

UN Afghan

UN Resolution Seen as Step to Weaken Taliban

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(INTRO :) The Security Council has adopted a resolution authorizing UN experts to monitor arms sanctions against Afghanistan's ruling Taliban. The tightening of arms controls is part of a U.S.- and Russia-backed policy of isolating and weakening the militia, which both countries see as supporting terrorism and unrest. RFE/RL correspondent Charles Recknagel speaks with an expert on the Taliban, Ahmed Rashid, who says the measures reflect a growing view that only disabling the Taliban can solve the Afghan crisis.

PRAGUE, July 31 (NCA/Charles Recknagel) -- The UN Security Council's resolution yesterday (July 30) to create a team of experts to help enforce sanctions against Afghanistan's Taliban rulers is the latest in a string of UN measures against the militia over the last two years. The resolution comes after the UN first placed sanctions on the Taliban in November 1999 to press it to turn over suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden for trial in connection with the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa the

previous year. Those sanctions, which included a flight ban on Afghanistan's airline, were followed last December by the UN imposing an arms embargo on the Taliban while allowing anti-Taliban forces to continue receiving weapons. With this week's resolution, the UN is tightening the arms embargo by creating a group to monitor its enforcement by neighboring states. The resolution creates a 20-person group, including five experts to be based in New York and 15 experts to be stationed in states bordering the Taliban-controlled area of Afghanistan. These states are Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and China. Moscow and Washington have been in the forefront of UN efforts to impose and enforce sanctions against the Taliban, which both countries condemn as sheltering terrorists and aiding Islamic militancy. The Taliban has also been condemned for widespread human rights abuses, particularly against women.

The new initiative makes it clear that the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, which took office in January, regards Afghanistan as a priority problem. The Bush administration, which is currently conducting a policy review on Afghanistan, is expected to announce a formal policy soon. Ahmed Rashid, an expert on the Taliban and a correspondent in Pakistan for the Hong-Kong based publication, "The Far Eastern Economic Review," recently visited Washington to learn more about the administration's emerging Afghan policy. He met with experts advising the White House in a series of off-the-record interviews earlier this month.

RFE/RL spoke with Rashid recently by telephone from Islamabad. He said his interviews indicate Washington increasingly views the Taliban's removal from power as a prerequisite to catching bin Laden and ending the civil war in Afghanistan:

(INSERT AUDIO Rashid, in English - NC072725) "I think the key difference that we are going to see here is that the Clinton [administration's] focus on bin Laden -- that saw Afghanistan only through the eyes of bin Laden and capturing bin Laden -- that is going to drastically change. I think already you've seen a huge stepping-up of American humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, [and] that will continue, and be stepped up even further, probably. The Americans will try to differentiate between the Taliban leadership and the Afghan people but continue to try to tighten the screws on the Taliban leadership. So, I think the big difference for the Bush administration is going to be a more Afghan-focused policy rather than a pure terrorism, bin Laden-focused policy."

Rashid says one emerging strategy for increasing pressure on the Taliban is to redress the

military balance in Afghanistan. The Taliban rules some 95 percent of the country. That strategy reflects concern that commander Ahmad Shah Masood of the anti-Taliban United Front needs to become stronger before the Taliban can be forced into any meaningful peace talks with the opposition.

Another emerging strategy, according to Rashid, is support for anti-Taliban elements among the Pashtuns, the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan and the community from which the Taliban draws its strength: "The policy has not been announced, but the hints that one has received so far about what this policy will be certainly point to the fact that Iran and Russia already are very heavily involved in trying to promote a Pashtun alternative to the Taliban. And I think some American policy-makers are very keen to do the same thing, perhaps even in some kind of coordination."

Rashid says that potential anti-Taliban Pashtun leaders include Abdul Haq, who recently met with U.S. officials and congressmen. Haq was one of the main military leaders in the 1980s Afghan war against the Soviet Union, and sought to create a leadership of field commanders as an alternative to the Afghan factions which, after expelling the Soviets, warred for control of the country. Since 1992, Haq has been in exile. Two years ago, his wife and daughter were killed when his home in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar was bombed, allegedly by supporters of the Taliban. The perpetrators have not been found. Still another option under consideration, Rashid says, is to galvanize efforts by Afghanistan's former King Zahir Shah, in exile in Rome, to convene a traditional Afghan assembly of leaders (a "Loya Jirga") to discuss peace solutions. Rashid says this option interests a number of European countries and, increasingly, U.S. officials.

(INSERT AUDIO Rashid - NC072727) "A lot of countries are interested, in that the Italians, who have sponsored Zahir Shah because he is living in Rome, are very keen, the European Community is very keen and, I think, the Americans. I think what that means is giving money to the Loya Jirga process, but more importantly, I think it would mean perhaps putting some kind of pressure on Pakistan to allow Zahir Shah's people access to the refugee camps in Pakistan, to some of the Afghan exiles living in Pakistan, perhaps even at some stage trying to set up some kind of office or base in Pakistan, because the only means by which the Zahir Shah people can have access to the Afghans inside Afghanistan would obviously be -- at least 70 percent of it -- would be through Pakistan. So far Pakistan is very much against any Zahir Shah initiative."

Pakistan is one of only three countries which recognizes the Taliban. The others are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. With Pakistan opposing efforts to create anti-Taliban alternatives among the Pashtun, a key test for any new U.S. policy will be how to persuade Islamabad to ease its resistance. Rashid says that will be a difficult challenge:

(INSERT AUDIO Rashid - NC072728) "This is going to be a very sensitive issue and a very difficult issue. If the U.S. is going to tighten the screws (eds: put pressure) on the military regime in Pakistan over Afghanistan you could have a very severe backlash in Pakistan, both from the military and from the Islamic parties, who are also backing the Taliban." But, he says, there may be some room for offering Islamabad incentives:

(INSERT AUDIO Rashid - NC072729)

"The U.S. administration is thinking of lifting sanctions on India. These are the sanctions that were placed on both countries -- India and Pakistan -- when they tested nuclear devices in 1998. Now, Washington at the moment is hinting that they would lift sanctions on India, but they would not lift the nuclear sanctions on Pakistan immediately. Now, that is a kind of carrot (eds: incentive), as Pakistan is very anxious that the nuclear sanctions at least should be lifted on both countries simultaneously and not just on India." This week's UN resolution to tighten curbs on arms to the Taliban comes after a panel of UN-appointed experts last month called on Pakistan and other states bordering Afghanistan to do a better job enforcing sanctions. In particular, the independent panel noted the absence of monitoring for flights into Afghanistan that are believed to be carrying tanks and artillery ammunition from Pakistan to the Taliban and from Iran to the opposition United Front. The United Front is not included under the arms embargo.

