abroad. "The situation is now far different from what I faced before," he said. "Now I am much stronger."

He has made it clear to the police and the concerned ministries that the government is deadly serious about the following: a crackdown on those banned extremist groups who have re-emerged under a new name, the closure of all publications propagating "hate", creating a new syllabus for the madrassas and their registration by December.

The registration of the country's 15,000 madrassas was announced in January 2002, but barely a few hundred registered. "This time those madrassas who don't register by December will be shut down," he said.

Now the government would no longer distinguish between "terrorists", Pakistanis linked to al-Qa'eda or other international terrorist groups who have been vigorously pursued and arrested, and Islamic "extremists", those who have fought in earlier jihads considered legitimate, such as that in the disputed territory of Kashmir.



President Musharraf:
charming

Improving relations with India weighs heavily on the president's mind. "I see the sincerity of the Indian leadership. But if we can move faster towards a resolution of Kashmir my hands will be stronger to deal with extremism," he said. "I have told the Indians we can only control the extremists to a degree. But there will be nowhere for the extremists to go once there is a settlement on Kashmir."

Accusations that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) still backed the Taliban were false, he insisted. Its officers dealing with Afghanistan had been changed "two or three times" since 2001 and nobody was left from the old guard who might have ideological affiliations with the Taliban, he said.

"All this talk about the ISI being a government within a government is wrong. There is no government within a government. There is only one government."

Much of the Taliban resistance was being generated from inside Afghanistan, he said. But he admitted that there were some Taliban elements clandestinely based in Pakistan, crossing the border.

He accused extremist elements belonging to the Jamaat-e Ullema Islam, a religious party that governs the two Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan, of allowing these Taliban to use sanctuaries inside Pakistan.

The key question now is whether the president will be able to break the long alliance between the military and fundamentalists that has driven past policies in Kashmir and Afghanistan and fuelled extremism at home.