

## Pakistan Closes Its Embassy In Afghanistan Amid Escalating Diplomatic Tension

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By Ahmed Rashid

Afghan leaders are confronting a diplomatic crisis with serious implications for the country's stabilization efforts. Pakistan has closed its embassy in Kabul after a crowd of Afghans, angry over Islamabad's alleged support for the Taliban and over supposed border intrusions, broke into the mission and ransacked it. The violence occurred amid a series of increasingly hostile exchanges between Afghan and Pakistani leaders.

About 2,000 Afghan demonstrators took to the streets of Kabul on July 8 for the second day running, spurred by allegations that Pakistani troops had intruded some 25 kilometers into Afghan territory along their common border - a charge Pakistan has denied. Up to 300 protesters broke away from the main rally and forced their way into the embassy, which was not protected by Afghan police.

The mob seemed well organized, carrying sticks, stones and sledge hammers with which they broke down a part of the outer wall of the embassy. Witnesses said they saw broken windows, smashed furniture, computers and fans and a partly burnt Pakistani flag inside the embassy. The embassy staff hid in the basement during the attack. The mob carried banners which read: "We condemn Pakistan's attack on our territory," and "Pakistan - the creators of the Taliban."

Pakistani Ambassador Rustom Shah Mohmand accused the Afghan government of inciting the mob. "We hold the Afghan government squarely responsible, not only for negligence, but for stage-managing this show, for creating the environment in which such an attack could take place," Mohmand told reporters. Mohmand said he had spoken to President Pervez Musharraf and ordered the embassy and the Pakistan consulate in Jalalabad closed. The scene was reminiscent of the burning down of the Pakistan embassy in 1995, which at the time was housed in the former colonial building of the 19th century British embassy.

"It [the embassy pillaging] is a big setback for our relations," the ambassador said.

Earlier in July, Afghan tribal leaders complained to President Hamid Karzai that Pakistani armed forces had interfered with an anti-terrorism operation. According to Afghan tribal leaders, a joint Afghan-US military force was carrying out the operation near the Afghan-Pakistani border. They added that during the search for Taliban partisans, Pakistani troops entered Afghan territory and fired on Afghan border guards.

On July 7, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry denied that its forces had intruded into Afghan territory, or had fired on Afghan forces. However, the same day Karzai issued a tough statement accusing President Musharraf of interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Karzai said he was seeking clarification from Musharraf for statements that the Pakistani leader made while visiting Washington in June. During the visit Musharraf intimated that Karzai's government was unable to extend its authority into Afghanistan's provinces.

"Afghanistan does not interfere in anyone's affairs and neither does it want others interference in its affairs," Karzai told reporters. "Musharraf has made some statements regarding Afghanistan which have become a matter of sadness and regret for me."

The Afghan government and the United States have been frustrated by Pakistan's reluctance to reign in elements of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Islamic militant units are reportedly using Pakistan as a safe haven from which to launch raids against US and Afghan troops. United Nations officials and heads of aid agencies have said the security situation has worsened and that aid and reconstruction is blocked in southern Afghanistan, or one third of the country, because of increasing Taliban activity.

Recently, the German head of the international peace keeping force in Kabul, General Norbert van Heyst stated that attacks by the Taliban and their allies had doubled between April and May. In addition, a high-profile opponent of the

Americans and the Kabul regime, renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar issued a taped message calling on Afghans to unite "to oust the foreign troops and cut the hands of the foreign meddlers." Afghan leaders have been urging the US Central Command to reign in alleged support for the Taliban from various elements in Pakistan .

Some political observers believe there may be a connection between the Pakistani embassy incident and an ongoing controversy in Kabul , in which Karzai's government is struggling to implement Defense Ministry reforms. At present, the ministry is packed with loyalists of the Northern Alliance (NA). The government's inability to implement reforms at the ministry has caused a delay in a \$200 million program to disarm and demobilize up to 100,000 militia members loyal to various Afghan warlords. That program had been due to begin July 1. The UN and Japan , the principle donors to the project, have decided the demobilization program will not begin until the necessary ministry reforms are completed. Some Western diplomats in Kabul suggest that the Northern Alliance, which is dominated by ethnic Tajiks, may have instigated the embassy attack to create an excuse to delay the ministry reforms.

A central element of the reforms is the removal of a large number of officers loyal to Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim from senior staff jobs, and their replacement with those from assorted ethnic groups. The reforms would also increase the number of commissions for non-factional officers in the new Afghan National Army, which is being trained by American military advisers.

Fahim has steadfastly resisted efforts to curtail the Northern Alliance's influence. Despite appeals by some Afghan leaders, the UN and aid agencies over the past few months, US officials have not taken a tougher line towards Fahim because he is seen as a key ally in the ongoing struggle against the Taliban. The Defense Ministry reform stalemate marks a setback for the Bonn process, which has outlined the shape of the peace process in Afghanistan since December 2001. It also creates an embarrassment for the Bush administration, which has asserted that Afghan reconstruction efforts were going well.

The Afghan-Pakistan tension, observers say, is likely to further halt the militia disarmament program, as well as stall aid and reconstruction efforts in southern Afghanistan along the Afghan-Pakistan border. It also places the US Central Command in a difficult position, frustrating its attempts to promote better coordination between Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to curb Taliban incursions.