

## Afghanistan Crisis Paves Way For Return Of The Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

Five years after the West promised to rebuild Afghanistan, the country is facing its worst crisis since the Taliban was overthrown.

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President Hamid Karzai and his western backers are seriously disillusioned with each other, while the Islamic militia is resurgent and people are being killed at a rate not seen since the 2001 American-led invasion.

At a recent reception for the Queen's 80th birthday at the new British Council in Kabul the scene may have been picturesque, with hundreds of diplomats, officers and Afghan dignitaries mingling on the lush green lawn, but the talk among them was full of gloom and desperation. Outside, lines of British troops kept guard against a possible Taliban attack.

Among the envoys and Afghan politicians there was abundant, and scathing, criticism of Mr Karzai's inability to govern effectively or punish those in his administration who are corrupt, dealing in drugs or close to the Taliban.

A few days later Mr Karzai in turn criticised 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. Members of the militia, which ruled almost the whole country for five years from 1996, have been reported just 25 miles from the capital, distributing letters by night that threaten death 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 guerrillas' southern heartland. A suicide car bomber in the western city of Herat killed an American security official in May and car bombs in Farah have claimed several lives.

Every day somewhere in Afghanistan a girls' school is burnt down or a female teacher killed by the fundamentalist militants, says the United Nations.

More than 600 Afghans have been killed in the past six weeks in the south, where about 6,000 American, Canadian and British troops under Nato are fighting the Taliban. Afghans remember that this is about the same rate of deaths as in 1992-93 during the civil war that ushered in a Taliban takeover.

Mr 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 to rule by fiat on tribal and ethnic lines.

This month he has ordered two corrupt former governors in the south to rearm their illegal militias in order to fight the Taliban, rather than deploying the new conventional, foreign-trained army.

It took several months of persuasion by Jack Straw and the Foreign Office to get rid of one of them - Sher Mohammed Akhonzada, the governor of Helmand province - before British troops were deployed there. Now Akhonzada is back with a 500-man militia force, while his brother remains deputy governor.

Nato is furious and so are the Japanese, who have spent £55 million paying for the disarmament of 62,000 militiamen.

Mr Karzai has also appointed 13 police officers widely known for brutality and corruption to key posts and brought back as an adviser Gen Mohammed Fahim, a powerful former warlord who was sacked as defence minister two years ago after 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."

Mr 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.