

Afghanistan And Its Future

Eurasia Net - 26/06/2006

By Ahmed Rashid

Five years after Western countries promised Afghans to rebuild their country, Afghanistan is on the brink, facing its worst crisis since the Taliban were overthrown in 2001. Afghan dignitaries and Western diplomats are scathing in their criticism of President Hamid Karzai's inability to govern effectively or punish those in his administration who are corrupt, dealing in drugs or close to the Taliban. In turn, Karzai has lashed out at the West's refusal to help his government with more money and troops much earlier on. Ordinary Afghans have no doubt that the Taliban virus is spreading.

Taliban have been reported just 25 miles from the capital, distributing at night written death threats to those who help the government. Taliban attacks have taken place in the north near the border with Central Asia and in the west near Iran, hundreds of miles from the main battleground in the south. Every day a school is burnt down or a teacher killed by the Taliban. Over 500 Afghans have been killed in the past six weeks in the south where some 6,000 US, Canadian and British troops under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are battling the Taliban. Afghans remember that a similar death rate in 1992-93, amidst civil war, heralded the arrival of the Taliban who promised peace and security. Karzai is now seen by many Afghans and Western diplomats as betraying the reform and nation building agenda set out by the Bonn agreement in 2001 and reverting back to rule by fiat on tribal and ethnic lines.

Since the May 29 riots that shook Kabul, he has ordered two corrupt former governors in the south, both linked to the drug trade, to rearm their illegal militias in order to fight the Taliban. It took several months of persuasion by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and the Foreign Office to get rid of one of them - Sher Mohammed Akhunzada, the governor of Helmand province in southwest Afghanistan - before British troops were deployed in the region. Now Akhunzada is back with a 500-man militia force, while his brother remains deputy governor.

The Dutch went through a similar process to get rid of another governor before their troops were deployed in the southern province of Uruzgan. NATO is furious and so are the Japanese who have spent over nearly \$100 million funding the disarmament of 62,000 militiamen. Tokyo threatened to cancel Karzai's visit to the Japanese capital later this month. Meanwhile, the United Nations program to continue disarming the militias is now at a standstill. Karzai has also appointed 13 police officers widely known for brutality and corruption to key posts and bought back as an adviser General Mohammed Fahim, a powerful former warlord and defense minister who was sacked two years ago after extraordinary Western pressure. "The government has to base their actions on good governance and not reliance on the old commanders," said Tom Koenigs, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Afghanistan. "The army and police have to be loyal not to commanders but to the constitution, which is why we are against forming uncontrollable militias and parallel forces," he added.

Karzai has also ignored the newly elected parliament, which is emerging as a watchdog over government excesses, and this week his office tried to clamp down on the Afghan media. Karzai has charged that the US and the West have failed to provide enough resources and soldiers much earlier on when they were needed. "The unhappiness between us and the international community," is because, "we did not get the assistance and cooperation that is necessary for a strategy for counterterrorism," Karzai said at a June 22 press conference. Karzai has also accused the West of ignoring the sanctuary provided to the Taliban by Pakistan, while officials say the militias are needed to beef up the beleaguered police force in the south. "There are 40 policemen to protect 80,000 people in Uruzgan, what do you want us to do?" asked a senior Afghan intelligence official. A senior US official admitted that the police training program is three years behind schedule, but stated that by December Washington will provide \$1.2 billion to equip 60,000 police nationwide with vehicles, radios and weapons.

Afghan officers are also furious that the US will now only train and arm a 50,000-man Afghan army compared to the 70,000 soldiers first promised. Moreover, from this year, the Americans are making the cash-strapped Kabul government pay soldiers' salaries -- hardly a way to win hearts and minds. Karzai is certainly right about the West's failings. With much hoopla just four months ago, the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair orchestrated the Afghanistan Compact, which promised a five-year, \$ 10.5 billion development program for Afghanistan, but which conveniently ignored the failures and false promises made by the West since 2001.

It is clear that the slow delivery of Western aid has wrecked the political will in the government, demoralized Afghans and given fuel to Taliban propaganda. Predicted one European ambassador: "The next few months will be critical." Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistan-based journalist and author of the book "Taliban: Militant Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia."