

Sending troops to Iraq

Jan¹¹
28.7.07

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ACCORDING to reports, the UN Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, was told by President Musharraf "not long ago" that Pakistan would be willing to send troops provided the request came from Iraq and provided there were other Islamic troops on the ground.

More recently, the ISPR director-general, Major-General Shaukat Sultan, said in a TV programme that there were three conditions that had to be met before Pakistani troops could be sent. These were (a) they would be there under UN auspices (b) the request for troops would come from the Iraqis and (c) there was consensus within the country on this issue.

It would appear that two of the three conditions have been met. The government has yet to test the waters with regard to the existence or otherwise of the consensus within the country. Obviously, the way to ascertain that would be to have a debate in the parliament. There is no indication yet that the government intends to bring this subject before the National Assembly.

While the UN Secretary-General seemed quite confident, in the above-mentioned interview, that troops from other Islamic countries would be on the ground soon, but no country has yet made any such official announcement yet. There were initially high hopes that there would be such an announcement from Egypt but media reports after the recent kidnapping of an Egyptian diplomat in Iraq show that Cairo would not send troops there. Morocco and Bangladesh, the other Muslim countries from where troops were expected, are maintaining complete silence.

Considering this public mood, only a foolhardy Arab or Muslim government would volunteer troops for serving in America-occupied Iraq. This perception could change if the Iraqi government, though not truly independent, could ensure that the UN would be able to function independently of the 140,000 strong American force in Iraq and could fulfil its limited mandate in a reasonably secure environment.

Is this possible? As this writer mentioned in an earlier article, the past experience does not augur well for the future. The high-profile Bremer may have left Iraq and the new American ambassador may have adopted a low profile even while heading the largest American embassy in the world and he may also have repeatedly emphasised that the new Iraqi government was fully sovereign. The fact remains that military actions that the continuing turbulence make necessary give the American forces a high profile. It also underlines the fact that the Iraqi security forces remain under-trained, under-manned, suspected of divided loy-

reduced the size of their forces or told the Americans that they would not stay beyond another two or three months. Many countries, including India (whose three nationals are being held hostage), are now trying to ensure that their nationals are not sent to Iraq by companies in Kuwait and elsewhere.

This is bound to cast a negative effect on the reconstruction effort and restoration of basic services, the absence of which is adding to the frustration of the ordinary Iraqi. The impact the hostage taking is having on the coalition partners and on other countries has clearly encouraged the insurgents and further hostage taking can therefore be anticipated.

It would seem strange, in these circumstances, to recommend that Pakistan should nevertheless consider sending troops to Iraq to protect the UN contingent and thus to facilitate the completion of the UN mission of holding elections and helping the Iraqis formulate a workable and viable constitution. Yet this is what I would recommend if and only if there are clear indications from the Americans that

the UN will be allowed to perform the task with the neutrality that is expected of it.

It is clear that the Iraqi situation is messy. Many may say that it is a mess created by the Americans and that they should get to grips with it. The unfortunate reality is that this will only add to sufferings of the Iraqi people. It could also mean that Iraq falls apart and as a consequence of that brings turbulence if not chaos to the entire area. This is the last thing our friends in the region would want. Nor is the Muslim world prepared to face such an eventuality, much less of emergence of a fundamentalist regime in an Iraq forsaken by the world. Afghanistan has taught us what that can mean.

It should be made clear that the troops under the UN banner will have nothing to do with the fight that the Americans or the Iraqi security forces are carrying on against the insurgents. Their task will be to provide protection to the UN's task force only. Once it is recognized that bringing some political order to Iraq is in the interest of the Muslim world and once we are convinced that this is what the Americans will not interfere with, the question of sending Pakistani troops no longer remains problematic.

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This is not surprising. In much of the Muslim world, the prevailing conditions in Iraq are seen as America's misadventure in an Islamic country from the consequences of which the US is now trying to rescue itself by enlisting, in a very subordinate capacity, the United Nations. So long as the UN's involvement in Iraq is seen in this light, reluctance to participate in any UN operation will be even greater in the Muslim world than it is in what the Bush Administration refers to as "Old Europe"

A recent poll conducted in the Arab countries, which asked virtually the same questions as in a poll conducted in 2002 shows how deep American popularity had sunk. In the 2002 survey, 76 per cent of Egyptians had a negative attitude toward the United States. Now it is 98 per cent. In Morocco, 61 per cent viewed the country unfavourably in 2002, but in two years, that number has jumped to 88 per cent. In Saudi Arabia, a similar attitude has intensified from 87 per cent in 2002 to 94 per cent in June. The majority of those polled believed that America invaded Iraq for oil, to protect Israel and to weaken the Muslim world and that the Iraq war has caused more terrorism, brought about less democracy, and left the Iraqi people far worse off today than they were while living under Saddam's rule. They also indicated that the only way for America to improve its image was to stop supporting Israel and change its Middle East policy. If any further evidence of the extent of frustration among the Arab masses was needed it was provided by the poll results that while Jacques Chirac was the most admired among the world leaders, Saddam Hussain and Osama bin Laden had a tie for the fourth place preceded only by the late Gamal Nasser and Ayatollah Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah.

alties and therefore incapable of giving the Iraqi government the underpinning it needs. In these circumstances it is unlikely that the Iraqi government can ensure freedom of action to the UN unless the Americans agree to let it do so.

It is also not certain if the UN's neutral role will win plaudits from the interim government. Much of what the last UN special envoy proposed in term of the composition of the interim government was summarily rejected by the American handpicked interim governing Council and the ones now in the interim government are the same persons. They are seeking to build their own power base.

Some of Bremer's egregious errors — the disbanding of the Iraqi army or the open quarrel with Moqtada Al-Sadr — have been corrected. An amnesty has been declared that would allow many of the insurgents to return to normal lives. All this, however, may not be sufficient for the interim government members many of whom including the prime Minister have spent many years in exile and have no real grassroots support or even recognition among the Iraqi masses. It is unlikely that they will welcome an early election particularly if it is supervised by the UN and therefore reasonably free.

Lastly, the security situation is far from satisfactory. The pause in insurgent activity for a fortnight or so after the handover of power has been followed by a spate of vicious attacks. There are almost daily reports of Iraqis being killed and injured in attacks mounted on recruitment centres and in American attacks on insurgent targets.

There has also been a new round of hostage taking, which, in turn has hastened the process of desertion from the ranks of the "coalition of the willing". The Philippines have withdrawn their entire contingent but many other countries have

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Some Americans may still entertain ambitions about Iraqi oil. Some of them may still believe that if the current chaos in Iraq increases the threat of terrorism to the Muslim world, it is a price worth paying for ensuring that Israel has its way in Palestine. Most of them, however, are beginning to see the Iraqi adventure as a big mistake and, hopefully are prepared to follow the advice former President Clinton offered in an interview to CNN when he said, "I hope that once we show good faith in the United States, if we show good faith in observing sovereignty, giving up monopoly on contracts, working with the U.N., I think in due time, perhaps not before very long, we could get more help from the Nato allies".

If the Americans do give the UN a free hand and if they urge the Iraqi government to do likewise the UN can become an instrument for bringing order and political harmony of sorts to Iraq. The UN cannot, however, perform this function without having adequate security for its personnel and for the many posts that it must perform set up all over the country. Providing such protection is not an easy task nor is it, in the present circumstances, any less fraught with risk.

It should be clear that the troops under the UN banner will have nothing to do with the fight that the Americans or the Iraqi security forces are carrying on against the insurgents. Their task, pure and simple at least theoretically, will be to provide protection to the UN's task force. Once it is recognized that bringing some political order to Iraq is in the interest of the Muslim world and once we are convinced that this is what the Americans will not interfere with, the question of sending Pakistani troops no longer remains problematic.

The writer is a former foreign secretary.