

## A Murderous Attack On Chinese Workers Shows That The Country Is Far From Stable

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

The killing of 11 Chinese construction workers near Kunduz in northern Afghanistan on June 9 was unprecedented even for conflict-ridden Afghanistan. Kunduz was considered the safest region of the country: The Taliban, Al Qaeda and their allies hadn't penetrated so far north in two years of intermittent guerrilla warfare with United States and Afghan government forces. So when police arrested at least 10 suspects linked to a Taliban supporter in connection with the killings, it was hard not to see it as a significant deterioration in the country's stability.

The workers were killed as President Hamid Karzai was in the U.S. to highlight Afghanistan's planned elections in September and bolster President George W. Bush's chances in the November U.S. election. The point was to demonstrate that even if Iraq still looked dicey, at least Afghanistan was showing progress. Said Bush after meeting with Karzai on June 15: "Afghanistan is no longer a terrorist factory sending thousands of killers into the world."

But what about inside the country? The Taliban have stepped up their attacks on aid workers, killing five officials, including three Europeans belonging to a French aid agency, in Badghis province in northwest Afghanistan on June 2. Meanwhile, some 2,000 U.S. Marines have been battling up to 800 Taliban in three provinces in southern Afghanistan: Kandahar, Zabul and Helmand.

### Calculated disruption

The Taliban say they will do everything they can to disrupt the September elections, and they may be succeeding. They have launched up to five attacks a day across the country in recent weeks. Over 450 Afghan and foreign aid workers, Afghan policemen, soldiers and civilians have been killed since January. "The lack of security for the elections is just one of many concerns," says Francesc Vendrell, the European Union's special representative in Kabul.

In this mayhem, the toughest task belongs to Reginald Austin, who heads a United Nations-Afghan team that is trying to register voters for September. So far, says Austin, 3.4 million Afghans out of an estimated 9 million have registered, but the lack of security in the south makes it unsafe for UN voter-registration teams to operate outside the major cities.

Western donors have so far not provided any of the \$70 million that has been pledged for the elections, out of a total cost of \$101 million. "Not one penny is in the bank," said UN spokesman Manoel de Almeida e Silva in Kabul in mid-June.

The September elections are expected to elect acting-President Hamid Karzai. A controversial election law, opposed by many Afghan leaders as being too restrictive to would-be candidates and political parties, has been issued and a dozen political parties have successfully registered to contest the elections. Eight candidates including one woman have so far said they will stand against Karzai, though none of them are given much chance of winning.

Karzai's pleas in the U.S. centred on persuading Nato to live up to its August 2003 promise to provide more peacekeeping troops for the elections. Critics say that Nato, which took control of the 6,500-strong International Security Assistance Force in Kabul last year, has failed to adequately staff and equip the Kabul force and done nothing outside the city.

Nato Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told Nato ambassadors in Brussels in mid-May that the alliance was "flirting" with failure by not living up to its commitments.

Simultaneously a \$300 million UN-Japanese-Afghan government plan to disarm 60% of the 100,000 militias controlled by warlords before the elections has foundered. Some of the most powerful warlords are refusing to disband entire military units-a key UN demand-rather than just downsize them.

The same warlords are now trying to strike a deal with Karzai: They will not put up a consensus candidate against him in the elections if he leaves them alone and shares power with them after the elections.

That's the kind of deal that American envoys brokered between Karzai and the warlords in December at the loya jirga, or grand council, to get the country's new constitution ratified. Privately, U.S. officials have told the UN and Karzai to accede to the warlords' demands.

"The whole point of the elections was to break the power of the warlords and give reformists a major role in governance. That looks unlikely now," says a senior Western diplomat in Kabul. "We will see the same power arrangements after the elections as we see today."