

Pakistan playing ball with Bush

By Bill Berkowitz

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If Joseph Cofer Black, the U.S. State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, is correct, al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden might be in the hands of U.S. authorities sometime before Election Day, thanks to Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf. Black, emerging from a September 2nd/3rd meeting of the Pakistan-U.S. Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism and Law Enforcement in Islamabad, Pakistan, told the private Geo television network that bin Laden's time was clearly running out:

"Osama bin Laden is probably the most hunted man in the planet now. Osama bin Laden and his associates at that level are primarily defensive, they spend most of their time trying to keep from getting caught. If he (bin Laden) has a watch, he should be looking at it because the clock is ticking. He will be caught. Programs are in place and what I tell people (is) I would be surprised but not necessarily shocked if we wake up tomorrow and he has been caught along with all his lieutenants."

(The comments of Joseph Cofer Black came just days before a new video from bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahri, aired on the al Jazeera television network.)

For months now, the media has been ripe with stories about Pakistani law enforcement officials capturing "high-valued" terrorists, its intelligence agencies helping British officials nab al Qaeda suspects and its military forces hunting and engaging al Qaeda and Taliban remnants along its border with Afghanistan. Comments like "with the help of Pakistani officials" or "with the support of Pakistani intelligence" are used to describe Pakistan's ratcheted-up participation fighting terrorism. In many reports Pakistan is referred to as America's "strong ally in the fight against terrorism."

Before 9/11, Musharraf, who took power in a military coup in 1999, was a military dictator and a major supporter of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Even after the US attacked Afghanistan in October 2001, and supposedly had bin Laden and his band surrounded, Pakistani military forces allegedly turned their backs while they escaped the US noose.

In October 2002, the New York Times reported that Pakistan was "a major supplier of critical equipment for North Korea's newly revealed clandestine nuclear weapons program."

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Intelligence officials told the Times that in the late 1990's, in exchange for weapons to help Pakistan "counter India's nuclear arsenal," it supplied "equipment, which may include gas centrifuges used to create weapons-grade uranium."

Three years into Bush's permanent war against terrorism, a plethora of positive stories have praised Pakistan's newly-found resolve fighting terrorism. How has Pakistan's President, Pervez Musharraf, become George W. Bush's go-to-guy in the war against terrorism?

The ratcheting up of Pakistan's anti-terrorist activities came on the heels of a series of recent visits by high-ranking Bush Administration officials, including the now former CIA Director George Tenet, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, and State Department counterterrorism chief Joseph Cofer Black. The visits were aimed at convincing President Musharraf to get off the dime in the war against terrorism, The New Republic's John B. Judis, Spencer Ackerman and Massoud Ansari reported.

According to the magazine, Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador to Afghanistan, "publicly chided the Pakistanis for providing a 'sanctuary' for Al Qaeda and Taliban forces crossing the Afghan border. The problem has not been solved and needs to be solved, the sooner the better."

Information about these visits was part of the New Republic's lightning-bolt story about how the Bush administration had pressured "Pakistani officials to apprehend high-value targets (HVTs) in time for the November elections — and in particular, to coincide with the Democratic National Convention. Although the capture took place in central Pakistan 'a few days back,' the announcement came just hours before John Kerry will give his acceptance speech in Boston," the magazine reported.

In late July, Pakistani law enforcement officials captured Tanzanian al-Qaeda operative Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani. The arrest took place in the Punjab provincial city of Gujrat, and made headlines across the U.S., shortly after the Democratic Party convention. According to Asia Times, the Tanzanian terrorist was wanted in the U.S. "in connection with the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998," and had been on a list of most-wanted terrorists in the U.S., drawing a multi-million dollar bounty.

The timing of Ghailani's capture was questioned by Newsweek's Christopher Dickey: "The first thing you notice when you look at the record of high-profile Al Qaeda arrests over the last three years is that almost all of these bad guys have been found in major cities, and deep inside Pakistan." According to Dickey, Ghailani is a black African who has been living quite openly in Pakistan "with friends and extended family... for the better part of six years," since the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were blown up. "His picture has

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been posted on the Web for years, along with a \$5 million reward from the United States government. And nobody noticed this guy until last week?"

"They're not being caught in some haystack on the border," M. J. Gohel, an authority on terrorism at the British-based Asia-Pacific Foundation, told Dickey. "The conclusion has to be that there are still elements in the government or the intelligence services that are protecting these individuals."

Pakistani forces once again appear to be accelerating their hunt for al Qaeda in the tribal areas of the mountains in Afghanistan. This spring, the Pakistani military pretty much convinced America's cable news networks that it had captured Osama bin Laden's chief deputy, Ayman Al Zawahiri. "Terrorist alert" banners re-emerged on our television screens and the news networks ripped into wall-to-wall coverage. Excited news anchors, scrolling updates, and picture phone reports from the mountains of Afghanistan brought the impending capture into our living rooms. The networks' military experts were rushed back into the studios.

Long story short: After a few days, the "high-value terrorist target" story disintegrated like a washed over sand castle, and the cable news networks pulled the plug. We later learned that Al Zawahiri might have either escaped through a series of mountain tunnels or, more likely, wasn't there in the first place.

After several years of undistinguished participation in the war against terrorism, President Musharraf is pushing the pedal to the metal. Pakistani officials close to Musharraf "insist that they are working full time all the time to track down every terrorist they can," Dickey reports. "They fiercely deny any suggestion that they're trying to distract attention from Pakistan's black-market bazaar for nuclear weapons by staging antiterrorist offensives and producing Al Qaeda leaders at convenient moments."

In early August, Reuters reported that "Pakistan provided information leading to the arrest of 12 terrorism suspects in Britain and may have thwarted a plot to attack London's Heathrow airport, sources in Islamabad reportedly told the news service. While Pakistani officials were taking credit for their participation, British police "downplayed any Pakistani role in the arrests." According to Reuters, "The role of Pakistani intelligence in Britain's arrests goes to the heart of a political debate in the United States, where the White House has defended its decision to launch the disruptive 'Orange alert' in three metropolitan areas."

During the recently concluded Pakistan-U.S. Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism and Law Enforcement meeting, Pakistan asked U.S. officials for more military equipment including helicopters, surveillance and communications equipment to help Pakistani forces guard border areas near Afghanistan "more efficiently," a Pakistani official at the talks told

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the Associated Press.

“We got a positive response from the American officials,” said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Ambassador Joseph Cofer Black gave a thumbs up to Pakistan’s overall record fighting terrorism. “In terms of national programs and effectiveness, I would put Pakistan up against anyone else... If you look at the arrests they have made, the information they have developed and the lives that have been saved, Pakistan is doing a great job,” Black said.

Should Pakistan help capture Osama bin Laden, President Pervez Musharraf will be able to get just about any weapon system he wants in order to keep a tight reign on the country.