

## Pakistan's Critical Hour

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By Ahmed Rashid

**LAHORE, Pakistan** - Pakistan is on the brink of chaos, and Congress is in a critical position: U.S. lawmakers can hasten that fateful process, halt it or even help turn things around. The speed and conditions with which Congress provides emergency aid to Islamabad will affect the Pakistani government and army's ability and will to resist the Taliban onslaught. It will also affect America's image in Pakistan and the region. Pakistanis are looking for evidence of the long-term U.S. commitment about which President Obama has spoken.

Since Obama announced his strategic review of U.S. policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan, worsening conditions here have nudged Afghanistan from the top of his foreign policy agenda. Pakistanis are beset by a galloping Taliban insurgency in the north that is based not just among Pashtuns, as in Afghanistan, but that has extensive links to al-Qaeda and jihadist groups in Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan.

That means the Taliban offensive in northern Pakistan has the potential to become a nationwide movement within a few months. Violence is already spreading. In recent days, at least 36 people have been killed in Karachi.

In the past, many of these jihadist groups, including the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, have been fostered by Pakistan's army and intelligence services -- at the cost of global security, democracy and civil society. The Bush administration ignored this trend for years while it pumped more than \$11 billion into Pakistan. The bulk of that funding went to the military, which bought arms to fight Pakistan's historic enemy, India, rather than the insurgency.

The army's recent counteroffensive against the Taliban was prompted in part by U.S. pressure and, more significant, by a dramatic shift in public opinion toward opposing the Taliban. Many people are beginning to see the country threatened by a bloody internal revolution. This public pressure can lead to a major change in army policies toward India and Afghanistan.

But the army and the civilian government still lack a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy as well as a plan to deal with the 1 million refugees who have fled the fighting. Every government official I have met says that the country is bankrupt and that there is no money to fight the insurgency, let alone deal with the refugees.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has asked Congress for \$497 million in emergency funds <<http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/12-clinton-seeks-495-million-for-pakistan-bi-01>> to stabilize Pakistan's economy, strengthen law enforcement and help the refugees. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has asked for \$400 million in aid to the army <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/30/AR2009043004067.html>>, funds that would be monitored by U.S. Central Command. Lawmakers are hesitating, wanting to tie these emergency funds to the \$83 billion the administration has asked for to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But delays are dangerous. Congress should authorize these funds quickly, giving the Obama administration tools to convince the Pakistani people that it is standing behind them. Immediate aid, and providing U.S. helicopters for the army's use, would shore up Pakistanis' resolve and could help persuade the army to accept the counterinsurgency training the United States has offered for the past year (but which has been refused because of the army's focus on India).

Other legislation before Congress would provide \$1.5 billion a year to Pakistan for the next five years. But the extensive conditions -- as varied as improving relations with India, fighting the Afghan Taliban and allowing the U.S. interrogation of Pakistani nuclear scientists -- are too much for any Pakistani government to accept and survive politically.

Certainly the United States can demand that its money be used for good purposes. The original Biden-Lugar bill introduced last year had the mix just right, setting down three strategic benchmarks -- that Pakistan be committed to fighting terrorism, that Pakistan remain a democracy (in other words, the army must not seize control), and that both nations provide public and official accountability for the funds. Unlike the extensive conditions that lawmakers are seeking to impose now, such broad parameters would provide space for further negotiations and progress between Pakistan and the United States.

Pakistan is deteriorating. Congress should pass the emergency funds quickly and, at minimum, offer the first year of the \$1.5 billion without conditions to foster stability between the two sides at this critical juncture and ensure that the powerful right wing here has no excuse to once again decry U.S. aid as politically motivated. At the least, U.S. lawmakers should stipulate that aid for Pakistani and Western aid agencies involved in development, particularly agriculture, education and job creation, should not be conditioned.

U.S. flexibility to set a minimum of conditions that can be further negotiated once aid delivery begins could become a model for donors in Europe and Japan.

For three decades, I have written about the fire that Islamic militancy has lit in this region. I do not want to see my country go down because Congress is more concerned with minutiae than with the big picture. Yes, there must be a sea change in attitudes and policies in the army, intelligence services and civilian government. But tomorrow may be too late. Pakistan needs help today.

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