

UN envoy backs Karzai against Pakistan

Canadian the first Western diplomat to publicly support Afghan leader's accusation that Islamabad spies are behind recent attacks

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KABUL — Pakistan's intelligence agents are likely responsible for recent attacks in Afghanistan, and the international community should support the Afghan government's complaints about such activity, a senior United Nations envoy says.

Chris Alexander, a former Canadian ambassador now serving as a UN deputy special representative in Afghanistan, says he believes the Afghan authorities, who say their neighbour's spy service is sending terrorists across the border.

President Hamid Karzai has accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency of plotting many spectacular attacks in his country in recent months, including an attempt on his life and an embassy bombing that killed at least 41 people in Kabul.

"We have to ask ourselves, was Karzai right on this point?" Mr. Alexander said in an interview. "I think the answer is yes."



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Afghan President Hamid Karzai. (*Shah Marai/AFP/Getty Images*)

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While many foreign officials and analysts have privately endorsed Mr. Karzai's view of the ISI, Mr. Alexander is the first Western diplomat to back the accusation in public.

"If we support him as President of Afghanistan, and we support the cause of peace and security in Afghanistan, we should be prepared to speak lucidly about these issues as well, and not be given pause or forced to back down simply because there's a reaction from someone who, quite frankly, is speaking for the spoilers," Mr. Alexander said.

"Let's have some international courage on this front."

Western diplomats have previously said they tread carefully with Pakistan in part because of the country's fragile politics, its mistrust of foreign pressure and its nuclear arsenal.

When asked how Islamabad might react to blunt accusations of waging a proxy war, Mr. Alexander shrugged. "I'm not sure, but there's only one way to find out. The project on which we're embarked - with its high stakes, with its serious investment, with its sacrifices - deserves at least that level of courage with regard to this issue. Otherwise we really are pretending that Niagara Falls doesn't flow."

Islamabad has consistently denied using intelligence services to interfere with its neighbour, but Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani bowed to international pressure on the weekend by removing the ISI from military control and placing it under the Interior Ministry's civilian supervision.

The head of Pakistan's ruling party said the move was intended to deflect criticism of the spy agency and the announcement was timed to coincide with Mr. Gilani's visit to Washington today for talks with U.S. President George W. Bush.

But the switch to civilian oversight was only a symbolic gesture and could aggravate the chaotic situation in Pakistan as power brokers struggle for control of the spy agency, according to an assessment published yesterday by Strategic Forecasting Inc., a private intelligence firm.

"Increased civilian say over the affairs of the agency will, in the short term, add to the crisis of governance faced by the state," the assessment says.

After years of excusing rumours of Pakistani involvement as being the work of rogue agents or retired intelligence officials acting on their own, Western leaders have become increasingly blunt with Pakistan in private conversations about the ISI's role in the Afghan war.

Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Pakistan this month and confronted his counterparts in a meeting that one diplomat described as stormy. "He lost his temper," the diplomat said.

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister David Emerson, who made a whirlwind visit to Kabul on the weekend, was more measured when a reporter asked him about relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"Canada does have concerns about the insurgency platform, if you like, that is developing and has developed in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan," Mr. Emerson said.

"...We believe that ultimately there has to be a collaborative approach to solving the situation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and look forward to dialogue taking place in the months ahead."

Pakistan's intelligence services are widely believed to have helped create the Taliban in 1994 and to have shepherded the movement toward its takeover of nearly all of Afghanistan. Pakistan formally cut ties with the Taliban in 2001, under U.S. pressure, but rumours of assistance received by Taliban insurgents in the lawless border region have persisted for years.

Mr. Alexander said the message to Pakistan must go beyond pressing the government. Concrete actions should be demanded against the networks of terrorists and insurgents who take shelter in the country's tribal areas, he said.

But assurances must also be given to Pakistan that moving against militants in the border regions will not harm its own national interest, he said, alluding to Pakistan's concerns about India. Members of the military establishment in Pakistan have argued that supporting Islamic militants can give their country a supply of irregular forces if needed against India, and prevent Pakistan from being squeezed on two fronts in the event of war.

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