

## The Reluctant Tough Guy

Musharraf has promised the West that he will be harder on terrorists. But every move he makes to crack down loses key domestic support.

Far Eastern Economic Review, 22/01/2004

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

Shortly after President Pervez Musharraf reassured the world that Pakistan would clamp down on nuclear proliferation and Islamic extremism during a January 17 speech to Pakistan's parliament, he took steps to show he meant business. Pakistani authorities detained several top nuclear scientists in Islamabad as part of a probe into alleged proliferation of nuclear technology and then arrested seven alleged members of Al Qaeda in Karachi. The United States undoubtedly cheered the moves as evidence that Musharraf's words were actually backed by action, which has seldom been the case in the past. But the actions also just as certainly exacerbated what is Musharraf's biggest problem: a continuing lack of support domestically. Even Musharraf's greatest recent accomplishment— rapprochement with India that will apparently lead to a formal dialogue in February— carries a serious domestic downside in terms of stirring up opposition.

Dressed in a white sherwani, or topcoat, rather than the army uniform he typically wears in public, Musharraf addressed the upper and lower houses of parliament for the first time since the present civilian government was elected in October 2002. Musharraf used his speech to dispel international doubts about Pakistan's seriousness in the war against terrorism. He said that Pakistan was "at a crossroads" and faced four dangerous misperceptions. Musharraf said there is a widespread belief that Pakistan encourages the Taliban in Afghanistan, supports Islamic militants in Kashmir, allows extremist groups to exist inside the country and profits from the proliferation of nuclear weapons. "We have to take far-reaching and important decisions, otherwise the coming generations will pay a very heavy price for our indifference," he said. He stressed his obligation to clamp down on the spread of Pakistan's nuclear technology. "We have to assure the world that we are a responsible nation and will not allow proliferation of nuclear weapons," said the president. At the same time, he made it clear that Pakistan would not surrender its nuclear capability. "Our nuclear and missile power is for Pakistan's defence and to strengthen it is in our interest," he added.

Since September 11, Musharraf has repeatedly promised to clamp down on nuclear proliferation from Pakistan, but his follow-up has been inconsistent at best. Western diplomats in Islamabad say they are still sceptical about his commitment, but Pakistani officials say that there has been a genuine change of heart in the army, especially since Musharraf was twice targeted by assassins in December. "This time will be different," says a senior Pakistani diplomat. The sweep by Pakistan's top intelligence agency, Interservices Intelligence (ISI), to pick up five men involved with the country's nuclear research-and-development programme following Musharraf's speech— adding to three detained for interrogation in December— was perhaps meant to demonstrate just how different. Of the eight men picked up, two are retired army brigadiers. One is Nazir, the director-general of Khan Research Laboratories, the nuclear research facilities named after Abdul Qadir Khan, who is considered the father of Pakistan's nuclear-bomb programme. Another detainee is retired Maj. Islam ul Haq, Khan's personal assistant. The rest comprised four scientists, one technician and the other retired brigadier, all Khan Research Laboratories employees.

Haq's wife, Nilofer, said her husband was taken away by two ISI officers as he was having dinner with Khan in Islamabad on the night of January 17. Khan is believed by Western intelligence agencies to be the mastermind behind selling centrifuge technology used in nuclear research to foreign clients. However he is revered by many Pakistanis and especially by Islamic parties. His interrogation in December by the ISI sparked angry criticism from Islamic leaders. Moreover, few in Pakistan believe that the scientists acted alone, especially considering that the country's nuclear programme has always been tightly controlled by the army. "The scientists are being scapegoated because the army will not question its own," says a senior bureaucrat. "This is a dangerous precedent." The detentions in Pakistan followed one on January 2 in Denver, Colorado, of South African businessman Asher Karni. He heads a company allegedly implicated in the smuggling of 200 electronic devices used to trigger nuclear weapons. Because a Pakistani front company is believed to have ordered the triggers from Karni, the arrest revived long-held suspicions of a sophisticated blackmarket in nuclear components in Pakistan.

cache including grenades, guns and ammunition. The government did not identify the seven arrested but said they included two Egyptians, three Afghans and two Arab women. The day before Musharraf's speech, Gen. John Abizaid, the head of the U.S. Central Command, met with Musharraf in Islamabad to press for help in catching Osama bin Laden. "After the capture of Saddam Hussain, there is serious U.S. and British pressure on Pakistan to deliver [bin Laden]," says a senior Western diplomat. "There is a strong feeling in the intelligence community that Pakistan is not doing enough," he adds. As evidence, they cite a "badly botched" raid in early January by Pakistani commandos in the country's tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. So far the raid has led to the arrest of some 40 local Pashtun tribesmen. However, there have been no significant arrests of Al Qaeda members, who are believed to have escaped. A Taliban statement that circulated on a Web site in mid-January said bin Laden, his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar were free and "in good health." Musharraf can't seem to win. Abroad, friendly governments criticize Pakistan for not doing enough to crack down on terrorism and Islamic extremism. But at home, critics think he is doing too much to oblige the Americans. During his speech in parliament, with his cabinet, his generals and dozens of foreign ambassadors in the audience, Musharraf faced nonstop heckling from mainstream opposition parties, which he has treated with contempt. Shouts of "Go, Musharraf, go," and "Friends of dictators are traitors," often drowned out his speech.

An alliance of Islamic parties that opposed the president for much of last year, but then signed a deal with him in December, walked out of parliament before the speech in protest against the army's raid in the tribal belt. Ironically, some domestic critics have argued that Musharraf has pandered to the fundamentalists while ignoring other possible allies. And mainstream politicians complain that the army continues to dominate Pakistan's political scene, while Musharraf, who remains head of the army and came to power as an army general, has done little to empower the civilian government.

The International Crisis Group's latest report says that Pakistan has failed both to tackle extremism and to reform the madrassas, or Islamic schools, where Pakistani and foreign militants are educated. "Having co-opted the religious parties to gain constitutional cover for his military rule, Musharraf is highly reliant on the religious right for his regime's survival," says Samina Ahmed, South Asia project director for the Brussels-based think-tank. "It's no surprise, then, that he has not intruded on the mullahs' turf by reforming the madrassa system," she adds. The report says that no laws to regulate madrassas have been promulgated. In fact, the government has assured the clergy that it will not interfere in madrassas' affairs. "Pakistan's failure to close jihadi [holy war] madrassas and to crack down on jihadi networks has resulted in a resurgence of domestic extremism and sectarian violence," the report states. But Musharraf undoubtedly feels boxed in, unable to reform or close madrassas for fear of antagonizing the fundamentalists he needs as allies.