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Baluchistan: The Iranian connection

By Abdus Sattar Ghazali

Pakistan's military government hurriedly buried the body of the Baluch nationalist leader, Nawab Akbar Bugti, in a padlocked coffin on Sept. 1, 2006. He was killed in a massive military operation in Baluchistan. It was a reminiscent of the 1979 funeral of Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was deposed and then executed by the military government of General Ziaul Haq. Even the identification of the body of Nawab Bugti was a replay of 1979. Officials claimed that the Imam of Dera Bugti's main mosque had seen the corpse and confirmed that it was indeed Nawab Bugti's body. Similarly, Bhutto's body was also identified by the Imam of a mosque of his native village Garhi Khuda Bux.

The target killing of Nawab Bugti on August 27, that caused turmoil in Baluchistan and Sindh and bitter opposition criticism throughout the country, came at a time when General Musharraf's government looks fragile. It is involved in fighting a war against its own people in Waziristan. No end to this fight seems in sight as the US, in return for its support to the military government, is pressing for more and more action against the so-called terrorists who were once buddies of both the US and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

About 70,000 troops are deployed to hunt down "terrorists" while American aerial attacks from neighboring Afghanistan have killed alleged leaders and scores of civilians, causing a flood of refugees and displacements. The military government is charged with allowing American forces to violate sovereignty of Pakistan.

In a bid to restore peace in the strategic area, the government has reportedly accepted most of the militants' demands — the release of all their men, return of their weapons and vehicles seized during various operations, dismantling of checkpoints, restoration of all perks and privileges of the tribal people and compensation for those killed and property damaged.

The target killing of Nawab Bugti, seen by many as a blow to the integrity of Pakistan's federation, coincides with the distribution of a map of the Muslim World after "the birth of a new Middle East" by the US Armed Forces Journal. The map shows a truncated "natural" Pakistan comprising Punjab, Northern Areas and Sindh. In the new configuration, Pakistan, which is described by the US Army as an "un-natural country," will lose its northern Pathan belt of the NWFP and Baluchistan to Afghanistan and the remainder Baluchistan along with the Baluch territory of Iran will become an independent "Free Baluchistan."

Like the recent Israeli rampage against Lebanon and Hezbollah which is seen as a dry run for U.S. military operation against Iran, many commentators wonder if the current Pakistani military operation in Baluchistan may be a prelude to a ground operation against Iran from Baluchistan.

In an article - Baluchistan and the Coming Iran War - published by "The Digest", Luciana Bohne writes that this is natural gas country where China is helping to build a pipeline, which President Bush opposes. "This is from where commandos are penetrating Iran (according to Samuel Hersh - The New Yorker). This is where the "west" has been stoking up separatist fires, probably to get Musharraf's army to intervene. Need boots on the ground to encircle Iran."

Bohne went on to say: "The US has three military bases in Baluchistan. They say they are fighting Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in the region. Perhaps. But, Baluchistan borders with Iran to the west. Baluchistan, too, is rich in natural gas and minerals. China is helping the Pakistani government to build a natural gas pipeline from Baluchistan's port of Gwadar to China, a project the Bush administration opposes. The port of Gwadar just happens to be geographically located to overlook the Straits of Hormuz, which the Iranians intend to block if they are attacked. Hormuz is the crucial sea route for international oil distribution."

Bohne asks. If this is a coincidence that the US should be interested in "terrorism" in Baluchistan and urging Musharraf to be more zealous at the same time that it is planning an

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attack on Iran?

A Carnegie Endowment paper by Frederic Grare entertains the same thought, albeit to deny it: "The Baluch and the Pakistani think that Washington would like to use Baluchistan as a rear-guard base for an attack on Iran, and Iran is suspected of supporting Baluch [independence] activists in order to counter such a Pakistani-US plot. . . . Some Pakistanis perceive the US using its Greater Middle East initiative to dismantle the major Muslim states and redefine the borders of the region. Some Baluch nationalists charge the US with conspiring with the Pakistani government to put an end to Baluch claims. So far nobody has been able to prove any of these accusations."

Frederic Grare also reminds that the strategic Pakistan is the location of Pakistan's nuclear tests.

So, the Grand Plan is to separate the Baluchistan province from Iran and form a Baluchistan state with the one in Pakistan. Herat (in Afghanistan) will join Iran and on the other hand there will be Kurdistan state (including the Kurdish provinces of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria) Azerbaijan provinces of Iran too will join the Azerbaijan republic. Iraq will be divided into Sunni and Shiite states.

Musharraf's government has re-opened hostility in Baluchistan against the decades-long separatist forces, which Islamabad is accused of provoking into taking up arms again. Throughout the spring of 2006 Musharraf government has come under intense criticism by America, Britain and even the puppet Afghan regime for not doing enough for the "war on terror." The trouble is that if he complies with his allies in the "war on terror," he comes under attack from domestic critics, of which he has legions, including the majority of the people.

Warning against the consequences of Nawab Bagti's killing, the most respected newspaper of Pakistan, Dawn points out: His killing has hurt the Baloch pride and honor, which count a great deal in the feudal-dominated society that Baluchistan by and large is. The government must abandon the attitude of arrogance and impatience that led to the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti and adopt a more patient and conciliatory approach in dealing with the highly sensitive Baluchistan situation. As in Waziristan, so also in Baluchistan, it is politics, not force, that must be put in command.

Now the question is whether the Musharraf government will give any heed to such calls or by default would become an instrument in implementing the grand designs?