

Afghanistan Imperiled

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By Ahmed Rashid/ New York

There are mounting fears in Afghanistan that President George W. Bush's war against Iraq will seriously compromise further attempts by the US-led Western alliance to stabilize Afghanistan--even as the US Defense Department appears to be finally acknowledging its failures in helping to rebuild the country.

Almost a year after the defeat of the Taliban, President Hamid Karzai's government is weaker than it was a few months ago, ethnic and political rivalries plague the country, the military power of the warlords has increased and there is a new wave of anti-Americanism from the Pashtun tribes in the east and south, who feel alienated and victimized both by the Kabul government and US forces.

The fragile security situation was highlighted by the September 5 assassination attempt against Karzai in Kandahar, a car bomb in Kabul that killed twenty-six people and stepped-up rocket attacks against US forces. On September 14 Afghan police intercepted an explosives-laden tanker truck headed for the US air base outside Kabul, and two days later rockets were fired at a US garrison at Khost, in the largest artillery barrage by Al Qaeda forces since their defeat last November.

The success of the US-led Afghan war depends less on catching the remnants of Al Qaeda than on insuring that the escalating political crisis does not cause the demise of the Karzai government. Since last December the Bush Administration has primarily focused on its military and intelligence war against Al Qaeda rather than on a political and economic strategy, which would help stabilize the fragile government and kick-start reconstruction.

Karzai has been unable to extend the writ of Kabul's authority across the country or find a political formula to rein in the warlords. He has been stymied not just because of continuing ethnic and tribal tensions but by the stark failure of the international community to deliver on two key pledges made last December. The first was to mobilize an International Security Assistance Force to stabilize Kabul and five other cities. The ISAF still has only 5,000 troops, and only in the capital. Even more dangerous has been the world's failure to deliver on reconstruction funds.

Essentially, Washington has frozen the status quo following the December Bonn conference, which nominated the Karzai-led interim government. And even though Karzai was elected to a two-year term in June at the Loya Jirga, or grand tribal council, the United States has done little to strengthen the central government.

Washington has begun to help build a new national army, but this will take years to achieve. And this policy is directly undermined by continued US funding of the warlords. Even though the majority of the 1,500 delegates to the Loya Jirga harshly criticized the warlords, the Pentagon has renamed them "regional leaders," giving them a legitimacy that Afghans themselves are unwilling to bestow.

At the end of August the Pentagon finally appeared to be getting the message. "I do think increasingly our focus is shifting to training the Afghan national army, supporting ISAF, supporting reconstruction efforts--those kinds of things that contribute to long-term stability," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told me in an interview at the Pentagon.

Also, for the first time US officials appeared to be seriously concerned about lack of funds. "My single biggest concern is that the economic aid that was promised at the Tokyo conference, which I think is crucial not just for economic purposes but for political and security purposes, is just not coming through at the levels that were pledged," Wolfowitz said. The January Tokyo conference pledged \$4.5 billion for reconstruction, of which donor nations promised to give \$1.8 billion this year. "Barely 30 percent of what was promised for this year has been delivered," Wolfowitz added. He said the United States now had no objections to expanding ISAF beyond

Kabul and would urge the Europeans to step up aid deliveries.

However, the Pentagon's apparent U-turn is only providing a halfway-house policy. It would like to see ISAF expand but wants others to do the job; Washington has ruled out using US troops as peacekeepers. It would also like others to provide more reconstruction money; in September several US officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, harshly criticized the Europeans for their slowness in providing funds.

Yet Washington's own contribution has been half that of the European Union. So far this year the United States has given \$300 million, nearly all of which has been spent. In contrast, Washington is spending an estimated \$1 billion a month on the Afghan war effort--a fact that has been strongly criticized by the UN's special representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi; the EU envoy to Kabul, Francesc Vendrell; and Karzai.

Given the lead US role in the war and the unilateralism that the Bush Administration has turned into a mantra vis-à-vis Iraq, other countries are unlikely to respond to either initiative unless Washington shows the way. "The United States has to play a leadership role in providing both greater security through contributions to ISAF and funding for reconstruction, if it wants other countries to step up to the line," says a European ambassador in Kabul. That appears increasingly unlikely as the US military machine prepares to attack Iraq. In his meeting with Bush at the UN General Assembly in mid-September, Karzai voiced fears--as do almost all Afghans--that war in the Middle East will lead Washington to forget Afghanistan, just as it did after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal.

The war against terrorism has shown notable successes with the breakup of Al Qaeda cells and large-scale arrests in Karachi, Singapore and Buffalo in September alone. But the Afghanistan/Pakistan region is the key to insuring that Al Qaeda does not re-emerge as a military force under a new Islamist or nationalist guise. Everywhere else in the world, Al Qaeda operates underground and in secret. In Afghanistan it rockets US troops in broad daylight.

Extremist forces are making a comeback in the Pashtun belt by coalescing around Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. An ethnic Pashtun, career warlord and former Afghan prime minister, Hekmatyar is now one of the biggest threats to Afghan stability. Afghan officials and Western diplomats in Kabul say there is clear evidence that Hekmatyar—who killed thousands of civilians in a vain bid to capture the city during the country's early 1990s civil war--has joined forces with Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants to destabilize the fledgling Karzai government.

The Pashtuns--the majority ethnic group--have serious grievances against the government. Because of the support of many Pashtuns for the Taliban, they feel they are being victimized by both the Americans and the Tajiks of the Northern Alliance, who dominate the army, police and intelligence apparatus in Kabul. Many Pashtuns consider Karzai, himself a Pashtun, to be a hostage to Tajik and US power and policies. Pashtun civilians have been the victims of US bombing raids, and the central government hasn't initiated a single reconstruction project in the Pashtun belt.

Hekmatyar is believed to have established contact with several disgruntled warlords, including Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Afghanistan's leading proponent of Wahhabi Islam; former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, once the head of the Northern Alliance; and Ismail Khan, the governor of Herat in the west. Karzai is too weak to take action against any of them.

Significantly, in the early 1980s these leaders (and Hekmatyar) belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, which emerged out of the Arab world and was the precursor to today's more extreme Islamist movements. Hekmatyar is now trying to revive those connections and the Brotherhood's ideology, which is stridently anti-Western and antidemocratic. He says "all true Muslim Afghans who want an Islamic government in their country must know it is possible only when the United States and allied soldiers are forced out."

Hekmatyar is also trying to whip up Pashtun nationalism. In tapes sent to journalists he accuses the United States and the Kabul government of beginning "a genocide of Pashtuns." He has a considerable network of supporters in Pakistan, including retired officers of that country's Inter-Services Intelligence. After the 1979 Soviet invasion, the ISI promoted Hekmatyar ruthlessly, until he was dumped in favor of the Taliban in 1995.

Clearly, President Bush's recent pledge that the United States, Saudi Arabia and Japan will provide \$180 million to rebuild the key Kabul-Kandahar-Herat road, which cuts through the Pashtun belt, reflects Washington's awareness of the unrest in the south. Roads are certainly important, but the urgent need is for the United

States to demonstrate that it wants to re-establish a central government with institutions, economic resources and military and political power that can give a sense of nationhood and a functioning state back to the Afghans. Only then can Al Qaeda and its allies be truly deprived of their former base for terrorism.