

Afghanistan & Pakistan

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In a recent article in The Globe and Mail, you wrote that in 2005, "...the Taliban al-Qaeda insurgency claimed the lives of 1500 Afghans and about 100 American soldiers, and for the first time a wave of suicide bombers, emulating their terrorist brothers in Iraq, have hit urban centers in Kabul and

Kandahar." What is the current situation in Afghanistan?

It's pretty grim. In fact, just two days ago, the former president, Sebghatullah Mojadeddi, his car, his convoy was attacked by a suicide bomber, who blew up a car packed with explosives next to his. Luckily, Mr. Mojadeddi, who is a spiritual leader and highly respected, was not killed. Two things are happening. There is an uptick in the Taliban offensive taking place. Normally, during the winter they rest up, but this winter they have not rested up, and the death and destruction have continued, especially in southern Afghanistan. In southern Afghanistan you have now American troops moving out and being replaced by NATO troops from Canada, Great Britain, Holland, and some other countries. And the Taliban are now clearly trying to have a major offensive in the south so that they can try to force these troops, obviously, to withdraw or retreat. At the same time, they've adopted new tactics of terror which have been used in other areas. Like Iraq, they have learned how to carry out suicide bombings, and they obviously have the people to do it. This was never the case before. They're using IED explosives, these kinds of roadside bombs which have caused such enormous American casualties in Iraq. They are being used now in order to ambush American and NATO convoys. And there is a much greater use of mines, much better planned ambushes. So at least in the south the situation is quite serious.

Since the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the United States has provided about \$4 billion or \$5 billion in aid to that country, is that right?

Yes. If you take into account the rebuilding of the Afghan military.

That's less than what the United States is spending in one month in Iraq.

The U.S. is spending something like \$6 billion a month in Iraq. It's spending \$1 billion a month in Afghanistan for its military effort. It has something like 15,000, 16,000 troops in Afghanistan, and they are costing about a billion dollars a month. And here we have a total figure of perhaps the U.S. has been

giving, on average, about less than a billion dollars a year for economic reconstruction. When the U.S. is giving so little, it's difficult to persuade other big donors—the Europeans, the Arabs, the Japanese—to give more. As a result, what we've seen is that actually reconstruction has been actually terribly, terribly slow. There have been a couple of roads that have been built. Not a single new power station has been built. In fact, there is not even proper power in Kabul. Only about a third of the city gets electricity.

Without power, of course, you can't have industry, you can't pump water, all sorts of things. So what has been really lacking has been a serious effort at reconstruction, something that President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, all the world leaders had promised in 2001. Only about a third of Kabul has electricity.

What's the situation in the rest of the country, if that's what's

happening in the capital city?

In many parts of the country it's even worse. Some cities have managed to import electricity, like Herat in western Afghanistan is importing electricity from Iran. Kunduz, a town in the northeast, is importing electricity from Tajikistan. But the point is that nobody is putting down the kind of money which is needed to build power stations.

You may have put your finger on one of the reasons why development money has been slow to go to Afghanistan. In a late January article you wrote in the Daily Telegraph, "Donors have been frustrated at the growing corruption, nepotism, and drugs culture at senior levels of government in Kabul, the lack of capacity in many ministries and the failure to deal with human rights abuses."

Certainly that's true, but it's a vicious circle. What we've seen over the last five years in Afghanistan is the fact that because reconstruction has not taken place, nor job creation, investment in agriculture, by which 17% of the population live, people have grown back to growing what is the simplest and most lucrative crop, which is poppy. With poppy comes, of course, massive corruption. Poppy is outside the formal economy. It's part of the black economy, and a lot of the profits are taken out of Afghanistan. But those

that remain form an enormous bank, if you like, for corruption and corrupt practices. The other thing that certainly has happened is that because the reconstruction has been missing, there has been enormous speculation in property, in drugs, in all of the kind of nonproductive aspects of the economy.

And thirdly, there is a lot of disillusionment amongst the government. As I say, it is a chicken-and-egg situation. The Afghans want reconstruction and they want economic development. That's not going to come without foreign help and foreign money. And with that foreign money then should come, of course,

scrutiny and better management techniques and people making sure that there is no corruption. I think an opportunity after 9/11, after winning the war, has really been lost here. And now, of course, you are faced with enormous corruption, a huge drugs problem, something that can't go away or can't be pushed out of the window very easily.

One didn't hear President Bush address those issues in his brief visit to Afghanistan in the early part of March.

No. Unfortunately, the official American line is still that everything is going fine, democracy has arrived in Afghanistan. In fact, this year the Americans say they're going to be pulling out 3,000 troops from Afghanistan and they will be replaced by NATO troops. The Afghan government has reacted very nervously to that, because they are concerned that some of the NATO countries are not willing to fight the Taliban; they want to retain a peacekeeping role rather than a combat role. So the official line is that. But unofficially, of course, when you get these hearings in the U.S. Senate from the CIA, from the

Defense Intelligence Agency, from other such agencies, you get fairly dire predictions that the Taliban offensive has certainly escalated in the last couple of years and it does pose a risk.

Detractors of Hamid Karzai, the leader of Afghanistan, call him the mayor of Kabul and that his writ does not really extend beyond the capital city. Is there any truth to that?

That was certainly the case for the year or so right after the war was won, in which the warlords were reigning all over the country and Karzai could not get the warlords to do certain things. That situation has changed. There have been advances. For example, there has been a huge disarmament and demobilization

campaign run by the United Nations and with Japanese money. Something like \$300 million have gone into that. And something like 200,000 militiamen have been disarmed. That is, the major warlords, their militias—some of these warlords had armies of 15,000 to 20,000 men—have actually been disarmed. So that has been enormous progress. And with that, of course, has been an extension of Karzai's authority. If he wants to change governors or police chiefs in the provinces, he's now able to do that, and everybody has to listen. So the situation has improved. But, of course, generally for the Afghan people I think the window is slowly closing in the sense that there is an enormous amount of public frustration that five years down the road, after all the promises of the international community, their lives have not really changed that much.

You've met Karzai. How independent is he of the United States? Is he his own man?

Again, it's a very complicated relationship. At the military level, I think the U.S. reigns supreme. I don't think Karzai can stop—if the U.S. wants to bomb somebody or launch an offensive somewhere, they may now be taking permission from Karzai, but they certainly would go ahead and do it without his permission. At the political level, Zalmay Khalilzad, who is now the ambassador to Iraq and was the former ambassador to Afghanistan, was very much a hands-on diplomat, who really kind of told everyone that he was running the show. Now you have in Kabul as U.S. ambassador a very low-key, State Department person, who functions like a proper diplomat and doesn't intervene too much or interfere too much in the political process. So I think as far as the domestic political scene is concerned, Karzai has full responsibility. And that's why the donor community has been critical of him in the past few months, because with this responsibility—and now, of course, there is a parliament, he's an elected president, he has a parliament—with all these responsibilities, he hasn't really been pulling his weight, as it were, to make changes which could encourage others to give more money.

You've written in *The Globe and Mail* that up to 30% of the loya jirga, the parliament is filled with warlords or their nominees and drug smugglers.

The fact is that these warlords have not disappeared. They have been disarmed, but many of them have gone into drugs, many of them have gone into official business deals, become big landlords. They're still exercising influence in the provinces, and certainly a lot of them have had people elected into the parliament. So I think certainly you have to have one or two elections, one or two more parliaments, before you can flush out these kinds of people. Nevertheless, I think, from what we have seen so far, that the parliament is viable. Certainly there is a strong core of independent people who are anti-warlords, very much in favor of pushing for human rights, for economic development, etc. And they are being heard. So it's not that this parliament is being totally dominated by the warlords.

Given the increasingly unstable security situation in Afghanistan, whatever happened to those pipelines, the pipe dreams of bringing natural gas and oil from Central Asia through Afghanistan? Is that all on hold now?

Actually, they have been revived. The main plan in the 1990s, if you remember, the Americans were trying to do a deal with the Taliban to build a pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and on to India. The idea of a gas and oil pipeline from Turkmenistan, which could then perhaps suck in other Central Asian oil and gas entities, is very much on the agenda. But again we're faced with this problem. All the countries are keen that this be done, the Americans are very keen, American companies are very keen. But the route of the pipeline goes through southern Afghanistan, where you have this Taliban insurgency right now. And the second part of the route then enters Pakistan's Baluchistan province, where there is also an insurgency going on. So the entire route of

the pipeline at the moment runs along insurgency-prone areas that are very unsafe.

Hamid Karzai paid a three-day visit to Islamabad in mid-February. He had a bill of particulars that he delivered to Pervez Musharraf that was quite accusatory of Pakistan.

The Afghans have been making accusations for several years now that the Taliban are all living in Pakistan, the leadership is here, and that the logistics is based, the recruiting, everything is being done from here, and it's being done by the Pakistan government. This has been very strongly denied by the Pakistan government. What Karzai brought this time was he brought dossiers of Afghan intelligence reports giving names and addresses and telephone numbers of people along the frontier who are involved in this Taliban resurgence. Karzai then spoke to the press and said he had given these dossiers, without giving the details of exactly what was in them. Right after that—and this is just before the Bush visit to Pakistan, in fact, while President Bush was in India President Musharraf got extremely angry and gave a press conference in which he blasted Karzai and said that they had checked out all the intelligence and it was all nonsense, and he accused Karzai of maligning Pakistan and of being in league with India, Pakistan's long-time enemy. Of course, the politics

behind all this was that President Bush had visited Kabul and had then gone on to India. And it seems that Karzai had made his move in order to try to impress the Americans to take sides with Afghanistan vis-à-vis Pakistan. So this is what angered Musharraf. And Bush then arrived in Pakistan, spent a day here, did not take sides but did question whether Musharraf was as committed to the war on terrorism as he had been in the past. From the Pakistani point of view, that visit went very badly. And the Pakistanis are now, of course, blaming Karzai for why Bush's visit went so badly. But whatever the politics of that may be, the truth is that there is enormous tension between the two countries, there are these accusations flying back and forth. Clearly the Afghans are very, very upset at the fact that a lot of this Taliban resurgence, as they see it, is coming from Pakistan.

Half the Pashtun population is in Afghanistan and half is in Pakistan.

That's true. And right after 9/11 the Taliban, those who survived, a lot of them, of course, fled to Pakistan, and a lot of them are here. We know that a lot of their leaders are here, or at least their families are certainly here even if the leaders are inside Afghanistan.

Let's talk a bit about President Bush's visit to Pakistan. Several editorial comments here have described it as humiliating and a snub to Pakistan in the sense that India, where Bush had visited just prior to his visit to Islamabad, was offered a sweetheart deal, effectively allowing it to do an end run around the Nonproliferation Treaty and to develop its nuclear program whereas Pakistan was offered no such carrot.

Absolutely. That is what happened. The visit to Pakistan, as I said, went extremely badly. The Americans had nothing to offer Pakistan. There was the hope that there would be a joint investment treaty, but even that didn't happen. Clearly, this enormous deal that the Americans have struck with the Indians has upset the Pakistanis greatly. Pakistan is also a nuclear power and wanted a similar deal. That was not going to be possible, given the extraordinary proliferation of nuclear technology that Pakistan has done in the past under its former head of nuclear power, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan. Again, the background politics is that the Americans had told the Pakistanis several months ago that there was no way they were going to get a similar deal, and did they want Bush to visit Pakistan even though there was no such deal. And the Pakistanis said, Yes, we still want Bush to visit Pakistan, and we hope that something else can be done or you could give something else or you could sign an investment treaty. The problem for Musharraf is that nothing was done. And the visit went down like a lead

balloon and has been very much criticized here in Pakistan and has been criticized abroad, too. The problem is that Musharraf faces a large slate of domestic problems. When Bush arrived, in contrast to

India, the whole of Islamabad was shut down, people were taken off the streets, there were thousands of troops and security people. And just the day before, an American diplomat had been killed in a suicide bombing in Karachi, which, of course, heightened the security concerns for Bush. So everything that could possibly go wrong for this visit did go wrong.

2007 marks the 60th anniversary of Pakistan. For many of those years the military has ruled: Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia ul Haq, and today Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup overthrowing the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif. Is the army central to understanding Pakistan?

Unfortunately, it seems to be at the moment. I think this military regime of President Musharraf—he's been in power now for nearly seven years—there is now growing opposition to it, coming both from the fundamentalist parties and the secular parties. The problem, of course, in Pakistan is that there is a long spate of military rule, seven to ten years, and then the military rule is overthrown either by the army itself or by a popular movement in the streets and we go back to some kind of elections and elected government. And you literally have to start from scratch. That is the tragedy. It seems that there is this kind of rolling wheel and that you keep going back to zero, having to start all over again and literally reinventing the wheel every ten years or so. That is the problem. So the criticism that there is no democracy, there is a lot of corruption, of course that is going to happen when there is no progress being made in political maturity, political democracy, etc., because every few years or so the military intervene.

The earthquake in Kashmir in October of 2005 saw a remarkable surge of involvement by what is called civil society, effectively doing the job that the government could not or would not do. Also fundamentalist groups were involved in some of that support. I've been in touch with Pervez Hoodboy, for example, who was involved in an NGO effort to help the earthquake victims.

It was really an awakening moment for the country and for Pakistanis. I think this is one of the reasons, perhaps, why the protest movement right now has been galvanized, on the back of that kind of awakening. The problem, of course, in Pakistan is that there is no credible opposition leader or civilian civil leader who could take advantage of that civic movement in order to help the earthquake victims. But I think what it has done, it has certainly opened people's eyes up to the reality that Pakistanis are not spiritually or politically dead, as it were. When a catastrophe strikes, people do get together and help.

Baluchistan, the southwestern province of Pakistan, borders Iran and

Afghanistan. You mentioned the insurgency there. What are its roots?

That insurgency has a long historical tradition. Baluchistan is certainly by far the most neglected province in Pakistan. It has a small population, huge land area, and nobody has spent any money there investing in development, infrastructure, education, health, etc. As a result, there have been four insurgencies in Baluchistan in the last 50 years, Baluchis demanding more autonomy, demanding better receipts for the gas and oil they supply the state of Pakistan, demanding more control over their resources. So the roots of this certainly go back a long time. Right now these rebels are demanding again autonomy. And there are strong feelings that if this insurgency is going to continue, then you might get these rebels actually coming forward with demands for independence, which would certainly shake Pakistan up enormously.

What do you have coming up in terms of travel and writing?

I'm certainly thinking of trying to write another book, a post-9/11 book looking at everything that's happened in this region. It's a difficult undertaking, because a great deal has happened and a great deal has been written about this region. And I'll continue to write newspaper articles, cover stories, travel to Afghanistan, travel to Central Asia, keep my eye on the ball.

Is it pretty easy to go back and forth from Pakistan to Afghanistan? Do you go overland or do you fly?

Yes, it's become much easier. I fly. People do tend to fly, although overland has started. The problem with overland is really not so much the lack of security now as that the road is still very bad. There are regular flights: there are the U.N. flights every day, there are now commercial flights by Pakistan and Afghanistan airlines and there are flights from Delhi, from Islamabad, from Dubai, from various places. So it's much easier now to get into Afghanistan.

Is doing journalism in your part of the world still fun?

It's fun. It's pretty hair-raising still, it's risky. You're still dealing with an insurgency somewhere, you've got the Taliban, you've got the Baluch, you've got military action in Waziristan in the northwest of Pakistan. It's still a very disturbed region.