

Musharraf's Bin Laden Headache

17/03/2004

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid ponders whether the capture of Osama Bin Laden could heap further problems on Pakistan's President Musharraf. The early capture of Osama Bin Laden and Taleban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar would provide an enormous boost to President George W Bush as he sets out to win re-election in November. That is the view I was hearing from US officials in Washington during a recent lecture tour of the US - and it's a view shared by US officials in Islamabad. So President Musharraf is facing intense pressure from Washington to help US forces in Afghanistan to capture or kill Bin Laden and other top al-Qaeda and Taleban leaders hiding in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border tribal region. However, Pakistan's increased military role in the volatile tribal belt poses enormous political and military risks for General Musharraf.

Denials over US forces

In mid-March and at the end of February troops and paramilitary forces launched major operations in South Waziristan, a tribal agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) between Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and the Afghan border. These were the latest moves by the army into FATA where the local Pashtun tribes have enjoyed considerable autonomy since the British Raj. With a population of 5.8 million, the seven tribal agencies in FATA, all inhabited by the Pashtuns, were created by the British to serve as a buffer between Afghanistan and British India. Dozens of US intelligence officers are now believed to be working with the Pakistan army in the FATA. The government in Islamabad firmly denies such reports, saying it will not allow US troops to enter Pakistani territory. According to the US army in Kabul, increased co-operation by Pakistan would create a "hammer and anvil approach" with Pakistani forces being used to push militants into Afghanistan, where US troops would be waiting for them. That, however, is easier said than done. There has been fierce resistance by tribal leaders who have repeatedly fired rockets and shells at forward posts of the Frontier Corps along the Afghan border and also attacked the main army base in Wana, the headquarters of South Waziristan. The anger of the tribesmen escalated enormously when nervous Pakistani troops fired upon a truck after it failed to stop in late February. Eleven passengers were killed. Local politicians say the political tension in the FATA is explosive. Anti-government sentiment is rising despite government money being spent on social and economic development projects and sympathy for the militants is increasing rather than decreasing. The Pakistani military is nervous of conducting such operations when there is already substantial political unrest in the country.

Military fears

The army is already taking a beating from opposition political parties for placing all the blame on the country's nuclear scientists over the recent revelations of the proliferation of nuclear technology, while whitewashing the army's own possible role in the affair. The military also fears that if it helps US forces capture Osama Bin Laden, its usefulness to the Bush administration may then dissipate. That would allow Washington to step up pressure on Pakistan to open up its nuclear weapons programme for inspection by the US and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Moreover, if Bin Laden is captured or killed, there could be severe repercussions for President Musharraf. These could include violent protests by Islamic parties and revenge suicide attacks by al-Qaeda and its sympathisers, as well as further attempts to assassinate President Musharraf who survived two attempts on his life in December. Other problems for General Musharraf are mounting. There has been a rise in Sunni-Shia sectarian killings, with more than 40 people being killed in Quetta during the Shia festival of Ashura on 2 March. More than 150 people were wounded as suicide bombers and gunmen belonging to Sunni extremist groups attacked a Shia procession. Meanwhile, the political fallout of the stepped-up operations in the FATA could be severe. The provincial governments of North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan are under the control of Islamic fundamentalist parties who are deeply offended by the army operations and are openly sympathetic to the resurgent Taleban movement in Afghanistan. Pakistan is also under US pressure to curb Taleban recruitment and other activities in Quetta and smaller towns in Baluchistan, where they are based and receive open support from ruling Islamic parties such as the Jamiat-e-Ullemat

year, according to US officials. Despite non-stop government denials, the border region is already awash with rumours that US troops will directly enter the FATA - such a move though, is highly unlikely. The government has made it difficult for outsiders to travel in the FATA, so it's hard for aid workers or journalists to see the situation for themselves. That has only fuelled the rumour mills and undermines government statements which are seen as one-sided. Many believe the restrictions are in place because US troops are already operating there - although that is unlikely. Either way, whether Bin Laden is captured or not, there will be serious consequences for Pakistan's domestic peace and stability.