

Anti-Americanism Rises In Pakistan Over US Motives

Saeed Shah | McClatchy Newspapers

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — For weeks now, the Pakistani media have portrayed America, its military and defense contractors in the darkest of lights, all part of an apparent campaign of anti-American vilification that is sweeping the country and, according to some, is putting American lives at risk.

Pakistanis are reacting to what many here see as an “imperial” American presence, echoing Iraq and Afghanistan, with Washington dictating to the Pakistani military and the government. Polls show that Pakistanis regard the U.S., formally a close ally and the country’s biggest donor, as a hostile power.

U.S. officials have either denied the allegations or moved to blunt the criticism, but suspicions remain and relations between the two countries are getting more strained.

The lively Pakistani media has been filled with stories of under-cover American agents operating in the country, tales of a huge contingent of U.S. Marines planned to be stationed at the embassy, and reports of Blackwater private security personnel running amuck. Armed Americans have supposedly harassed and terrified residents and police officers in Islamabad and Peshawar, according to local press reports.

Much of the hysteria was based on a near \$1 billion plan, revealed by McClatchy in May and confirmed by U.S. officials, to massively increase the size of the American embassy in Islamabad, which brought home to Pakistanis that the United States plans an extensive and long-term presence in the country.

The American mission in Islamabad was forced to put on three briefings for Pakistani journalists in August trying to dampen the highly charged stories, which could undermine US-Pakistani relations just as Washington is preparing to finalize a tripling of civilian aid to Islamabad, to \$1.5 billion a year. Over this last weekend, an embassy spokesman had to deny suddenly renewed stories that the U.S. was behind the mysterious death of former military dictator General Zia ul Haq back in 1988.

Pakistan is a key priority for the United States because of its nuclear weapons and its potential usefulness in taking on al Qaida within its borders and ending the safe haven for the Afghan Taliban.

“I think this recent brouhaha over the embassy expansion has been difficult to beat back,” said Anne Patterson, the U.S. ambassador, in an interview Thursday. “I can’t really understand what’s behind this because what we’re doing is actually quite straightforward. We’ve tried to explain it carefully to the press, but it just seems to be taken over by conspiracy theories.”

Briefing Pakistani journalists last month, Patterson told them that there were only nine Marines stationed to guard the embassy in Islamabad and that, even after the expansion, their number would be no more than 15 to 20. Press reports had put the figure at 350 to 1,000 Marines. She also stated categorically “Blackwater is not operating in Pakistan”. But the stories refused to go away.

Patterson said she wrote last week to the owner of Pakistan’s biggest media group, Jang, to protest about the content of two talk shows on its Geo TV channel, hosted by star anchors Hamid Mir and Kamran Khan, and a newspaper column of influential analyst Shireen Mazari in The News, a daily, complaining that they were “wildly incorrect” and had compromised the security of Americans.

There are 250 American citizens posted at the Islamabad mission on longer-term contracts, plus another 200 on shorter assignments, the embassy said. The present embassy compound can accommodate only a fraction of them. According to independent estimates, there are some 200 private houses for U.S. officials, on regular streets located throughout upscale districts of Islamabad.

Pakistani press and bloggers also targeted Craig Davis, an American aid worker, insisting that he’s an undercover secret agent. Davis, a contractor to the USAID development arm of the government, is based in the volatile northwestern city of Peshawar, and now appears to be at risk. Last year, another American USAID contractor in Peshawar, Stephen Vance, was gunned down just outside his home.

“In one or two cases these commentators have identified very specific embassy employees as CIA or Blackwater, and that very much puts the employee at danger. In at least one case we’re going to have to evacuate the employee,” said Patterson, without identifying the individual involved. “What particularly scared us about him is that Stephen Vance, who was the other AID Chief of Party in Peshawar, was of course assassinated a few months ago. So there is a track record here that’s sort of alarming.”

In recent days, shows on two popular private television channels, Geo and Dunya, which broadcast in the local Urdu language, put up pictures of homes in Islamabad which they claimed were occupied by CIA, FBI, or employees of the controversial Blackwater company of private security contractors, now called Xe Services. Some of the houses were identified with their full address. It is believed that several of the homes weren’t occupied by Americans but others were. According to the U.S embassy, bloggers are now calling on people to “kill” the occupants of these houses.

A survey last month for international broadcaster al Jazeera by Gallup Pakistan found that 59 percent of Pakistanis felt the greatest threat to the country was the United States. A separate survey in August by the Pew Research Center, an independent pollster based in Washington, recorded that 64 percent of the Pakistani public regards the U.S. “as an enemy” and only 9 percent believe it to be a partner.

“The Ugly American of the sixties is back in Pakistan and this time with a vengeance,” said Mazari, the defense analyst whose newspaper column was the subject of the American complaint. “It’s an alliance (U.S.-Pakistan) that’s been forced on the country by its corrupt leadership. It’s delivering chaos. We should distance ourselves. You can’t just hand over the country.”

While the anti-US sentiment appears genuine, it is uncertain whether the current storm, and the particular stories that it thrived on, was orchestrated by a pressure group or even an arm of the state. In the past, Pakistan’s notorious Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, part of the military, has very effectively used the press to push its agenda.

The U.S. provided over \$11 billion in aid to Pakistan since 2001. Yet in recent days, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has complained that too much of the promised new enhanced U.S. aid package would be eaten up in American administrative costs, while President Asif Zardari demanded that multi-billion dollar civilian and military aid money, currently stuck in Congress, be speeded up.

The Pakistani government has repeatedly stated that joining the U.S. “war on terror” has cost the nation an estimated \$34 billion and ministers frequently lambast the U.S. for trespassing on Pakistani territory with use of spy planes to target suspected militants — an emotive tactic for the Pakistani population.

Ambassador Patterson said that “the (Pakistani) government could be more helpful” in combating the anti-American controversies, which took on a new fever pitch since the beginning of August.

The weak Islamabad government appears unable to come to the defense of its ally and even tried to score some popularity points by joining the U.S.-baiting.

A widely believed conspiracy contends that America is deliberately destabilizing Pakistan, to bring down a “strong Muslim country”, and ultimately seize its nuclear weapons. Pakistanis, especially its military establishment, also are distrustful of U.S. motives in Afghanistan, seeing it as part of a strategy for regional domination. Further Pakistanis are appalled that the regime of Hamid Karzai in Kabul is close to archenemy India.

“Part of the reason why we can’t fight terrorism is because the terrorists have adopted what I’d call anti-U.S. imperialist discourse, which makes them more popular,” said Ayesha Siddiqi, an analyst and author of Military Inc.

Many also blame the U.S. for “imposing” a president on the country, Zardari, who is deeply disliked and who last year succeeded an unpopular U.S.-backed military dictator. So democrats resent American interference in Pakistani politics, while conservatives distrust American aims in Afghanistan.

“You used to find this anti-Americanism among supporters of religious groups and Right-wing groups,” said Ahmed Quraishi, a newspaper columnist and the leading anti-American blogger. “But over the past two to three years, young, educated Pakistanis, people you’d normally expect to be pro-American modernists, and middle class people, are increasingly inclined to anti-Americanism. That’s the new phenomenon.”

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