

After Saddam, Is The Capture Of Osama Bin Laden Now Possible

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News of the capture of Saddam Hussein flashed like lightning through 500 Afghans and Western diplomats gathered for the Constitutional Loya Jirga in Kabul. Talk soon turned to whether the days of liberty for fugitive Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar may now be numbered, but most Afghans doubt that either man will be caught soon. Both fugitives have been on the run since the Taliban were defeated in December 2001. The Pashtun tribal belt along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border where they are believed to be hiding is virulently anti-American and largely pro-Taliban. Bin Laden and Omar are believed to be constantly on the move. United States officials in Kabul admit that the good intelligence leading to Hussein's capture is scarce in the dangerous Pashtun belt. Western diplomats say that U.S. intelligence resources - including both intelligence sources and satellite surveillance -- were moved to Iraq. Early this month, U.S. forces launched a major offensive in seven Afghan provinces along the border to prevent Taliban attacks during the Loya Jirga. U.S. officials say they are planning to tighten their grip by establishing six Provincial Reconstruction Teams along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border by March 2004. These smallish teams of military and civil affairs officials will provide security for aid agencies and help in reconstruction efforts. They will also be expected to dramatically improve intelligence gathering. Winning hearts and minds among the Pashtuns has been a low priority for the U.S.; now it is near the top of the American agenda - especially with two key fugitives still on the loose.