

Musharraf: No Challenge From Bush

On Reversal

Pakistani President Still Leading Army

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept. 12 -- President Bush, who has been promoting democracy around the world, has never questioned Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, about his controversial decision last year to renege on a pledge to step down as army chief, Musharraf said in a wide-ranging interview Monday.

"Let me assure you that President Bush never talks about when are you taking your uniform off," Musharraf said before offering an energetic defense of his democratic credentials.

Musharraf, interviewed after arriving for this week's opening of the U.N. General Assembly, also said he believed that Iran, like every country, had a right to peaceful use of nuclear power, opposing efforts by the Bush administration to punish Iran for pursuing a nuclear program.

He also expressed surprise that North Korea has denied having a uranium enrichment program, because he said a nuclear smuggling network run out of Pakistan sold North Korea designs and centrifuge parts needed for such a program. Based on what he knew of Pakistani sales, "I think they do have an enrichment program," he said.

Musharraf said the United States and Pakistan have no agreement about what would happen to Osama bin Laden if he were captured in Pakistan, but he said he would readily turn the leader of al Qaeda over to the United States for trial for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He said Pakistan has captured 600 to 700 members of al Qaeda, including top aides to bin Laden, and said "they are all here in the United States, we handed them over." The U.S. government has not publicly acknowledged the captivity or whereabouts of its most "high-value" detainees.

Musharraf, who wore a gray suit during the 50-minute interview, took power in a bloodless coup in 1999. In December, shortly before visiting the White House, he refused to honor a promise made in 2003 -- in exchange for broader constitutional powers -- to give up his uniform at the end of 2004. The largely pro-Musharraf parliament has approved a bill allowing him to keep the military post until 2007, but asked whether he would take off the uniform then, Musharraf replied: "We will cross that bridge when we come to it."

Musharraf said it was "very much a concern" to him that he still held the army post. "A president cannot be a president in uniform, should not be," he said. But "the environment of Pakistan dictates that I keep on until 2007 . . . the regional and international environment demands that I keep it on. So why should I be bothered to remove it now?"

Musharraf said he had "totally turned around Pakistan" and had made key advances in fostering democracy, including protecting freedom of the press, empowering local government, improving the position of women in society and giving greater representation to minorities.

"Leave the developing world aside; I think we are better than all of them," Musharraf declared. "Bring the developed world and let us compare Pakistan's record, under me, a uniformed man, with many of the developed countries. I challenge that we will be better off."

Musharraf also became animated when he spoke about the case of Mukhtar Mai, a 33-year-old illiterate woman

who spoke publicly about having been gang-raped on the orders of village council in 2002. Mai, bucking taboos, won public sympathy and government support after she demanded that the men be charged and convicted. But earlier this year Musharraf earned the ire of the Bush administration when he blocked her from traveling to the United States to publicize the case.

Musharraf said that Mai was free to travel now -- though she has never left Pakistan -- and that he had no regrets about how he handled the incident. He said Mai had come under the sway of organizations determined to harm Pakistan's image and he did not think Pakistan "should be singled out when the curse is everywhere in the world." He noted he had seen reports or figures about rape in the United States, Canada, France and Britain showing that "it is happening everywhere."

"You must understand the environment in Pakistan," Musharraf added. "This has become a moneymaking concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped."

As a general who still runs Pakistan's military, Musharraf was highly critical of the execution of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and said the war had contributed to an unstable Middle East. Musharraf said the United States should have targeted only Saddam Hussein; instead, he said, the invasion had left images that were very disturbing to Muslims.

"If you launch a massive operation where the whole world sees for months bombing and shelling and people dying and towns burning, this alarms the whole Muslim world," he said. "So the whole scenario of a hated man turns into sympathy for the people of Iraq. It went to the worse."

Musharraf cautioned against similar operations and said Pakistan would not support any military action against Iran, a close ally and neighbor.

He voiced support for Iran's nuclear program, saying that "every country has a right to use nuclear knowledge for peaceful purposes," and he came out against U.S. efforts to pressure the government into giving it up. Rather than report Iran to the U.N. Security Council, as the Bush administration wants, the international community should be looking for ways to help Iran, he said, adding that "Iran needs to show flexibility" as well.

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