

ZARDARI RETURNS TO PAKISTAN; LIAISON OFFICERS RETURN TO BORDER CENTERS; STAGE SET FOR HAQQANI AS DOUBLE SCAPEGOAT

Two major steps toward stability in Pakistan and restoration of relations with the United States have taken place, as President Asif Ali Zardari returned to Pakistan yesterday while liaison officers have now returned to the border coordination posts from which they were withdrawn as part of the response to the November 26 NATO attack that killed 24 Pakistani troops. NATO supply routes remain blocked, however. In a very interesting move, former Pakistani Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani has been forced to submit a statement and to appear before the Abbotabad Commission. The Commission is seeking information on visas issued by the Washington embassy during his tenure as Ambassador.

Despite the earlier statements that Zardari would take two weeks of rest before resuming his duties, Zardari yesterday returned to Pakistan from Dubai:

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari returned home from medical treatment in Dubai to face rising tension between his civilian government and the military over a memo accusing the country's generals of plotting a coup.

It's not clear when the deeply unpopular leader who has uneasy ties with the army will return to work. He flew into the southern city of Karachi after treatment for a heart condition.

It would appear that Zardari immediately took up at least ceremonial duties:

State television showed him at his residence, looking relaxed as he met senior provincial officials.

Multiple media reports had addressed the fact that Zardari and Army Chief Ashfaq Kayani had talked on the phone prior to Zardari's return. An article today by Dawn provides more details on that conversation:

An Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) spokesman issued an explanatory statement of the telephonic conversation between President Asif Ali Zardari and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, DawnNews reported on Monday.

The spokesman said Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani received a phone call from the president while meeting with the COAS General Ashfaq Kayani.

Zardari asked to convey his well wishes to Kayani. The COAS in return talked to the president, spokesman said.

During the conversation, General Kayani inquired after the president's health, the spokesman said, adding that rumour mongering over the subject should stop.

In addition to calling for the end of "rumour mongering" the spokesman also appended this:

The spokesman moreover said that events that took place in the country during the last 72 hours should not be linked to this conversation.

In reading this article, keep in mind that Dawn is routinely believed to be closely tied to Pakistan's military. So here we have an ISI spokesperson speaking through Dawn to emphasize

that Zardari and Kayani only spoke about Zardari's health and that there is no connection between their having spoken and the fact that Zardari returned to the country almost immediately after the conversation.

Despite our being instructed to read nothing into the conversation between Zardari and Kayani, it appears that some sort of peace between the military and civilian arms of the government has been struck and that former Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani remains the highest ranking official who appears to be tied to the Memogate scandal. Ignoring Haqqani's pleas of innocence, information leaked so far, principally from Mansoor Ijaz (who claims the military has confirmed his evidence) appears to place Haqqani squarely in the middle of preparing the memo for delivery to then US Joint Chiefs Chair Michael Mullen.

As if that is not trouble enough for Haqqani, there now appears to be a pathway developing where he could also wind up as the scapegoat for the killing of Osama bin Laden. Also from Dawn:

Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani on Monday submitted his written reply to the Abbottabad commission, DawnNews reported.

After the statement's submission, the commission directed Haqqani to appear before it again.

/snip/

Earlier, the commission's head, Justice (retd) Javed Iqbal, had said that the former ambassador was being summoned because the panellists wanted to find out the details of the visas issued by Pakistan's embassy in Washington during his service.

Will Haqqani take the fall for both Memogate and

bin Laden in a brokered deal between the military and civilian sides of the government?

That could be one outcome of the current trajectory of events.

Returning to news that tends toward stabilization of the situation in Pakistan, we also learned today that liaison officers have returned to the border coordination posts that play a key role preventing events like the November 26 NATO attack:

Pakistan has restored liaison officers at coordination centers on the Afghanistan border, Nato said on Monday, in a slight easing of tensions, after Nato air strikes last month killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers and provoked fury across the country.

But the US-led coalition's supply lines that run through Pakistan remain closed since the November 26 incident and it is both in the interests of foreign forces as well as Pakistan that the routes be opened sooner rather than later, the alliance said.

Ties between the United States and Pakistan are fraught, with Islamabad blocking the Afghan supply line for one of the longest periods yet. Last week, US lawmakers agreed to freeze \$700 million in aid to Pakistan demanding it disrupt the movement of fertilizers used in making homemade bombs, the deadliest killer of foreign troops.

But the top Nato commander in Afghanistan, US General John Allen, had spoken to the Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Kayani and there were signs of progress over the last few days, Brigadier General Carsten Jacobsen, a spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), told reporters.

Stay tuned for further developments.