

Humanitarian

Ahmed Rashid: U.S. needs a political and economic strategy for Afghan reconstruction

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Ahmed Rashid, the distinguished Pakistani journalist who wrote the definitive book on Afghanistan under the Taliban (*The Taliban: Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*), spoke on current developments in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region on August 21st at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Rashid's main point, which resonates with the experience and advocacy efforts of Refugees International, is that the current situation in Afghanistan is dangerously unstable, and demands a coherent political and economic response from the United States and the international community. The effort to root out the last remnants of Al Qaeda, while important to the United States, is utterly irrelevant to 99.9% of the Afghan people, according to Rashid. They have more immediate concerns: establishing a viable central government, improving security, and initiating large-scale infrastructure improvements to repair the damage from more than two decades of civil war. Echoing the comments of Afghan NGO leader Dr. Al-Umara, Rashid believes that Afghan frustration with the U.S. and its allies will grow if they do not begin to see tangible impact from the billions of dollars pledged for post-war reconstruction.

Rashid cited the "spring back to school" campaign as the one undeniable success of the international reconstruction effort to date. The campaign succeeded in getting three million Afghan children back in school, which reflected the pent-up demand among the Afghan people for education after the restrictions of Taliban rule. The beauty of the campaign for Rashid is that, as the sheer numbers indicate, it was a truly national effort that cut across ethnic lines and did not rely on the power of the warlords. Other projects like this are required to build national identity and reinforce national political cohesion.

Rashid described the Karzai government as fragile, still weak in the face of the power of the regional warlords. The U.S. and its allies need to design an integrated program of support for the national government, a program involving mutually reinforcing political, economic, and military elements. This program needs to receive the same level of support and visibility as the war against Al Qaeda to demonstrate to the Afghan people that they are indeed the focus of the international engagement, not a sideshow within their own country.

Rashid made the following specific recommendations:

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) should be deployed beyond Kabul in other major regional centers, such as Mazar-I-Sharif, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. Reconstruction efforts should focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, as their impact and visibility will enhance the stature and authority of the central government. Road building is a particular priority of the Karzai government. Build the national army, but link this effort to demobilizing the armies of the warlords. The project of creating a multi-ethnic national army will fail if the warlords continue to receive independent support from the U.S. military in the context of the war against Al Qaeda remnants.