



SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP  
SOCIÉTÉ ASIATIQUE DES PARTENAIRES  
CANADA

Report on a cross-Canada speaking tour by  
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Oct 25-Nov 3, 2001

# The Aftermath of September 11: A Voice from Pakistan

## **The Aftermath of Sept. 11: A Voice from Pakistan**

The Sept. 11 incident and the ensuing US-led war on terrorism have serious implications for developing countries across Asia. The countries sharing borders with Afghanistan, however, have more at stake. In order to understand better the ramifications of a war in Afghanistan and its effect on the rest of the region, SAP-Canada invited I A Rehman, Director Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, for a cross Canada tour (Oct 25-Nov 3, 2001). A former journalist and renowned human rights activist, Mr Rehman addressed a number of audiences across Canada. Sharing his view of the situation arising out of the war in Afghanistan, he discussed at length the challenges faced by governments and people in the region (see Appendix A for complete biography).

Following is a consolidated account of the speeches made by Mr Rehman at various seminars, consultations and roundtable discussions in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto (see Appendix B for complete list of events).

### **What led to Sept. 11 tragedy**

Mr Rehman criticized the international community for walking away from Afghanistan after the Soviet retreat without helping to establish a government of national consensus. “An incredible arsenal of arms and ammunition was brought into Afghanistan during the war against the former USSR, but nobody realised that leaving that arsenal behind in an unstable Afghanistan would eventually cause mischief,” he said.

He mentioned that Pakistani and Afghan civil society warned of Afghan infighting spilling over borders in a devastating manner. However, “our voice was too weak to be heard by the rest of the world”, he added.

Mr Rehman also criticized Pakistan government’s Afghan policy for having a negative impact on Afghanistan’s internal affairs. He blamed General Zia’s policy based on the doctrine of ‘strategic depth’ for adding to conflict in Afghanistan as well as promoting religious militancy in Pakistan. “As a Pakistani, I see blood on my hand for what has happened in Afghanistan,” he maintained.

Discussing further the history of Afghan crisis, Mr Rehman said that throughout the 1990s and 1980s Pakistan treated Afghanistan as its backyard. “Pakistan rejected Dr. Najeeb’s offer to establish a pluralistic government that could ensure peace. Instead, a jirga in Islamabad set up a mujahideen government led by Gulbadeen Hekmatyar, but it failed to take over Kabul. Then the Taliban came into being with the help of Pakistan, US and Saudi Arabia,” he said.

“It is the single-minded pursuits of a few, who want their will to prevail over the wishes of millions, which led to a tragedy of such proportions,” said I A Rehman. According to him, terrorism in the countries with colonial past was rooted in ‘injustice of the international economic system’ and ‘neglect of human rights’ by oppressive states. The

leaders of fundamentalist religious outfits were trying to give legitimate social movements a militant direction, he added.

He warned against confusing terrorism with people's legitimate struggles, saying that even the UN supported the people rising for justice. As an example, Mr Rehman cited the fact that ANC leader Nelson Mandela was given a Nobel Prize for his struggle that was formerly considered terrorist activity.

### **Mixed Reaction in Pakistan**

Mr Rehman described the reaction to the Sept. 11 incident of the general public in Pakistan as mixed. "Some people believe that Al-Qaeda wasn't capable of carrying out such a sophisticated operation," he said, adding that there wasn't an opinion on who else might have done it either.

More important, according to Mr Rehman, was the fear that the US might also try to implicate Pakistan for its obvious links with the Taliban in Afghanistan. On the other hand, he said, "There's a serious threat of internal disturbance as a backlash to siding with the US. The jihadi groups may try to destabilize the government. Given their military strength, acquired over the past two decades, and their connections with the civil and military bureaucracy in Pakistan. Such an attempt, if successful, could even change the map of Pakistan."

According to Mr Rehman, the TV images of people gathering at the border with Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban portray a partial picture. "Those are groups only from tribal areas, mainly Bajaur agency... these are isolated cases, as some rural-based jihadi outfits are trying to hasten occupation of their seat in paradise... but they do not represent the Pakistani majority," he said.

*The Pushtun Factor:* Pushtuns, who are the dominant ethnic majority in Afghanistan, have also supported the Pakistan government's decision to ally with the US-led coalition against terrorism. Mr. Rehman said that contrary to the general belief that they helped create the Taliban, the Pushtuns were among the worst affected by the Taliban regime. "The Shariah law, as introduced and imposed by the Taliban, was in total negation of the traditional Pushtun tribal system. All the tribal leaders were unhappy to have to surrender their power to the Taliban. They all want their old political structure back," Mr Rehman maintained.

*Talibanisation of Pakistan:* The reason why a movement against General Pervez Musharraf's decision to join the US-led campaign against terrorism could not gain momentum in Pakistan was because a majority of the people thought it to be the only way they could get rid of fundamentalism. Mr Rehman said that there was, of course, anti-US sentiment in Pakistan. "However, people are mortally afraid of Talibanisation. They think by joining hands with the US we might be able to get rid of this cancer of fundamentalism."

Elaborating further on his point, Mr Rehman regretted the fact that state support to fundamentalist elements during General Zia era, had extraordinarily strengthened the jihadi movement in Pakistan. “Now it’s not just the mullah who is the threat. We have jihadi bureaucrats, judges, and even army officers,” he said.

Giving examples of how fundamentalist elements crept into the state structure and ultimately into the social fibre, Mr Rehman said that during the 1980s, the government adopted a ‘twisted approach’ toward improving the literacy rate in the country. “A large number of maktabas (mosque-based schools) were set up to show the international donors that we had opened so many schools. At that point, it seemed to be a harmless sort of cheating but it led to disastrous consequences.”

Discussing further the adverse effects of General Zia’s ‘Islamization’ of the education system, Mr Rehman said that no new universities were set up during his 11-year rule over the country. On the other hand, Mr Rehman added, acres of land were given for establishing madrassas. The religious forces were further institutionalized by means of support through zakat (an Islamic tax imposed on all earning members of a Muslim society) authorities, and appointment of mullahs into military, civil service and even judiciary.

Commenting on General Pervez Musharraf’s plan to mainstream madrassas, Mr Rehman said that such attempts had also been made in the past but to no avail. The present day madrassas, Mr Rehman said, are home to militant extremists and ‘have nothing to do with education’.

“There used to be some genuine madrassas like Jamia Ashrafia in Lahore and Maulana Samiul Haq’s madrassa in Akora Khattak. These madrassas have also now become safe havens for terrorists. Presently, there is a notice outside the Akora-Khattak madrassa saying that ‘All the Taliban have gone to jihad (in Afghanistan), so the university is closed’. Other religious institutions, especially those monopolizing the Islamic publications, are all involved in religious extremism.”

### **Pakistan’s dilemma**

Mr Rehman said that the Sept. 11 incident had forced Pakistan to revise its ‘flawed Afghan policy’. “Pakistan didn’t have many options as the US asserted that ‘you are either with us or with the terrorists’. Fortunately, Pakistan managed to seek some favours such as getting some financial aid and some of its foreign debts overwritten.

Mr Rehman said that Pakistan had witnessed a ‘considerably prolonged struggle between modernists and medieval conservatives’, which had seriously hampered the state’s performance and denied people of their basic human rights. The state of affairs has also had an adverse effect on the relations between the centre and the four provinces.

In order to support militant Islamists in Afghanistan, who also facilitated jihad in Kashmir, the government of Pakistan had to give a free hand to the domestic religious

extremists. In time, Mr Rehman said, those militant groups grew bigger than state policy itself. “It has now become extremely difficult for the state to ditch the monster it has created in the shape of jihadi groups,” he added.

Mr Rehman called for a nationwide consultative process to review the state policies that have led to the present situation. He warned that with yet another military government in place, it might be easier said than done.

Mr Rehman appreciated General Musharraf’s action against the militant outfits in the country and the fact that he had even fired some high-ranking army officers reportedly linked with jihadi groups. However, in Rehman’s opinion, that was not enough. “Political forces in the country need to be strengthened and no one person should have the prerogative to decide for the rest of the country, it just isn’t the solution.”

According to him, the fanatic Islamic thinking was in negation of the thinking that brought Pakistan into being. “The people of Pakistan wanted it to be a modern, economically independent country, but all we have now is lawlessness and insecurity, which has deepened the economic crisis. Due to insecurity we have no investment, either domestic or foreign, as a result of which the unemployment rate is at its highest,” he added.

Despite the state’s patronage and a strong institutional base, the religious groups have failed to address larger social issues such as poverty. This is the reason why, Mr Rehman said, they do not enjoy the support of the majority of Pakistanis. In fact, “the population of Pakistan realises that women, minorities and civil society would not have any space with a Taliban-like rule in Pakistan”, he maintained.

Speaking of the upcoming general elections in Pakistan, to be held in October 2002 as promised by General Musharraf, Mr Rehman expressed fear that ‘the results would be entirely in Musharraf’s favour’. There is a long way to go before a responsible government is in place, he said.

Mr Rehman further said that Pakistani civil society had concerns regarding the ongoing devolution process as well. “We think it is not fully representative,” he added.

He was of the view that Pakistan needed massive international support both in economic and political terms. However, he said it should be ensured that international support (mainly economic) was in fact channelled down to the masses and not monopolized by the state.

### **Shift in International Discourse**

Mr Rehman said that the Sept. 11 incident had led to a massive shift in the international discourse. He said the international community’s focus on economic development of the world has been moved to ‘security concerns’. The under-developed world, Mr Rehman

said, has ‘serious grievances’ against such a transformation of international public discourse.

“Despite our warnings, the international community didn’t take any action with regard to fundamentalist threats. There are hundreds of reports produced by peace institutions that are eating dust in the shelves. Now that it was our (third-world countries) turn for bearing the fruit of all the global efforts made in terms of economic development, the international discourse shifted to security concerns.”

Mr Rehman urged the international community to take collective responsibility for what had happened on Sept. 11. Despite grief and shock, he said what was required was a rational response. “The approach should be to revert the situation, and not to multiply the number of terrorists.”

Calling the discourse around global security ‘irrational’, Mr Rehman regretted the fact that there was no room for dissent in such a discourse – ‘you are either with us or you’re a terrorist’. “The middle ground that maintains sanity in such situations has been eroded.”

He lamented the fact that ‘all other major global issues such as poverty, democracy, social justice, and transfer of technology’ were no longer relevant. “The fact that Pakistan is once again under a military dictatorship has also gone on the backburner,” he added.

While emphasising the need for reviving the ‘development’ discourse, Mr Rehman referred to these remarks made by a UN Rapporteur: “...the best way to work against terrorism is by ensuring human rights and economic justice in all states...”

### **Vulnerability of the State**

Mr Rehman said that the Sept. 11 event has unleashed a new form of vulnerability of the State in the third world. “If it could happen to the super-power, the weaker States face a greater threat,” he added.

He also voiced concern about the logic of self-defence, as developed by the US to attack Afghanistan. In his opinion, there is room for misuse of this logic of self-defence. “There is a possibility that bigger states get tempted to attack the smaller ones whenever they can justify it,” he said.

### **The Challenge for Civil Society**

Mr Rehman criticized the anti-terrorism laws being enacted in the US, in Canada and elsewhere in the world as having the potential to seriously curb civil liberties. “The defence-oriented lobby round the world has found an opportunity to further their agenda. This has challenged civil societies across the globe,” he maintained.

He said the fact that advanced democracies were creating such laws would set bad precedents. “The weaker democracies are always quick to follow such examples,” he added.

Speaking of the Canadian C-36, Mr Rehman said the law echoed the anti-terrorism laws already existing in Pakistan and India. He said that civil society, all over the world, should take serious note of these developments and make all possible efforts to ‘keep the human rights banner flying’.

### **International Community and Afghanistan**

Stressing that an unstable Afghanistan would create unrest in the rest of the region, Mr Rehman urged the international community to do all it could to restore peace in Afghanistan. He expressed hope that unlike in 1990s, the international community would not walk away from Afghanistan this time around.

Due to being the battleground for ‘proxy wars between different powers’, Mr Rehman, said Afghanistan had disappeared as a state. “In 20 years of war and infighting, all the pro-peace forces have vanished. There is no civil society. I don’t see any agents of change in the post-Taliban scenario,” he added. Expressing concern with the Northern Alliances’ capacity to restore peace in the country, he said, “unless the power-sharing formula in the post-Taliban scenario is a well-thought-out one, there is no guarantee against another massacre”.

Identifying some of the pressing needs of the Afghan people, Mr Rehman said peace wasn’t possible without thoroughly disarming the population. In order to do so, he maintained that the international community needed to check Afghanistan’s arms trade. “Ironically, it’s the advanced western countries that are sending all the weapons to Afghanistan,” he added.

*The Regional Factor:* According to Mr Rehman, the interests of all the neighbouring countries needed to be considered while designing a peace plan for Afghanistan. “All its neighbours want a government in Kabul that is friendly to them, which seems impossible. The international community will have to put pressure on all the international stakeholders to find a way around this problem,” he said.

Mr Rehman also urged Pakistan and India to realise that it’s about time they resolved their conflict. Expressing fear that India might try to exploit Pakistan’s current vulnerability, he said tensions between two neighbours could have disastrous consequences. “Considering the gravity of this global crisis, both India and Pakistan should behave more sensibly,” he added.

He regretted that fact that there was an element in India who would like Pakistan to be Talibanised. “This will strengthen their stand that Pakistan is a terrorist state,” Mr Rehman said.

*Afghan Women:* Mr Rehman said that in the post Taliban scenario, special efforts needed to be made to alleviate the plight of Afghan women. “They have been the worst victims of the past 20 years. From our point of view, advocacy on the women related issues should be a high priority.”

He asked the international donor agencies to support Afghan women organizations, which are actively working on women’s issues. He said, “Brining together the Afghan women is very challenging. We (HRCP) are trying to identify civil society groups who are working to strengthen the women’s community-based groups.”

Mr Rehman said that the HRCP was also planning to organize consultations with Afghan leaders, refugees and tribal people in order to strengthen efforts for reconciliation and peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

*Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan:* Mr Rehman said that Afghanistan, at present, faced a gigantic humanitarian crisis. He further said, “The area in which HRCP is working is that of Afghan refugees. One of the major issues that we identified was refusal by the government of Pakistan to recognise refugees. The government hasn’t even appointed a lawyer to help process the refugee claims.”

HRCP recently conducted research into the refugee issues. It constantly monitors the refugee condition and produces a monthly report.

“We are also lobbying the government to respect the rights of refugees. We don’t have means for relief work, but we’ll continue to monitor.”

Some of the HRCP demands, according to Mr Rehman, are that:

- International laws on refugees should be respected;
- There should be no forced deportation;
- Children, women and other vulnerable persons should be particularly looked after;
- Funds for refugee camps should be properly administered by joint bodies of donors, government officials, representatives of refugees and human rights organisations;
- Minimum quality standards for relief work should be met.
- The international community should continue support in areas of poverty-eradication, education and peacebuilding.

### **HRCP’s position**

As Mr Rehman put it, the HRCP condemns Sept. 11 attacks but also finds the US retaliation counterproductive. “War cannot be the solution to the crisis. It will rather deepen it. There is no need to continue war in Afghanistan for long. Instead, attention should be paid to the post-Taliban scenario.”

Mr Rehman also stressed the need to learn from the success of the Taliban phenomenon. He said that the Taliban had started gaining some popularity among the common Afghans. “The measures they took to disarm people brought relative peace in Afghanistan and people were happy about that,” he said.

On the issue of jihad, Mr Rehman said that Islam only allows States, not individuals to declare jihad. “Killing innocent people is in fact bringing a bad name to Islam and empowering the enemy as a result,” he added.

Speaking on the issue of fundamentalism in Pakistan, Mr Rehman said the HRCP hold the view that free public discourse is required, which is not possible without due political process. “The silent majority of people, who are totally against terrorism in the name of religion, have to come forward and spell out their disapproval of fundamentalism,” he maintained. (see Annex C for complete address of HRCP)

## APPENDIX A

### **I A Rehman's Biography**

Renowned journalist and human rights activist, I A Rehman was born in 1930, in Hasanpur Haryana, East Punjab, India. He received his education from Aligarh University and from the Islamia College, Lahore. He started his professional career in 1951 with the daily Pakistan Times, when Faiz Ahmed Faiz was the Editor.

In 1970, with the help of his fellow professionals Abdullah Malik and Hameed Akhtar, Mr Rehman brought out his own newspaper entitled Azad. From 1975-78 he worked as the Editor of a film magazine called Cinema. Afterwards he joined the weekly Viewpoint, a Lahore-based socio-political magazine. In 1988, he was appointed as Chief Editor to the Pakistan Times. Since 1990 he has been working as Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

I A Rehman has always been active with the journalists' trade union, working on civil liberties, which resulted in his loss of employment and incarceration. He was kept behind bars for six months, which did not dampen his spirit or his ideas.

For the past decade he has been raising his voice for the protection for all human rights and the safeguarding of peace between Pakistan and India and in the South Asian region. He is the President of the Pakistan Chapter of the Pakistan India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy and an active member of the intelligentsia involved in track-two diplomacy for improving ties between Pakistan and India.

He is credited with two books and a number of contributions to national and international publications. Mr. I A Rehman is a leading figure in the Pakistan civil society and South Asia human rights community, and contributes to several Boards of Directors. He is currently the Chairman South Asian Forum for Human Rights and a Board Member of South Asia Partnership (SAP) Pakistan.

## APPENDIX B

This report is a consolidated account of the speeches made by Mr Rehman at various seminars, consultations and roundtable discussions in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto between October 26 and November 1, 2002. Here is the list of the various events where Mr Rehman spoke:

Oct. 26 – Keynote address to the “Roundtable on Human Security in the Aftermath of Sept. 11” organized jointly by South Asia Partnership (SAP) Canada, the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee (CPCC) and the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), Ottawa;

Oct. 28 – Informal presentation to the South Asian Left Democratic Alliance at Robarts Library, University of Toronto;

Oct. 29 – Presentation to the Pakistan desk at the Canadian International Development Agency, Hull, Quebec;

Oct. 31 – Keynote Speaker to an in-house seminar organized by the South Asia Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa;

Nov. 1 – Guest Speaker at the public forum on “Strategic Issues for Democratic Development: Participation, Democratic Culture, the Post-Sept. 11 Context” organized by Rights & Democracy, SAP Canada, PAC and Focal, Ottawa;

Nov. 2 – Guest Speaker at a public meeting organized by CERAS at McGill University. He addressed the issue of “Repercussions for Pakistan of the US war against Afghanistan”;

Nov. 3 – Guest Speaker at a public meeting entitled “Who Will Pay for the new American Crusade” organized at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) by Alternatives.

## APPENDIX C

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