

Appeasement Is Musharraf's Worst Enemy

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Human body parts and fragments of car engines littered a major highway between Islamabad and Rawalpindi yesterday after President Pervez Musharraf escaped a second attempt on his life in 11 days. Bloodied and badly wounded civilians and policemen were in shock after two vans loaded with explosives tried to ram into Gen Musharraf's convoy in an attack that stunned Pakistan and let loose a flood of conspiracy theories. Gen Musharraf's bodyguards were recently trained by the US State Department's special protection service and the CIA had provided him with the latest high-tech jamming devices. But these were not enough to stop determined suicide bombers.

The attack, and the Dec 14 attempt to kill him by blowing up a bridge over which his convoy crossed, both took place in Pakistan's highest security area. Within a few hundred yards of the two sites are the general headquarters of the Pakistan army and Army House, Gen Musharraf's official residence. Gen Musharraf's security is so tight that only a handful of military officers know the route and timings of his travel plans. Retired military officers ominously point to the fact that these assassination attempts could not have taken place without inside information from disaffected army officers linked to extremist Islamic groups and possibly al-Qa'eda. In September, al-Qa'eda issued a death threat to Gen Musharraf, blaming him for the arrest over the past two years of some 500 of its members, who have been handed over to the US. Al-Qa'eda increasingly operates within Pakistan with the help of Pakistani extremist groups who want their country to continue the jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan where they back groups fighting the Indian army, as well as the Taliban who are trying to unseat President Hamid Karzai and his new government in Kabul. In recent weeks the extremists have been infuriated by Islamabad's rapprochement with India. After intense American pressure, a major summit next week between Gen Musharraf and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Indian prime minister, was expected to lead to serious negotiations on resolving the Kashmir dispute.

The extremists, and the fundamentalist nuclear scientists who dominate Pakistan's nuclear programme, are also furious at Gen Musharraf for accepting demands by the US and the International Atomic Energy Agency to investigate the sale of Pakistani nuclear technology to Iran and North Korea. Fundamentalism is also growing in the army. After a tip-off by the CIA, at least five army officers were arrested in October for helping al-Qa'eda members in Pakistan's border regions with Afghanistan. Despite all these threats, Gen Musharraf has always tried to appease the Islamic parties and his half-hearted crackdowns on extremist groups have only been carried out because of inordinate pressure from the Americans. Until recently the army has allowed extremist groups to continue crossing into Indian Kashmir to battle Indian troops, while the intelligence agencies are turning a blind eye to the resurgent Taliban.

Gen Musharraf has refused to talk to the mainstream non-religious parties, who would be his natural allies in any genuine battle against the Islamic extremists. These parties are demanding that the army give up power and return to the barracks, which Gen Musharraf has refused to do. The result is that he is seriously isolated, trusted by none of the political forces in the country - secular or religious - and increasingly disliked by a public frustrated by his fluctuating policies and the lack of economic development and investment. Until now Gen Musharraf has kept his one constituency - the army - happy by giving them hundreds of jobs in the civilian sector and other perks and privileges, which have infuriated the public, civil servants and the police. He has also done little to root out fundamentalists in the army's officer corps. His unwillingness to take the fundamentalists seriously is now proving to be a direct threat to his life.