

## Taleban's Second Coming

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By Ahmed Rashid

Guest journalist and writer Ahmed Rashid on why Afghanistan is facing a resurgent Taleban movement.

Nearly 400 Afghans have been killed in an unprecedented offensive by the Taleban, in a bid to pre-empt a major deployment by some 6,000 Nato troops this summer in southern Afghanistan.

From just a few hundred guerrillas last year, Taleban commander Mullah Dadullah now claims to have 12,000 men under arms and control of 20 districts in the former Taleban heartland in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan. There is also a strong Taleban-al-Qaeda presence in the eastern provinces bordering Pakistan.

Why - five years after the Taleban and al-Qaeda were smashed by US forces - is Afghanistan facing a resurgent Taleban movement that is now threatening to overwhelm it?

Even though the country now has a legitimately elected president, government and parliament, there have been major failures by the international community and the Afghan government in their inability to provide troops, security and funds for reconstruction and nation building to the Pashtun population in the south.

### Security vacuum

Neither Nato, nor the American forces they are replacing, have offered an honest assessment of their successes and failures during the past five years.

Here is a checklist of failures in the south that the US, Nato, the UN and the Afghan government should be discussing and rectifying:

Washington's refusal to take state building in Afghanistan seriously after 2001 and instead waging a fruitless war in Iraq, created a major international distraction which the Taleban took advantage of to slowly rebuild their forces.

US-led coalition forces were never deployed in southern Afghanistan in sufficient numbers, even though this was the Taleban heartland and needed to be secured. Apart from a US base for 3,000 troops in Kandahar and a couple of fire bases, for four years there was virtually no military presence in three of the four provinces. US forces failed to secure even the major cities and highways in the south. The growing security vacuum in the south was steadily filled by the Taleban.

Afghanistan has received far less funds for reconstruction than almost all recent nation building efforts such as the former Yugoslavia, Haiti or East Timor. The lack of security in the south meant that UN development agencies and western and Afghan aid organisations could not provide sufficient aid and reconstruction. Nor was there ever adequate funding by western donors, especially for rebuilding the vital agricultural sector. The West's refusal to invest in agriculture on which 70% of the population depend, led to a massive return to poppy production by destitute farmers in the south, which quickly spread to the rest of the country.

Drug smugglers and cartels now offer much greater incentives to Pashtun farmers than aid agencies. The best functioning extension programmes for farmers are operated by opium traffickers who provide improved varieties of poppy seeds, fertilizer, improved methods of cultivation, banking and loan facilities and organised large scale employment during the poppy harvest. Compared to 2001 when poppy cultivation was at a minimum, southern Afghanistan now needs to develop an entire alternative economy costing billions of dollars in order to replace the drugs economy.

The drugs economy has fuelled massive corruption among government officials, undermined the authority of the government and funded the Taliban. The failure to reconstruct the south has led to widespread public disillusionment, increasing sympathy for the Taliban and anger at the Afghan government. Drugs money has allowed the Taliban to acquire new weapons, provide salaries to fighters and larger sums to suicide bombers.

## **Corruption**

For the past five years President Hamid Karzai has tolerated Pashtun warlords as governors, police chiefs and administrators in the south. Most of these warlords were discredited and defeated by the Taliban in the 1990s, but were resuscitated by US forces to help defeat the Taliban in 2001. Unlike Northern Alliance warlords who tended to defy President Karzai's authority, these Pashtun warlords were friends of the government and helped secure the Pashtun vote for Karzai in two Loya Jirgas and two elections in 2004 and 2005. Despite pledging loyalty to President Karzai these warlord-governors became visibly corrupt, by their open involvement in the drugs trade, cutting deals with criminal gangs and the Taliban and showing supreme incompetence in dealing with development issues. For the majority of southern Pashtuns, the corruption of these warlord-governors unfortunately symbolised the intentions of the Kabul government.

Kabul refused to change these warlord-governors, until forced to do so by Nato countries, who refused to deploy their troops until they were removed. Thus Canada, Britain and the Netherlands played a major role in forcing the resignation of the governors of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan - the provinces in which their troops are now being deployed.

Kabul's offer of an amnesty and safe passage home in 2003 to non-belligerent Taliban living in Pakistan was a sensible attempt at reconciliation, but it was badly handled. The Northern Alliance leaders refused to accept any reconciliation with the Taliban. Overtures to the Taliban were handled secretly by the American and Afghan intelligence, instead of being done openly with international support and guarantees of protection for returning Taliban and a separate aid programme to rehabilitate them. Pakistan refused to help persuade the Taliban to return home, while Washington refused to put any pressure on Islamabad to do so. The reconciliation drive has been a failure.

After being routed in 2001 the Taliban found a safe sanctuary in Balochistan and the North West Frontier province of Pakistan. They have been able to set up a major logistics hub, training camps, carry out fund raising and have been free to recruit fighters from madrassas and refugee camps. The Taliban have received help from Pakistan's two provincial governments, the MMA, Islamic extremist groups, the drugs mafia and criminal gangs - while the military regime has looked the other way. Al-Qaeda has helped the Taliban reorganise and forge alliances with other Afghan and Central Asian rebel groups.

Thus the current Taliban resurgence is a reflection of the failure of policies by all the major players in Afghanistan - the US, Nato, the UN, the international community, the Afghan government and neighbours such as Pakistan.

All these problems will have to be addressed honestly and frankly, before Nato and Afghan security forces will be able to defeat the Taliban.