



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: General Musharraf, President of Pakistan

STOURTON: Mr. President, can you hear me

MUSHARRAF: Yes I can

STOURTON: It's very kind of you to give us your time to talk to us

MUSHARRAF: You're welcome, you're welcome

STOURTON: Just to say very quickly, I don't know whether it's been explained to you but this is for a series of interviews with world leaders running to mark the anniversary of September 11th, so I'm going to ask you, if I may, to cast your mind back a bit... over the past few months

MUSHARRAF: Thank you... you're welcome

STOURTON: Could we start by talking about the day itself, 11 September, what is your most vivid memory of that very memorable day?

MUSHARRAF: Well it was when I got this message and then when we went to the television and I saw the world trade centres crumbling down like cards after this attack. That is one of the most vivid memories I think.

STOURTON: The following day, Richard Armitage in Washington called in General Mahmoud and listed some demands the United States were going to make on Pakistan, and on 13 September, you spoke to Colin Powell and agreed to those demands. Did you feel you were being bullied in any way by the Americans at that stage?

MUSHARRAF: I wouldn't say I was being bullied, but certainly one could understand that there's a lot of anger in United States over this terrorist attack, rightly so I would say. This anger was there, and it, this anger was visible in their talking to me, and as far as demands are concerned, on that day really the demand was whether we would join the coalition against terrorism around the world and we did, I said "Yes, we will". The actual demands of attacking Afghanistan and using our air space etcetera came much later.

STOURTON: A lot of people were very surprised by the speed with which you agreed to join the coalition, what was the calculation that you made, was it simply that you had no real option?

MUSHARRAF: It was, I think I weighed all the pros and cons. First of all, the basis was on a matter of principle, and on a matter of principle on the side of right. I thought it was certainly a terrorist attack, whoever did it, and therefore the decision on a matter of principle was that we should join the coalition. The other (issue) of course was our own national interest and I think the

decision was based on a principle stand basically in our own national interest.

STOURTON: You made various efforts to mediate between the Americans and the Taleban, attempts to get them for example to surrender Osama Bin Laden. Did you think that those attempts had any real chance of success or had you already accepted that you were almost certainly destined for a war in Afghanistan?

MUSHARRAF: No I thought, I always thought that we'd be able to persuade Mullah Omar. In fact I was almost going to go myself to persuade him to hand over Osama Bin Laden. I thought a person would not be that senseless, and he would see the, the reason, see reason and not harm his country and his people for the sake of one person who's pulling the whole of the country and the Afghan people to this disastrous situation. So I was quite confident I would say that he would agree, but somehow he was much more obstinate than I thought.

STOURTON: You say you almost went yourself, that's very interesting, what made you change your mind?

MUSHARRAF: Well, all my advisers. They all thought that if I go and I come back empty handed it wouldn't be good. It would be quite humiliating in fact if I went there and I return empty handed. So they thought that they should prepare the grounds and if there is a reasonable indication that something positive will happen, then only I should go, so therefore I agreed with them.

STOURTON: The bombing began on 8 October. There were demonstrations after Friday prayers in the weeks that followed in Pakistan, a lot of people talked about the possibility of revolution in Pakistan, even civil war. People we've talked to said that you were remarkably calm and remarkably confident about your ability to keep the lid on things.

MUSHARRAF: Yes, I was confident all along, because I knew that the people of Pakistan are with me and they have confidence in my judgement. And secondly I knew that the religious extremists in Pakistan are in a very small minority. I know the results of all our elections in the past, I know that they don't enjoy the confidence of the masses, the people of Pakistan, therefore when they were out on the streets I knew that this is a minority and that the majority is very, very strongly with me. I was quite sure and quite confident about that.

STOURTON: Colin Powell visited you I think within a week of the bombing starting, what at that stage did you tell him that Pakistan needed and wanted in return for it's support for America?

MUSHARRAF: Yes I think, in the initial stages I didn't consider it to be correct or even gentlemanly I would say to demand some returns for whatever one is doing. I didn't think it was appropriate at all to be talking of what are you going to give me, there was no bargaining going on. So we, whatever we did and whatever we are expected to do was without any demands or returns. But when Mr. Colin Powell came here, by that time of course he also knew that we required certain things. We have certain problems of our own, and he offered to help us. Then we had to mature our ideas and I was very frank with him and we discussed Pakistan's requirements.

STOURTON: Can you tell me what Pakistan's requirements were? What did you discuss at that meeting?

MUSHARRAF: Well my concern was the economy of Pakistan really, I focused only on three aspects of the economy. I said there are three elements, one is debt relief, the other is fiscal support, budgetary support, and the third is market access for our goods. So I really discussed these three aspects of assistance from the United States.

STOURTON: And do you think they've delivered as you would hope they would have done?

MUSHARRAF: Reasonably I would say. On the debt relief, yes they have, President Bush has promised me \$1bn write off, and then the Paris club has the whole stock of our bilateral debt which is to the tune of \$12.5bn to the United States it's about \$3bn, restructuring or re profiling of that debt, so debt relief is there. As far as fiscal support is concerned, yes, in all we've got nearly \$1bn in fiscal support, but my regret is about the market access, we haven't got it as yet.

STOURTON: You said that you didn't want the bombing campaign to continue during Ramadan, which of course it did, and on 9 November in Downing Street you said with Tony Blair by your side that you wanted a targeted short campaign. What were the British and Americans saying to reassure you on the point about the duration of the campaign?

MUSHARRAF: Everyone I think generally agreed that it should be short, but short is really a comparative term, I mean it can't be converted into a time frame. Obviously I did understand that it has to be effect related, I mean you have to attain the effects or the results that you want to attain in the campaign, and you cannot stop it on a time basis. I did understand that. At the initial stages I thought really that it could be short, but I think I was mistaken, it couldn't be that short.

STOURTON: And did you feel that Pakistan's interests were being taken account of in the work that the Americans and the United Nations were doing at that stage to try and put together some kind of post war political settlement for Afghanistan?

MUSHARRAF: I have always thought in the initial stages that we were concentrating only on the military part. I was always of the opinion that we need to simultaneously work out a political strategy and a reconstruction and rehabilitation strategy, because I was extremely apprehensive that once the military strategy succeeded and the operation comes to an end or comes to a culmination, and if we don't have a political strategy and a reconstruction strategy in place, maybe it'll create a void and a vacuum which will be filled again by these warlords and we return to the days of the post cold war period where these warlords were fighting and killing each other. So I was apprehensive of that, that is why I used to say that we need to work out a political strategy and a reconstruction strategy to be put in place immediately after the culmination of the military operation.

STOURTON: And were you concerned when Kabul fell and the Northern Alliance moved in as they did, that again the politics that you're talking about would have got lost?

MUSHARRAF: Sorry, I didn't get your question...

STOURTON: When Kabul fell there seemed to be a lot of concern expressed in Islamabad about the speed with which it fell and the fact that the Northern Alliance simply moved into government offices and so forth.

MUSHARRAF: Yes, yes, there was. That was the time when there were apprehensions because the political strategy was not really in place, and I thought if it keeps going at the speed that it is going, and if the Northern Alliance spreads all over Afghanistan, we are in for some kind of trouble. I thought that there is a requirement of some peacekeeping force, or the United States force to come and bring some semblance of balance into the atmosphere in Afghanistan.

STOURTON: Have you been reassured by the way that things have developed in Afghanistan since then?

MUSHARRAF: Yes, I would say under the circumstances that things are moving quite well. With the loya jirga in place and Mr. Karzai heading the loya jirga, I am extremely happy. I think he is the right man for the job, he has the will, he has the charisma, and he has the determination to do well. I think under him there is a possibility of ensuring the unity and stability of Afghanistan, and bringing progress and improvement in the situation in Afghanistan. So to that extent, I think things are moving pretty well.

STOURTON: On 13 December there was that suicide bomb attack at the Indian parliament, which was the first time the Kashmir problem had really flared up again since 11 September. How had the war on terrorism changed the way that you approached that problem?

MUSHARRAF: Well yes, the attack on the parliament did cause alarms, but I keep saying that the response of the Indians was extremely impulsive and I've called it a knee jerk reaction. There was no cause for escalating it to the level of almost going to war. It would have really devastated both the countries and we would have really suffered a lot if we had gone to war, just because five or six individuals attacked their parliament. Certainly it was not government sponsored and they should have realised it and they should have taken some balanced judgement and balanced actions. They moved impulsively and the effects of that are visible even now, we haven't reduced the tension, because the forces are on the border and the capability of any adventurism still exists.

STOURTON: But you did say that you would try and crack down on extremism, you closed training camps and so forth, back in January. Was that partly because you felt that the climate of the war on terrorism strengthened your political hand in dealing with extremists?

MUSHARRAF: I did move against terrorism, I didn't talk of any training camps, I did say that (we would move against) any organisation which is involved in extremism, sectarian hatred and sectarian terrorism, sectarian intolerance. We moved against them, we sealed their offices, we froze their accounts, that's what we did with a number of political parties, a number of extremist religious organisations. That is what I moved against really.

STOURTON: You point out that things are still very tense between yourselves and India. People did as you say not until very recently fear that there might actually be war. What was it, particularly in the visits of Donald Rumsfeld

that made you, well the two sides, but you particularly, pull back from the brink?

MUSHARRAF: We were conscious obviously that we need to avoid war, I've been saying that Pakistan doesn't want to go to war, we will not initiate war. But we will take defensive measures, if at all war is imposed on us we'll fight with all our capability. That was our response. The world was extremely concerned, we knew the world was concerned about cross border terrorism. We always say that it is a freedom struggle going on in Kashmir, so I did assure the world that there's nothing happening across the line of control. I think that was a big assurance and I did say that, in response, that there's nothing happening across the line of control. We expect the initiation of a process of dialogue towards, and movement towards the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, so I am really waiting for the response.

STOURTON: And do you think that some of what's been happening in Pakistan and Kashmir is down to al-Qaeda and Taleban terrorists who fled Afghanistan and then came across the border and are now responsible for some of what's happened?

MUSHARRAF: That is one of the possibilities, at least (for) what is happening in Pakistan. This is one of the possibilities that it's al-Qaeda. The other possibility is also that it is Indian inspired, because they are another party which is not too happy about the developing Pakistan-US relations. They are not too happy about our defensive potential in the form of the submarines that we were making with the French assistance, they are not happy about our economic revival, they would like investment to be frightened away from Pakistan, so that is another possibility. And the third possibility is some extremist organisation within Pakistan who are not too happy with Pakistan-US relations.

STOURTON: Just one final question if I may about those relations. In other circumstances, you might have expected objections from America to the referendum which confirmed your presidency. Do you think the fact that they gave you at least tacit support was part of the reward if you like for the stand you took after 11 September?

MUSHARRAF: I really don't see that in terms of rewards and punishments. I think Pakistan has developed a certain relationship with the United States, and may I also add that I personally have developed a relationship with the leadership, with President Bush, Colin Powell, Mr. Donald Rumsfeld and everyone. And also may I add that I think I give them credit that they really understand the environment, that this referendum was a great success. Now the detractors of this referendum, those who were trying to show or prove that it was all a farce, are absolutely and totally wrong. I think the United States understood the reality. I think credit also goes to their ambassador that she understood the reality and can read the right perspective.

STOURTON: President Musharraf, thank you very much indeed.

MUSHARRAF: Thank you very much

STOURTON: That was very kind of you, thank you, to give us so much time, very helpful.

MUSHARRAF: Thanks a lot, bye bye...