

Bush Offers Praise To Pakistani Leader

Government Beats, Arrests Protesters In Advance of President's Appearance

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, March 4 -- President Bush on Saturday praised Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, for his efforts in hunting down al-Qaeda operatives inside his country and his long-term commitment to democracy during a day-long visit to the capital.

"In the long run, he understands that extremists can be defeated by freedom and democracy and prosperity and better education," Bush said of Musharraf in a joint news conference at the presidential palace.

Bush's visit to Pakistan came at the end of a four-day trip to South Asia, which included a stop in Afghanistan and two days in India, where he announced an unprecedented agreement that would provide U.S. nuclear power assistance to India while allowing the country to increase production of nuclear weapons.

Bush's visit to Pakistan, his first to the country, was also symbolic. Musharraf is a key ally in the administration's global fight against terrorism, and hundreds of al-Qaeda members have been killed or captured here. Yet some U.S. officials have questioned his desire to aggressively battle militants and his record on democratic reforms.

Only hours before Bush's appearance, the Pakistani government cracked down on political leaders and others planning to protest the president's visit. In the city of Rawalpindi, about 10 miles from Islamabad, police arrested about 20 members of Tehrik-e-Insaaf, a small political party, as they staged a noisy but peaceful demonstration, beating some of them with bamboo sticks as foreign journalists and camera crews recorded the scene.

The protest was supposed to have been much larger, but early Saturday morning, police detained the leader of the party, former international cricket star Imran Khan, and placed him under house arrest, along with about a dozen other party officials, according to a party leader who remained at large and declined to be named for fear that he could be arrested. Later Saturday morning, blue-uniformed police blocked the driveway to Khan's palatial hilltop home near Islamabad and barred reporters from entering.

Reached by telephone, Khan speculated that Musharraf had ordered his detention because "he's just petrified that there could be a lot of people" at the protest. Khan added, "These double standards have to be exposed. . . . To call this democracy is a joke."

Bush and Musharraf did not mention the crackdown in their only joint appearance in the heavily fortified capital. The city's streets were cleared as Pakistan and the United States took extraordinary security measures to protect Bush and his entourage two days after a U.S. diplomat was killed by a suicide bomber in Karachi.

At a news conference Saturday afternoon, Pakistan's foreign minister, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, said the detentions of Khan and other protest organizers were necessary to prevent the kind of disturbances that led to several deaths in Pakistan during the recent protests over cartoon depictions of the prophet Muhammad. "The idea is to prevent a breakdown of law and order," he said, asserting that such detentions normally last for less than a day.

The scene in Pakistan was even more tense than usual as a result of waves of violent protests, often directed at the United States, over the cartoons, which were initially published in a Danish newspaper. Musharraf, whom many Pakistanis consider too cozy with Bush and the West, began the news conference by condemning the cartoons and saying that they are not justified by the principle of freedom of press. Bush has defended the right of the press to print the cartoons, despite their offensive nature. He did not comment on the controversy Saturday.

Bush offered guarded praise of Musharraf's democratic moves since seizing power in a bloodless coup in 1999. He did not mention Musharraf's refusal to step down as army chief, which the Pakistani leader had promised to do as part of a democratization process. Nor did Bush echo the concerns of some inside the administration that Musharraf continues to stifle religious and other freedoms. He described a democratic Pakistan as more of a hope than reality.

But Musharraf offered an extraordinary defense. "Unfortunately, we are accused a lot on not moving forward on democracy," he said. "We have empowered the people of Pakistan now -- they were never empowered before -- by introducing a local government system where we have given the destiny of their areas for development, for welfare, for progress in their own hands through financial, political and administrative involvement." Bush said the two leaders strategized on how to make the next round of national elections more open and fair.

Unprovoked, Musharraf defended his refusal to relinquish his military position, which he had promised to do by 2004. He said he would revisit the issue next year.

U.S. officials said Bush is more concerned about Musharraf's help in hunting down terrorists than he is about Pakistan's mixed record on democracy, in large part because Bush realizes democracy is new to the region and will take time to blossom.

Bush said he was pleased with Pakistan's commitment to finding Osama bin Laden, who is believed to be hiding along the Pakistani-Afghan border, and other terrorists.

"Part of my mission today was to determine whether or not the president is as committed as he has been in the past to bringing these terrorists to justice, and he is," Bush said. "He understands the stakes, he understands the responsibility, and he understands the need to make sure our strategy is able to defeat the enemy."

Musharraf said "if there are slippages" in Pakistan's pursuit of terrorists, they have been caused by "implementation," not intentions.

Still, Bush made clear that Pakistan, while an important ally, has not earned his trust in the way that neighboring India has.

"I explained that Pakistan and India are different countries with different needs and different histories," Bush said. "So, as we proceed forward, our strategy will take in effect those well-known differences." He did, however, pledged to continue U.S. economic assistance.

Bush spent the entire day here, starting with a welcoming ceremony and ending with a state dinner. In the afternoon, Bush, a former owner of the Texas Rangers, took a swing at cricket, hitting a few balls and bowling -- akin to pitching -- with about two dozen children. He presented them with autographed baseballs.

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