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HANDS OFF BALOCHISTAN

Canada's ally, Pakistan, assassinates rebel leader

Stephen Harper's war in Afghanistan is threatening to draw Canada into an ever-wider cycle of death and destruction.

Many will know that the war in Afghanistan is closely related to Harper's strong support for the Bush regime in America.

But that war also puts Canada into a close alliance with the Pakistan's military dictatorship, headed by Pervez Musharraf.

But where is this alliance taking us?

August 26 the Pakistani military, using cluster bombs, killed Nawab Akbar Bugti, a key leader of the Balochi people. Thousands of people took to the streets throughout the region in protest against this barbarism.

The eight-million strong Balochi nation exists in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, but like the Kurdish nation, has no independent state. Pakistan in particular has a long history of attacking the national rights of the Balochi people.

Promises were made to the Balochi people – in 1948 and again in 1973 – that there would be some recognition of their national status. But various Pakistani military regimes have refused to honour these promises. But the issue of national oppression will not go away.

Pakistani Balochistan emerged into the news in 1998 when the Pakistan government conducted underground nuclear tests in the Chagai Hills. So not only do the Balochi people not have the right to self-determination, they do not have the right to live free of nuclear contamination.

It is not surprising, then, that there have been repeated movements for national rights in Balochistan, Nawab Akbar Bugti was seen as a leader of these movements, and his death – along with two of his grandsons – is a clear sign that Pakistan



Above: thousands demonstrate against Pakistani assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti. Right: the zone of conflict.

has chosen to intensify its oppression of the Balochi people.

These developments are completely linked to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Immediately after the assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti, the Pakistani government signed a cease-fire agreement with opposition groups in the Northwest of the country. The *Wall Street Journal* captured a part of the meaning of this deal clearly.

"Pakistan's decision to end a military offensive against Islamic militants in the country's troubled northwest frontier reflects mounting pressure on President Pervez Musharraf to deal with an even bigger security problem: a growing rebellion in the resource-rich province of Balochistan" which is in the south.

But this is only part of the story. The Pakistani offensive against Balochistan is completely linked to the growing threat of a US war on Iran. All of the attention of the US is now turning towards Iran, and Pakistan's military actions are part of the equation.

The Northwest of Pakistan – where Musharraf has signed a ceasefire – borders on Afghanistan while Pakistan



Balochistan borders on Iran.

The freeing up of 70,000 Pakistani troops, up until now tied down in the Northwest, will allow for a much greater Pakistani military presence on the border with Iran. The presence of a large Pakistani military force in Balochistan, on Iran's eastern border, complements very well the military pressure the US is putting in Iran on its western borders from Iraq. Added to this, the US already has three military bases in Balochistan.

It is bad enough that this all creates greater pressure for a disastrous military war between the US and Iran. Even worse, is the way in which these events could aggravate relations between the US and China.

Before the events of 9/11, Pakistan and China began work on a massive port development in Gwadar, one of the major cities of Balochistan. The port development is part of a huge redevelopment project to ship natural gas from Balochistan to China.

It is opposed by Balochi organizations who see it as a rip-off of resources which belong to the people of Balochistan.

It is also opposed by the US, which a) does not want the energy resources of the region going to China and b) does not want China to have a beach-head on the Straits of Hormuz, the lifeline of much of the world's oil, and which Gwadar overlooks.

The potential, in other words, for a very dangerous escalation of tension between China and the US, is built into the conflict in Balochistan – on top of the very clear implications it has for a possible war with Iran.

And in the middle of this tinderbox sits Canada. Canada's military operation in the south of Afghanistan points like a dagger, towards Balochistan, Pakistan and the port of Gwadar. Any confrontation between the US and Iran, or the US and China could very quickly draw Afghanistan – and therefore Canada – into a much wider war.

So we should oppose Pakistan's assault on the people of Balochistan, out of solidarity with their right to self-determination.

But we should also do so because the actions of Pakistan and the US threaten to drag the region – and Canada with it – into a very big, very destructive war.

And we need to add this to our arsenal of arguments, and demand that Stephen Harper get Canadian troops out of Afghanistan right now.

Friday, September 15, at 3:30pm, there will be a demonstration against Pakistan's assault on Balochistan, at 180 Dundas St. West (at University), outside the offices of the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

And on Saturday, October 28, we need to get all who are for peace, for self-determination, and against war, to march in the big protests demanding an end to Canada's war on Afghanistan.