

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

By Bushra Asif | April 8, 2004

As donors met in Berlin last week to review Afghanistan's progress and reaffirm their commitment to its reconstruction, the Afghan National army was swiftly moving into the northern province of Herat. Its mission was to quell an upsurge in factional fighting, following the murder of Mirwais Sadeq, the Afghan aviation minister and son of the powerful warlord and governor Ismail Khan. Although the army may have prevented the escalation of violence, the episode highlights the weakness of the central government and the fragility of security in the country. Almost two years after the fall of the Taliban, peace and security in Afghanistan still remains elusive.

The establishment of Hamid Karzai's interim Afghan government and the presence of U.S. forces had temporarily curbed factional infighting between warring ethnic militias, but did little to reduce the influence of regional warlords or improve security beyond Kabul. In the absence of effective central authority, different parts of Afghanistan continue to suffer from chronic insecurity and violence. More than 220 Afghan officials, civilians, and aid workers were killed in 36 separate armed attacks in and outside Kabul in August 2003 alone. 2004 was not much better. January was marked by a series of suicide bombings and ambushes, particularly in the Pashtun-populated east and south, where Taliban insurgents are staging a come back.

The pace of reconstruction in Afghanistan too has been exceedingly slow. Inadequate funds, lack of coordination among international aid agencies, and increasing insecurity outside Kabul have hampered reconstruction efforts. Not only were initial disbursements, following the Tokyo 2002 donor conference, insufficient to meet Afghanistan's developmental needs, delivery was often slow and a disproportionate amount of the allocated resources was spent on short-term, humanitarian emergency relief rather than reconstruction. According to CARE International, a British nongovernmental organization, the amount per person per year pledged to Afghanistan was no more than a quarter than the amount actually spent on post-conflict recovery in Rwanda, Kosovo, Cambodia, and East Timor. Only 16% of this aid was channeled through the Afghan central government.

Lack of security also continues to be a major hurdle. Mounting attacks on aid personnel have all but stalled reconstruction in most of the countryside. Over the past two months more than 11 aid workers have been slain. Large areas have been declared "medium to high risk" by

NGOs. According to the UN, one third of the country, including 60% of the south and 20% of the south-east, is off-limits to its staff. The need for foreign troops to address these threats is acute.

Security Vacuum

Logistical problems notwithstanding, precarious security conditions are also the main reason behind President Karzai's recent decision to postpone for three months the presidential and parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for June 2004. Thus far, only 1.5 million of the estimated 10.5 million eligible voters have registered. Till last month, only 2% of women had been able to register. In a country where 70% of the population is rural, lack of security has also limited registration to urban areas. Due to the continuing violence, the areas most severely marginalized in the registration process are the south and east Pashtun-populated areas. Given Afghanistan's complex ethnic politics, any electoral process that fails to adequately represent Pashtun preferences is likely to intensify their alienation, further exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions, and undermine political stability in the future.

Given the political and security vacuum outside Kabul, warlords who control approximately 75% of Afghanistan's countryside continue to undercut the authority of the central government. U.S. support to regional warlords in the hunt for al Qaeda and Taliban leaders has only increased their autonomy and strengthened their militias. Despite the ongoing UN backed Demobilization Demilitarization and Reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, only 2,700 of the estimated 100,000 Afghan fighters who pledge loyalty to different warlords have so far surrendered their weapons. Complicating matters further is a booming opium trade, which remains a key source of the illicit income of recalcitrant commanders.



It goes without saying that the role of the United States is crucial to the successful reconstruction and democratization of post-Bonn Afghanistan. So far the U.S. has failed to provide the necessary military and financial resources needed to do so. The 13,000 U.S. troops around the country plus the 5,700 NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops confined to Kabul are also not sufficient to address the multiple security challenges that the country faces. Recent announcements by NATO that it plans to expand ISAF beyond Kabul in the form of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) is a positive development, as are efforts to increase the strength of the Afghan national army, which is currently estimated at 7,000.

A Perilous Future

However, much more will need to be done if Afghanistan is to establish even a modicum of normalcy. With Washington's attention focused on the military operations in Iraq and the campaign against Taliban and al Qaeda remnants on the Pakistan-Afghan border, ordinary Afghans fear that their security and developmental concerns have been pushed to the back burner. Observers believe that a decline in U.S. engagement could also give impetus to regional competition as Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and others attempt to re-establish their influence through proxies. Concerns have also been raised that the U.S. focus on elections could divert essential resources away from state building, and, in the absence of effective institutions, exacerbate Afghanistan's problems. A victory in the elections may be necessary to give President Karzai the

fresh mandate that he needs to legitimate his authority; it is unlikely to be sufficient.

As a first step, Washington and the international community must support the goals outlined in "Securing Afghanistan's future," the Afghan government's seven-year developmental roadmap presented at the recently concluded donor conference in Berlin. These include, inter alia, the need to create a secure environment, encourage private investment, and allow the rule of law to develop. The \$8.2 billion three-year funding commitment made by donors at Berlin serves as an important indicator of the international community's sustained engagement in Afghanistan. But it falls short of the \$28 billion seven-year target set by Kabul.

Notably still, donors failed to announce new troop commitments, urgently needed for addressing pressing security concerns. In the final analysis, failure to extend the central government's writ and ensure security beyond Kabul is likely to make the task of establishing a viable democratic state in Afghanistan extremely difficult. In the first instance, external actors should ensure the timely delivery of existing aid commitments. They must also take tangible steps to augment and implement the Karzai administration's developmental agenda with the aim of effectively tackling both the security and reconstruction needs of Afghanistan. Given the country's recent past, the dangers of inaction are all too clear.

(Bushra Asif is a visiting researcher at the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in Washington, DC. She wrote this for Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpif.org).)

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