

The News International
April 29, 2007
Divide and rule

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

I have a bone to pick with the American military. Wherever they show up, walls start to appear. In the fall of 2005, during a 75-minute audience with foreign policy dragon Condoleezza Rice, General Musharraf broached the idea of what Pakistan could do to prove that we are very serious about counter terrorism with his usual linear thinking. The General suggested the construction of a 1,500-mile wall -- he said 'fence' -- between Pakistan and Afghanistan's border. The barrier would thwart Taliban terrorists from slipping into our country and simultaneously quash the petulant poppy trade, and just in case those dastardly fanatics and drug dealers think they can hop the fence, Musharraf came up with the ingenious notion of mining the partition. Anti-landmine activists be damned, Pakistan is not a signatory to the Anti-Landmines Geneva Convention and the various other international treaties that call for the self-explosive weapons to be banned. In fact, according to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) Pakistan is one of only 13 countries that continue to manufacture landmines, so Musharraf's suggestion turns out to be both time and cost efficient. Imagine the scope for the local industry's growth!

A generic White House spokesman blessed the proposal, saying it was "very important that Pakistan and Afghanistan take this idea up". Cheers. Thanks for letting us take the credit on this one. As it is, Pakistan -- with US military tackle and supervision -- mans 800 checkpoints along its border with Afghanistan. Our army also has approximately 80,000 regular troops stationed along the Durand Line. A bit excessive, but then again those Taliban chaps are really quite sneaky.

Since 2005 work on the wall has been underway, though no timetable for its completion has been put forward. The main problem with the partition is that while America and Pakistan think it's a swell idea, the Afghans don't seem to agree. President Hamid Karzai has complained that the wall would create rifts between the "brotherly Pakistani and Afghan people" and has expressed his "deep concern" to United Nations Secretary General Ban ki Moon. One can't fault Mr Karzai this time. While the rest of the rational world is up in arms (metaphoric!) over Israel's construction of an apartheid-esque wall in the Palestinian run territories, we Pakistanis decided that this would be the very best time to engage in a little cordoning of our own.

Last Sunday several Afghan troops tore down some of the construction material being set up along our borders, which resulted in a bout of unfriendly fire between our soldiers and theirs. This may be the first time violence has erupted over our construction of the anti-Taliban wall, but it certainly won't be the last.

Now back to the Americans -- as we speak they are currently busy at work building what has been nicknamed "The Great Wall of Adamiya". Adamiya is a Sunni neighbourhood on the Eastern banks of the River Tigris that has the bad luck of being situated in the middle of a Shiite

community. Prior to the American occupation of their country, Sunnis and Shiites co-existed peacefully; even as Saddam Hussain's government persecuted the Shiite majority, sectarian bloodletting between ordinary Sunnis and Shiites was unheard of in pre 'democratic' Iraq.

In the week that saw some of the worst suicide bombings since 2003, one killing 200 people -- Iraqis -- in a single day, America announced its latest intrepid plan. US paratroopers, flanked by protective tanks, have been working nightly on the construction of the three mile wall that is being celebrated as "one of the centrepieces of a new strategy by coalition and Iraqi forces to break the cycle of sectarian violence" according to a US military press release. Each concrete block that makes up the Great Wall weighs an impressive 14,000 pounds and will eventually reach 12 feet high. The Great Wall is not the first time the Americans have tried to wall in hostile elements -- they built walls in the Sunni city of Samarra, in Falluja, and in Tal Afar near the Syrian border, not to mention completely cutting off the American bastion of safety that makes up the Green Zone (nom du guerre: Emerald City) from the rest of Baghdad -- but it is the first of their partitions to be built exclusively along sectarian lines. Iraq's Balkanization at the hands of the Coalition of the Willing has proved disastrous, dragging the country further and further into a gory civil war. Building walls to separate religious and ethnic communities now is like putting a band-aid on a very bloody wound.

There has been some confusion over exactly what this newest fit of wall building -- don't forget, they built walls in Vietnam too -- is supposed to accomplish. When the US military spokesman in Iraq, Major General William Caldwell, was asked about The Great Wall of Adamiya this past Wednesday he said he hadn't heard of any plans to piece up and barricade parts of the city, after all "Our goal is to unify Baghdad, not subdivide it into separate enclaves". Well, apparently not.

Sunnis themselves do not seem too pleased with the American military's efforts on their behalf. The leader of the largest Sunni bloc in the Iraqi parliament, Adnan al Dulaimi, lashed out against the wall saying it "would make the whole district a prison" and called it "collective punishment on the people of Adamiya". Undeterred by logical concerns as per usual, George W Bush said he was in favour of his military's latest security efforts in Iraq. Obviously claiming that the situation in Iraq is "starting to shift", George W proclaimed that the time had come for the "Iraqi people and the Iraq elected folks to show America and the world that they're ready to do the hard work necessary to reconcile and move forward". One would agree wholeheartedly that the "Iraq elected folks" and their people should do just that, but surely it might be easier for them to do once they're no longer occupied? Or once they've been let out from the gargantuan walls that the American military keeps building around them? It's just a thought...