

“There is no doubt that Afghanistan has progressed enormously since 9-11, but now even the positive achievements carried out by the international community appear to be unraveling.”

Letter from Afghanistan: Are the Taliban Winning?

AHMED RASHID

In Kabul today, most Afghans, from illiterate cooks to well-educated civil servants, take it for granted that the Taliban are coming back to power. Afghans speak of yet another American betrayal, trading theories on why the United States and the international community have not been serious about combating the Taliban insurgency, stemming the flow of jihadists out of Pakistan, or devoting money and resources sufficient to rebuild the country.

Many Afghans see President Hamid Karzai as an increasingly forlorn figure, trapped in the presidential palace as events spin out of his control, grasping for political straws to stem the widespread disillusionment with his government, begging the international community for more support.

Public morale has been most affected by the revived Taliban insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan, areas covering one-third of the country, and by the gradual withdrawal of US troops from the insurgency-hit areas and their replacement by less well-equipped or less motivated NATO forces. On average five NATO soldiers have died every week since May, three times the casualties taken by US troops in the same period. More than 4,000 Afghans, including Taliban fighters, were killed in 2006. Some 700 have died in more than 80 suicide bombings, which until 12 months ago were almost unknown in the 27 years of conflict since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

The Taliban have been able to launch attacks involving battalion-size units of more than 1,000 men, and for the first time in their four-year-old insurgency, they now receive considerable local sup-

port. The major Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders are still at large. And the critical Pakistan-Afghanistan border zone, inhabited by the Pashtun tribes, has become the world's "terrorism central," a base area where once again terrorist attacks worldwide are planned, and training and funding are coordinated.

Afghans, including aides to Karzai, believe that the hard-line neoconservatives within the US administration never had the intention to stabilize or rebuild Afghanistan after 9-11. Iraq is not just a major distraction, sucking in eight times more American troops and seven times more money than Afghanistan has received. It is Washington's ideological and foreign policy focus, whereas stabilizing Afghanistan is a sideshow.

While Iraq has bathed in US funding for infrastructure projects (though these projects have rarely been completed), there is less electricity in Kabul now than there was under Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world—even though it provides 92 percent of the world's heroin, which pumps some \$3 billion annually into the Afghan economy, or more than 60 percent of gross domestic product. More than five years after 9-11, and after a well-documented explosion in drug production, there is still no international agreement or adequate funding for a major anti-drug campaign that would offer Afghan poppy farmers new jobs or alternative crops to grow.

Most of the depressing developments in Afghanistan are matters of fact. Others may be matters of perception, or even falsehood. But in a largely illiterate society that for three decades has been fed a diet of violence and rumors, as well as real and imagined conspiracies and interference by neighboring countries, perceptions are all-important. For many Afghans, the perception is that the war against the Taliban is already lost.

AHMED RASHID is a journalist who has written for the International Herald Tribune, The Washington Post, and The New York Review of Books. He is the author of *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Penguin Books, 2002) and *Taliban* (Yale Press, 2001).

TWO STEPS BACK

There is no doubt that Afghanistan has progressed enormously since 9-11, but now even the positive achievements carried out by the international community appear to be unraveling. It took at least \$300 million for the United Nations to hold presidential and then legislative elections in 2004 and 2005, inaugurate the parliament, and pass a new constitution. Since then parliamentarians have been killed by the Taliban and abused by warlords, and many from the south cannot go home because of the insurgency. The new constitution is in virtual abeyance across the country because implementing it is impossible.

Japan contributed \$100 million to a highly successful UN-led program that collected heavy weapons from warlords and disarmed some 62,000 Afghan militiamen. But now a follow-up UN program to disarm more than 1,000 smaller illegal gangs and armed groups is at a standstill. In northern and western Afghanistan the price of weapons has doubled, as warlords and ordinary Afghans rearm to protect themselves against Taliban fighters arriving in their areas.

The rebuilding of a 70,000-man Afghan National Army by the Americans and the training of a 60,000-man police force by the Germans are going far too slowly. The army numbers just 34,000 men and is poorly equipped, lacking armor and helicopters. Now, in order to protect towns and villages in the south, the government has asked tribal chiefs to provide local guards—a return to the kind of local warlordism that the new political order was supposed to replace.

The beacon of the international aid effort in Afghanistan—restoring education and placing 5.1 million children in school—has been badly affected as the Taliban have killed teachers and students and burned down school buildings, causing 300 schools to shut down. Afghans are passionate about education. It has become the most important indicator of progress and change, and it highlights the differences between conditions today and those under the former Taliban regime—which is precisely why the Taliban are targeting schools and in particular girls' schools.

For many Afghans, Taliban bases and sanctuaries in Pakistan are at the heart of the problem. The Bush administration knows these bases and sanctuaries exist but refuses to acknowledge them. Karzai and US and NATO military commanders believe the Taliban leadership is based in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, just 80 miles from the Afghan

border. From this safe haven the Taliban are able to recruit, organize logistics, import arms and ammunition, and carry out fund-raising.

Since 9-11 the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have deliberately allowed “Talibanization” to take place along the 1,600-mile-long Pakistan-Afghanistan border, both sides of which are populated by Pashtun tribes. Tens of thousands of Afghan Taliban retreated into Pakistan after their defeat in 2001. The radical Islamic schools and parties in Pakistan, which had supported their cause since 1994, gave them shelter. And they were joined by Pakistani Taliban, young Pashtun men who had been indoctrinated by the same madrassas. Today, hundreds of Pakistani Taliban join in attacks inside Afghanistan.

Pakistan sees the Taliban as a proxy card to be kept in reserve and used to mount pressure on Karzai, so that Pakistan can regain its dominant position among the Afghan Pashtuns in the south. Islamabad also believes that Talibanization or the Islamization of Pashtun culture and politics will serve as a bulwark against secular and democratic-minded Pashtun nationalism, which is reemerging in Kabul, Peshawar, and Quetta.

A Talibanized Pashtun belt will owe first loyalty to Islamabad rather than Kabul, and will counter growing Indian influence in Afghanistan, which Pakistan sees as a threat to its security. Finally, the Pakistani military, arguing that only it can combat Islamic fundamentalism, believes that the threats posed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban encourage continued international support for General Pervez Musharraf's regime and for military rule.

ANGRY AND BEWILDERED

Afghans are disillusioned with the United States and the international community because they see them as providing cover for Pakistan's actions. Anti-Pakistan feeling is running at an all-time high among Afghans across the political and ethnic spectrum.

In a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on September 21, 2006, General James Jones, NATO's supreme commander, testified that the Taliban's headquarters is based in Quetta. Yet President George W. Bush did not even bring up Quetta when he hosted a dinner for Musharraf and Karzai in Washington on September 27. Jones's comments were largely ignored by the US media—infuriating many Afghans.

Tom Koenigs, the UN secretary general's special representative for Afghanistan, reported to the UN Security Council in September that “five distinct

leadership centers of the insurgency can be identified.” These include a Taliban northern command active in Afghanistan’s northeastern provinces, a Taliban eastern command, and a Taliban southern command, as well as separate fronts established by two Taliban allies, the Islamist warlords Gulbuddin Hekmetyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Although Koenigs did not openly allege that all these fronts are based in Pakistan, NATO and US intelligence place all the top leaders of these fronts—Haqqani, Hekmetyar, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, and Mullah Dadullah, the chief commander in the south—in Pakistan. “The leadership relies heavily on cross-border fighters, many of whom are Afghans drawn from nearby refugee camps and radical seminaries in Pakistan,” said the report to the Security Council. “They are trained and paid to serve as medium-level commanders, leading operations inside Afghanistan and are able to retreat back to safe havens outside the country,” the report added.

The UN Security Council declined to debate Koenigs’s findings, which again left Afghans angry and bewildered. Afghans were even more infuriated when Musharraf, during his September visit to Washington, waved the UN report at journalists at the White House, saying that it vindicated Pakistan’s denials about providing sanctuary to the Taliban. The State Department declined to correct Musharraf’s misreading of the report.

However, the ISI is cooperating fully with the United States and Britain in dealing with their domestic terrorism threat, which in Britain largely emanates from young men born in Pakistan or of Pakistani descent who now hold British citizenship. Access to information from Pakistani intelligence about potential terrorist threats has trumped concerns about Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani military’s controversial September 5 deal with Afghan and Pakistani Taliban in the North Waziristan tribal region has allowed Pakistani Taliban to set up a virtual Islamist state. Although Islamabad insisted the deal would prevent attacks against both Pakistani troops in Pakistan and US forces in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the commander of US forces, told me that attacks out of North Waziristan have gone up 300 percent since the deal was signed.

After promising a strategy of peace with the seven tribal agencies that border Afghanistan, the

Pakistani military, under US pressure, bombed a religious school in the Bajaur tribal agency on November 1, killing 80 people believed to be extremists. The action inflamed emotions and left Pakistanis baffled by the military’s vacillating tactics and apparent lack of strategy.

Pakistan’s military has carried out few of the reforms promised by Musharraf after 9-11. There has been no reform of the madrassas, where radicals and militants are trained, and no serious attempt to deal with extremists. In fact, the military remains in alliance with the largest Islamic fundamentalist party that aids the Taliban—the Jamiat-e-Ullemah Islam. Next year Musharraf plans to continue his alliance with these radicals when he runs for another five-year term as president.

India, Iran, the Central Asian states, Russia, and even Pakistan’s longstanding ally China are looking warily at Pakistan’s support of the Taliban. Most of these states have zero tolerance for Sunni Islamic radicalism of the Taliban variety and they expect the United States to contain Pakistan. If America proves unable or unwilling to do

so, Washington’s clout in the region will diminish substantially. Weaker countries such as those in Central Asia will move closer to China and Russia to protect themselves, instead of relying on the United States.

FAILED COMMITMENTS

For many Afghans the other part of the crisis is the incompetence and corruption of the regime. President Karzai has failed to carry out tough measures against well-known drug traffickers, including several in his cabinet and parliament. Western nongovernmental organizations say corruption is epidemic, with aid money and profits from reconstruction contracts being siphoned off to senior officials. Key parts of the reform agenda that Karzai promised he would carry out after he was elected president in 2004 remain to be implemented. The lack of developmental activities in the south has resulted in part from Karzai’s failure to purge corrupt or drug-trafficking officials from powerful positions. This has fuelled disillusionment among Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in southern and eastern Afghanistan, many of whom are now offering to fight for or at least offer sanctuary to the Taliban.

Many Afghans see President Hamid Karzai as an increasingly forlorn figure, trapped in the presidential palace as events spin out of his control.

The other part of the blame rests with the international community's failure to rebuild the shattered infrastructure in the south, including roads, electricity, and water supply, and to invest in agriculture to wean farmers from growing poppies. NATO cannot combat the growing insurgency in Afghanistan unless it shows the flexibility and determination to effectively address major problems that stem from the legacy of the American failure in Afghanistan over the past five years. Turning the tide will mean that NATO has to act not just as a military alliance, but also as an economic, political, and diplomatic alliance—something it has never done before.

NATO now commands some 30,000 troops in Afghanistan drawn from 37 countries, including 8,000 American troops, while another 10,000 US troops remain under separate US command. NATO will need to use military victories as a lever to pry more money out of the European Union, the United States, and the Muslim world—money that, along with funds from Western development agencies, could be devoted to expensive infrastructure projects.

NATO also has to play a critical political role in resuscitating the Afghan government and giving it the confidence to perform better and to eliminate public corruption. At the same time, NATO needs to play a more aggressive diplomatic role in convincing Pakistan to stop supporting the Taliban.

However, as a result of the intense fighting in the south, European countries are balking at providing more troops to the NATO forces in Afghanistan. Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and others have refused to send more soldiers. France, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and Italy, which have troops stationed in the more peaceful regions of Afghanistan, are refusing to send them to the south, where British, Canadian, and Dutch forces are facing the bulk of the fighting. NATO members have also been extremely slow to come up with a reserve brigade and the necessary military equipment for their troops, especially much-needed helicopters.

Lieutenant General David Richards, the NATO commander in Afghanistan, says he is trying to persuade all NATO countries to lift the caveats that governments have imposed on their contingents, caveats that prevent troops from taking part in combat or being deployed where commanders want them. Not surprisingly, the publics, parliaments, and media in many NATO countries whose soldiers are dying in Afghanistan are up in arms—demanding that their governments recall their troops. In many European countries, public opin-

ion equates Afghanistan with Bush's misjudged occupation of Iraq, and the dislike for Bush's policies means Afghanistan suffers as a result.

STIFF RESISTANCE

NATO was ill prepared for the Taliban offensive in the south this past summer. When the NATO forces deployed there, they found themselves under heavy attack by the Taliban, who aimed to inflict such heavy casualties that Western publics would demand a recall of their troops. In "Operation Medusa," from September 4 to September 17, 2006, NATO forces in Kandahar's Panjwai district defeated a well-entrenched force of 1,500 Taliban who had planned to attack Kandahar city. NATO commanders say they killed a staggering 1,100 Taliban fighters, including hundreds of Taliban reinforcements who arrived from Quetta in pickup trucks.

A post-battle report compiled by NATO and Afghan intelligence showed that during the battle the Taliban had fired an estimated 400,000 rounds of ammunition, 2,000 rocket-propelled grenades, and 1,000 mortar shells. The Taliban had stocked over 1 million rounds of ammunition, much of it presumably acquired in Pakistan. "Taliban decision-making and its logistics are all inside Pakistan. There are several Taliban shuras [councils] in Quetta, each with a Pakistani ISI officer coordinating it," said Afghan Defense Minister and army chief General Rahim Wardak.

As in their comments about the war in Iraq, senior US officials have downplayed the threat of any imminent collapse of the Afghan government or defeat for NATO forces. They have insisted that all is well and the Taliban violence is only a sporadic response to NATO's wider deployment. But to many Afghans, it seems the Americans are talking about some other country, not Afghanistan.

NATO and US commanders now believe that there will be no winter lull in Taliban attacks as has happened in the past, and that suicide bombings in the cities against soft Afghan targets and concerted Taliban strikes against NATO forces will continue. Since the Panjwai battle there have been major Taliban attacks in the southern provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul, demonstrating that the huge losses they suffered have not demoralized the fighters.

A major problem for the West is its inability or refusal to acknowledge past failures in Afghanistan, or the country's present predicament, and to offer serious future commitments of both money and troops. Until that happens, Afghans will continue to believe that they are losing the war against the Taliban. ■