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Bolstering Pakistan in its Fight Against Extremism

Lisa A. Curtis

Revelations from top U.S. intelligence officials that al-Qaeda remains as strong as ever due to its safe haven in Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan are alarming. The officials' comments, delivered Wednesday during congressional hearings, coincide with the denouement of the Red Mosque standoff in Islamabad, which has left at least 10 Pakistani military commandos and scores of al-Qaeda-linked militants dead. Pakistan is facing a critical moment in its battle with extremism. Washington must demonstrate its support both to the Musharraf regime's offensive against terrorism and to the moderate majority of Pakistani civilians that Musharraf needs to bring along in his efforts against extremists.

Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Time Running Out for Peaceful Solution. President Musharraf has vowed to eliminate extremism and terrorism from "every corner of the country," and he needs U.S. support to do this. U.S. officials should make clear, however, that eliminating terrorism requires that his military go back on the offensive in the Tribal Areas, where al-Qaeda and the Taliban are plotting, planning, and training for their next terrorist operations. During Wednesday's hearings, one senior CIA official said that Musharraf's peace deals with tribal leaders, made last September, had "not been helpful," implying that they had weakened counterterrorism efforts in the region.

From early 2004 until September 2006, Pakistan's security forces conducted military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)

that succeeded in keeping al-Qaeda on the run and in disarray. However, these military operations also damaged traditional tribal institutions, increased radicalism in the region, caused the deaths of several hundred Pakistani soldiers, and met with increasing opposition from the broader Pakistani population. Because of the growing problems with the FATA military operations, President Musharraf announced on September 5, 2006, a peace deal with tribal leaders of the North Waziristan Agency that included an end to offensive military operations in exchange for the tribal rulers' cooperation in restricting Taliban and al-Qaeda activities. The objective of Pakistan's government is to restore the traditional form of governance in the region and co-opt the tribal elders and political representatives through an infusion of economic assistance for new roads, hospitals, and schools.

The Pakistanis argue that their new policy in the FATA will take time to bear fruit. But time is not on their side. This week's statements by senior U.S. intelligence officials reveal that the new Pakistani policy in the FATA may not be effective in preventing another potential 9/11-type terrorist attack. There are also signs that Pakistani extremists are taking advantage of the decreased military pressure by

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attempting to institute strict Islamic edicts in the region—the same tactics employed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. The extremists have sought to forcibly close down girls schools, barber shops, and video stores, and are increasingly challenging the writ of the government, even in some of the settled areas of the Northwest Frontier Province.

U.S. intelligence officials also noted concern that military strikes on al-Qaeda elements entrenched in Pakistan's tribal areas could spawn new militant activity in the country. However, these fears must be weighed against the possibility that such military action could help prevent future terrorist attacks, including on the U.S. homeland. Deliberations on next steps in the FATA should also take into account the fact that militant attacks are already increasing in Pakistan and that hesitation to issue a strong military response would only increase the terrorists' ability to conduct future attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere. The Red Mosque siege was a symptom of a larger militancy problem, which is rooted in the Tribal Areas.

Red Mosque Siege: Al-Qaeda's Showdown with Pakistan. The confrontation at the Red Mosque marks the beginning of a showdown between progressive forces who see Pakistan's future linked to close relations with the West and al-Qaeda-linked extremists who want to establish a theocratic state in Pakistan. The crisis should be a wake-up call for the Pakistan government that it must deal firmly with extremist elements and develop a unified and strong opposition to any groups or individuals linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This includes confronting groups that previously received sanctuary and support within Pakistan because of their anti-India agendas. Focusing primarily on insurgency operations in Kashmir, these groups also support al-Qaeda operations and objectives in Pakistan. Although Pakistan has banned such groups, it has failed to arrest their top leadership or punish those within the intelligence services who continue to have links to the groups.

The siege of the Red Mosque festered for over six months before President Musharraf decided to take military action. President Musharraf likely delayed action because he knew the nature of the people he was dealing with and calculated that any law and

order operation would result in severe loss of life that would incite the conservative religious elements of the population. Having done what was necessary to assert the government's writ over the situation, Musharraf now must cope with the fallout from the confrontation and remain committed to the fight against terrorism.

Most Pakistanis support President Musharraf's decision to confront the extremists at the Red Mosque, which brings an opportunity for him to highlight the dangers of allowing extremists to fester in the Tribal Areas. He should emphasize that the only way to avoid a repeat of the Red Mosque situation in other parts of the country is to clean out the extremists from their base in the tribal borderlands.

Critical Moment in Pakistan. Pakistan is at a critical moment, and Washington will need to pay close attention to the various trends developing in order to effectively bolster the Pakistani state against al-Qaeda-linked extremists. Ayman al-Zawahiri's statement inciting Pakistanis to jihad over the Red Mosque confrontation and proclaiming that "elections will not save you" is aimed at taking advantage of the political uncertainty in the country. Al-Zawahiri is taking advantage of Musharraf's declining credibility with the Pakistani people over the judicial crisis and the people's frustration with the lack of democracy.

An important element in fighting extremism in Pakistan is to ensure that the people have a compelling alternative to the anti-state ideology of al-Qaeda. In other words, if the Pakistani people feel they have a voice in how their country is governed, they will be less susceptible to the al-Qaeda ideology. This requires that President Musharraf pay heed to the large-scale protests that have occurred since early March over his dismissal of the country's Supreme Court Chief Justice. He cannot afford to be in confrontation with the secular democratic forces of his country and should instead make common cause with them in order to keep Pakistan from drifting further toward extremism. The United States should press the Musharraf government to work with the mainstream political parties to develop a plan for returning the country to civilian, democratic rule through credible elections at the earliest possible date.

Conclusion: Right and Wrong Courses of Action. Members of Congress are considering conditioning U.S. assistance to Pakistan on its specific actions to counter the al-Qaeda and Taliban threat, a move that would send the wrong message at a time when the Pakistani government needs and deserves U.S. support. Pakistanis still remember the United States cutting off assistance in 1990 because of Pakistan's nuclear program. Cutting or conditioning assistance now would be interpreted as a repeat of that situation and further proof that the United States is not a reliable partner.

A more effective strategy is to pursue the dual tracks of supporting Pakistan in its offensive

against terrorism and extremism (including military operations in the Tribal Areas) as well as pressing for free and fair elections at the earliest possible date. President Bush reiterated in yesterday's press conference on progress in Iraq the importance of offering an alternative way of life to extremism and terrorism in order to deny terrorists more opportunities for recruitment. The need for such an alternative is no less true in Pakistan than it is in other parts of the world.

—*Lisa A. Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*