

Extra Feature Story

Pakistan Asks For More Money to Battle Taliban, May 12, 2009

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari was in Washington last week to ask for help fighting the Taliban, the same group that supported the Sept. 11 al-Qaida terrorists and now threatens the stability of Pakistan, one of the world's few nuclear powers.

In recent weeks, President Barack Obama has expressed concern that the Pakistani government is losing control of large parts of the country.

"I am gravely concerned about the situation in Pakistan. The civilian government there right now is very fragile and don't seem to have the capacity to deliver basic services, schools, health care, you know, rule of law, a judicial system that works for the majority of people," he said in a speech earlier this month.

The White House is pushing Congress to boost U.S. military aid for Pakistan, and it's also asking Congress to launch a hefty civilian aid program, \$1.5 billion a year for five years, to build up infrastructure, education, and health for ordinary Pakistanis.

However, any more aid will come with a list of conditions, as American lawmakers strongly distrust Pakistan's culture of corruption.

"We've sent money in the past. It has been stolen. It has not been spent on the purposes that it was intended for. So we don't want to go through that again," House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-Calif.) said during debate last week.

Taliban militants did not keep their promises

The northwest region of Pakistan, along the border with Afghanistan is most at risk. Earlier this month, militants from the Islamic extremist group the Taliban advanced towards the nation's capital, Islamabad.

The United Nations says that as many as 360,000 civilians have left their homes in Swat Valley, a former tourist destination, making their way to rapidly growing refugee camps.

Pakistan's government brokered a controversial agreement with the Taliban in February, allowing the Swat militants to impose Islamic (Sharia) rule upon the region in exchange for peace.

Despite criticism from Washington, Pakistan said that the truce was necessary for regional stability.

In recent weeks, however, Taliban forces began advancing towards the capital, violating the terms of the ceasefire and prompting international alarm.

Leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan meet with Obama

President Zardari met with President Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai last week to discuss plans to fight Taliban and al-Qaida militants who have a growing presence in both countries.

Pakistan's leader promised to move troops from its eastern border with historic rival, India, to the western Afghanistan border.

In a May 8 NewsHour interview, President Zardari expressed confidence that the United States and other western nations were committed to helping Pakistan fight the Taliban.

"They're a challenge to every government, and no government can afford to disengage," he said.

Refugee crisis could destabilize Pakistan, which has nuclear weapons

In addition to the 360,000 people who left the Swat Valley since last week, about 500,000 people have been displaced since hostilities began last August.

The government and the United Nations have set up refugee camps outside Swat and while there is enough room for now, officials believe that as many as 600,000 more people could flood the camps in the coming days.

Although many refugees support government action against the Taliban, most want a peaceful end to the fighting that has destroyed their homes and families. Some observers worry that if the government does not provide sufficient aid to people in the camps, disheartened refugees could turn to the Taliban for answers.

One Mardan camp resident told Al Jazeera that he trusted neither side to end the violence. He said he saw refugees dying on the road, "but no one was willing to offer us any help - neither the army nor the Taliban."

In an interview with the NewsHour, Pakistan resident and writer Daniyal Mueenuddin noted that the Taliban have a powerful ability to recruit the children of poor and displaced families who have limited options.

"They speak to the needs of the people and what they demand of them in return is this kind of allegiance," Mueenuddin said. "That's very attractive to people who are very poor and desperate."

-- Compiled by Kate Stanton for NewsHour Extra

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