

U.S. visit to Pakistan shows 'panic'

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American diplomatic mission triggers widespread resentment

ISLAMABAD — The visit to Pakistan of top U.S. officials this week was supposed to cement ties with the country's incoming government. Instead, it ended up roiling local sensitivities and inadvertently showing up key policy differences.

Deputy secretary of state John Negroponte arrived for consultations even before the new government had a chance to form itself, fuelling paranoia in the country about being ruled from Washington. There is no foreign minister or interior minister yet, and the Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, was only sworn into office on Wednesday.

However, there was enough interaction for one thing to be obvious: The rules have changed. Mr. Negroponte and assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher received a cold reception from politicians, highlighting the difference between dealing with an elected government and the military regime of President Pervez Musharraf.

Washington had been used to dealing with just one man, Mr. Musharraf, who served as president, army chief and de facto prime minister for eight years after seizing power in a 1999 coup. Now, it will have to deal with a president, army chief and a cumbersome coalition consisting of four political parties, including the pacifist Awami National Party, and the pro-Taliban Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. And, in addition to the prime minister and other ministers, the leaders of the two senior coalition partners, Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, and Asif Zardari, chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party, will sit outside the government and will also have to be consulted.

If Pakistan's politicians were frosty to the diplomats' three-day visit, the press and public opinion were outright hostile.

"To my mind, it seems ham-handed insensitivity that brought Negroponte and Boucher to Pakistan. Because certainly no one has welcomed their visit here," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, a professor of physics at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University and one of the country's leading political commentators. "It's a sign of panic, anxiety, of things slipping through their hand."

Dawn newspaper, in an editorial yesterday, described the arrival as being in "indecent haste," adding that Washington should give the new government time to settle in.

Pakistan's election, on Feb. 18, produced a resounding rejection of Mr. Musharraf, leaving in doubt his future and the military action he championed against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters operating in the country's tribal area. While Mr. Negroponte insisted that the United States wanted a "multifaceted" strategy, in Pakistan he and his government are suspected of a blunt military mindset.

"Bad timing gives the wrong signals, as if they are trying to pressurize the new government when it is in the stages of being formed," said Shireen Mazari, director-general of the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad.

"The war on terror has to be revisited. The most dangerous thing is that the Americans have succeeded in shifting the centre of gravity of the war to Pakistan. We have to shift it back to Afghanistan."

Mr. Sharif publicly castigated U.S. policy after meeting Mr. Negroponte. He said that Pakistan would no longer be a "killing field" so that other countries could pursue their interests. There were open differences over how to approach Mr. Musharraf. Mr. Sharif said afterward "we don't recognize him as the legitimate president."

In a meeting with Mr. Zardari, Mr. Negroponte stressed the need for a "smooth transition" from Mr. Musharraf's rule to democracy. The Peoples Party side wanted reassurance that there would be a transition.

Mr. Negroponte's team may have been especially chastened after their meeting with tribal elders on Wednesday, in Landi Kotal, on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

"We told them that whatever differences we have [with the extremists], they can all be solved through the jirga system," said Malik Darya Khan, one of the tribal chiefs who participated, referring to the traditional meeting of elders to solve disputes.

Mr. Negroponte saved his real clanger until the last. Just before he boarded a flight to leave yesterday, he pre-empted the new government's policy toward militants by warning that some were too extreme to engage in talks. All parties in the coalition have advocated negotiations without making any such distinctions.

"Security measures obviously are necessary when one is talking about dealing with irreconcilable elements who want to destroy our very way of life. I don't see how you can talk with those kind of people," he told a press conference.

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