

Afghanistan's Faltering Peace-building Process

By Mark Sedra | March 17, 2003

“Don't forget about us if Iraq happens. If you reduce the attention because of Iraq...and if you leave the whole thing to us to fight again, it will be repeating the mistake the United States made during the Soviet occupation.”

- Hamid Karzai, February 26, 2003

The success of peace-building activities in Afghanistan, a nation physically and psychologically scarred by 23 years of internecine conflict, is dependent on the existence of a robust and durable commitment by the international community. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's pronouncement on the eve of the fall of the Taliban, that “we will not walk away from Afghanistan, as the outside world has done so many times before” reassured many that this commitment would be forthcoming (*Independent*, February 24, 2003). The January 2002 Tokyo International Donors Conference, which resulted in extensive material and moral pledges to rebuild Afghanistan bolstered this initial optimism. The Tokyo meeting rightly recognized that peace building in Afghanistan is a process that must be pursued on two parallel tracks, security sector reform and economic development. “Security and development are two sides of the same coin,” President Karzai affirmed during his opening address at the conference.

Despite the international community's recognition of this principle, progress on security sector reform and economic development in the 14 months that have elapsed since the conference has been limited. Growing insecurity in late 2002 and early 2003 has highlighted the lack of substantive change that has been achieved in these areas. Spurred by two factors, warlordism and the resilience of spoiler groups such as the Taliban and al Qaeda, the growing security vacuum threatens to undermine the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA). A renewed and expanded commitment to Afghanistan is required to

avert this eventuality; however, with international attention shifting to other global trouble spots, such as Iraq and North Korea, it appears unlikely to materialize.

The upsurge of violence across Afghanistan in the first two months of 2003 revealed the tenuous position of the peace-building process. Between January 1 and February 28, 2003, there were seven major attacks on UN and nongovernmental organization (NGO) interests; almost a rocket attack per day on coalition military forces; several terrorist strikes against Afghan civilians, including a bus explosion that claimed 16 lives; and at least four ongoing inter-factional disputes that have generated a number of violent clashes. Much of this violence has been attributed to a consortium of spoiler groups consisting of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-I-Islami faction. These groups are stronger, better organized, and more confident than they have been at any time since the fall of the Taliban regime.

The resurgence of warlordism has been a major obstacle to the peace-building process. Controlling private armies, warlords have carved out mini fiefdoms throughout the country. Ongoing factional fighting in northern Afghanistan near the city of Mazar-I-Sharif, between the forces of Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammed, both members of the ATA, exemplifies how destabilizing this problem has been. Atta, a Tajik, and Dostum, an Uzbek, are highly influential figures in the ATA, yet they have retained large, well-equipped, private armies and compete for territory and influence in the north of the country.



Until the government is able to disarm these figures, reconcile their competing allegiances and interests, and further integrate them into the new government, the peace-building and reconstruction process will not move forward. Security sector reform provides the most effective means to achieve these objectives.

By creating a counterbalance to their armed forces, through the creation of a national army and police; by undermining their support base through the disarmament and demobilization of their militia forces; by countering the culture of impunity that they have enjoyed through the implementation of judicial reform; and by removing a key source of their revenue by curtailing drug production, security sector reform could conceivably emasculate the warlords and eradicate spoiler groups. However, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and inaction have paralyzed the process.

Military reform, a vital component of security reform, has lagged behind schedule. The ATA had planned to train approximately 7,000 troops by the end of 2002; however, by 1 January 2003, the Afghan National Army (ANA) numbered 1,700 - 1,800. At the current rate of graduation, it will take up to 25 years for the ANA to meet its agreed force size of 70,000 according to CARE International. Progress on police reform has been similarly slow. The bulk of the police under government salary are illiterate and remain in Kabul, leaving a security void outside the capital. The ATA has set a goal of providing training for 9,000 officers in Kabul and 75,000 nationwide, but with the National Police Academy having a maximum capacity of 1,500 and a standard training course with a duration of three years, it will take decades to professionalize the entire force.

The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DD&R) process has been fixed in the planning stage since its inception. Less than a lack of funds, it is a lack of initiative that has stalled the process. The Japanese government hosted a conference, entitled "The Consolidation of Peace in Afghanistan," in late February to give the process new momentum. The conference secured fresh pledges of support from donor countries amounting to U.S.\$50.7 million dollars, but apart from vague pledges by President Hamid Karzai that the process would be completed

in three years, little was elucidated in terms of the prospective program's content and structure. Similar to DD&R, progress on judicial reform has been negligible. The current judicial reform commission was only established in November 2002, and Italy, the donor country assigned the responsibility of overseeing reform, waited until December 2002, eight months following the Geneva Security Sector Reform Conference, to organize an international conference to garner support for the initiative. Although the conference was successful in securing U.S.\$30 million in multilateral funding for the project, the lack of urgency with which the process has been pursued has been disconcerting.

Counter-narcotics has, perhaps, been the most glaring failure of security sector reform thus far. In 2002, Afghanistan returned to its position as the world's foremost producer of heroin. The 2002 poppy crop reached an estimated 3,400 metric tons (mt), a 540% increase on the yield for 2001 and significantly higher than the 1,900-2,700 mt. earlier predicted for 2002 (*IRIN*, January 21, 2003). The ATA's policy on this issue, centered on crop eradication, has been largely unsuccessful due to mismanagement, inadequate funding, and an unwillingness to address the socio-economic causes of drug production.

The ineffectiveness of security sector reform has been compounded by the lack of progress in the sphere of economic development. Frustration over the slow pace of reconstruction is palpable across the country. If the Karzai government does not deliver on its promises to the populace, it is likely to lose its support. However, to deliver a peace dividend to the people, it requires a greater proportion of the aid budget. Just 16% of funds for 2002, roughly \$87 million went directly to the ATA—the rest flowed through UN agencies and NGOs (*New York Times*, September 27, 2002). The ATA should be the driving force behind reconstruction, not the myriad of NGOs and international organizations that have descended upon Kabul.

Sustainable economic development can only be achieved in Afghanistan if there is a shift in the emphasis of the nation-building process from humanitarian relief to infrastructure development. Currently, only one third of the aid budget has been

earmarked for reconstruction, the rest has been allocated for humanitarian relief. Large-scale reconstruction projects—such as road building—are not only needed to restore an infrastructure decimated by 23 years of warfare, it is required to boost employment. Afghans are eager to bury their country’s violent past if only they are given the opportunity to do so in the form of alternative livelihoods. An increase in donor-supported investment projects would have an enormous impact in creating employment for the multitudes of Afghans who are unemployed. However, major investment projects have, thus far, been slow to materialize.

Afghanistan has made many advances since the fall of the Taliban: two million refugees have returned to the country, three million children, one third of which are girls, have returned to school, and a new currency, the Afghani, has been established. While these achievements should be a source of optimism that the international community should laud, it should not be lulled into complacency. It would be “very, very unwise to reduce attention to

Afghanistan,” President Hamid Karzai warned the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 2003, “for the reconstruction process has just begun.” If the world wishes to avoid repeating the mistake of abandoning Afghanistan, as it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a mistake with tragic and far-reaching ramifications, it must bolster the flagging peace building process. The cost of complacency and inaction in Afghanistan will be even higher now than it was after 1989, for in the post-September 11 world it serves as a proving ground for the international community’s ability to assist in rebuilding a post-conflict society and fight the roots of terrorism.

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