

Afghan peace at stake in Bonn

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Ten years ago a seminal conference in the German city of Bonn ended the Afghan war and helped broker a post-Taliban government. Writer Ahmed Rashid considers whether a second Bonn conference can secure a long-term peace now that one of the crucial players, Pakistan, has pulled out.

The talks in Bonn were all set to reassert the commitment of the international community to helping Afghanistan after 2014 when most Western military forces will have left.

Such a commitment is seen as critical for the many Afghans who fear a breakdown in law and order after 2014 and inadequate levels of aid.

There had been hopes for a breakthrough on reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban to break the mould of the plethora of sterile conferences held this year - until Pakistan pulled out of the Bonn gathering.

The government took the decision after pressure from the army following Nato's accidental killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers at a border checkpost. Pakistan cut Nato supplies to Afghanistan and there was uproar across Pakistan - one that was carefully fuelled by the military.

Talking without Pakistan?

Some still hope that a breakthrough may take place with the announcement at Bonn that the Taliban, the US, Qatar and Germany will agree to open an office for the Taliban in Doha, Qatar so that talks between all sides can continue in a more permanent manner.

However, much depends on how quickly the Americans, who are deeply divided on the issue of talks with the Taliban, agree among themselves. The state department is deeply at odds with the Pentagon which wants to continue fighting until 2014.

But Pakistan, which hosts the bulk of the Taliban leadership, is critical to any settlement. Unless the Pakistan military co-operates with the Afghans and the international community and unless ever worsening US-Pakistan relations improve, progress on reconciliation will be deadlocked because Pakistan has far more leverage than any other state.

Pakistan is a member of the critical "contact group" that also comprises Afghanistan and the US. All the major Afghan Taliban groups and their leaders are based in Pakistan - although Islamabad denies this - and can be influenced by the military to co-operate or not with international efforts to bring them to the table.

Pakistan demands a major role in any US negotiations with the Taliban and is already angry with the Americans for opening secret talks with the Taliban without taking Pakistan into its confidence. Nevertheless, all players understand that without Pakistani co-operation a peace settlement is not achievable.

Earlier hopes that the Taliban may send representatives to Bonn 2 appear also to have been dashed by the lack of progress in the secret talks, following the murder of peace advocate Burhanuddin Rabbani in September.

Well-informed sources say the secret talks begun earlier this year between the US and the Taliban brokered by Germany and Qatar have continued - even after Rabbani's death - but progress has been slow.

Economic fears

Despite Pakistan's absence, what the delegates must also pledge to do at Bonn 2 is grapple with the problems the Western alliance is leaving behind in Afghanistan and help the Afghans find solutions for them.

Bonn 2 will be well staffed: 90 foreign ministers will be leading more than 1,000 delegates, 34 members of Afghan civil society and 3,000 journalists.

It begins on 3 December with Afghan civil society representatives meeting their German counterparts, followed the next day with Afghan-to-Afghan political meetings and a meeting of the contact group. It ends with all delegates drawing up the Bonn 2 declaration of intentions.

The 90 nations will no doubt give a rhetorical endorsement to continued economic aid, training for the Afghan armed forces and help in governance after 2014, although many Afghan officials question whether economic aid will flow in reality given the worsening recession in the US and Europe.

However, there are several problems which the international community is ignoring at its peril. First is the danger of an economic collapse in Afghanistan after Western forces leave.

Tens of thousands of young Afghans who work at Western military bases and embassies will be rendered jobless - the very generation that the West has nurtured over the past decade.

Of the \$17bn (£10.9) Afghan budget, 90% is foreign funded, while \$5-6bn (£3-4bn) is needed to maintain the newly-trained Afghan army. Future funding for all this is promised by the West but no concrete steps have been taken to guarantee the money and reassure the Afghans.

The Afghan economy cannot sustain its population at present let alone the infrastructure the West has built.

Tricky neighbours

Secondly, the internal problems faced by Afghans multiply. They include increased ethnic tensions between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns (which are described by some Afghans as deteriorating rapidly), the reluctance of many non-Pashtuns to accept reconciliation with the Taliban, the continued uncertainty about the reconciliation process and the future of the Afghan constitution.

2014 is also when the next presidential elections are due. Although Hamid Karzai cannot stand for another term and the field will be open to all comers, there are growing demands that the constitution be re-examined and changed from a presidential form of government to a parliamentary system.

There are demands that the highly centralised powers of the central government be devolved to the provinces and decentralisation and devolution take place.

Moreover, if peace talks with the Taliban bring about a ceasefire and then there are substantial power-sharing negotiations between the government and the Taliban, it is likely that the Taliban will also want to reopen the constitution and demand changes to it.

All sections of Afghan society are demanding political changes within the next 24 months, but neither the Afghan government nor the international community are prepared for this. Any such changes must be carried out peacefully through debate and not force of arms.

Thirdly, there is the regional problem, the role of the neighbouring states and the continued interference by some of them including Pakistan, Iran and India.

Last month's Istanbul conference was supposed to ease regional tensions. In fact it worsened them by exposing how deep the divisions are between countries.

An enormous amount is at stake in Afghanistan and a great deal needs to be done before Western forces leave. Bonn must take a deep look at all these problems and come up with some answers.

Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.