

Britain Back On The Afghan Front Line

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Four years ago Tony Blair strode on to the tarmac of Bagram air base outside Kabul, grasped President Hamid Karzai's hand and pledged that Britain would never again abandon the Afghans, as it had in 1989 after the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

Mr Blair was the first western leader to visit Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qa'eda. Since then Britain has done more than its fair share towards ensuring it does not collapse back into chaos, providing money, troops and political guidance. Its single failure has been its inability to control the drugs trade.

In holding a conference today that will spell out a new five-year compact between Afghanistan and the international community, Mr. Blair is putting Britain on the front line yet again, when many countries may be seeking to reduce their commitment.

"At this stage in many post-conflict situations the international community is looking for an exit strategy," said Frances Vendrell, the European Union special representative to Afghanistan.

But Afghanistan was different, he said. "The international community is willing to stay engaged for five more years, while the Afghan government wants us to stay involved and help rebuild institutions, improve governance, extend disarmament and fight drugs."

The challenge will be how to put these good intentions into action. The Afghanistan Compact, as the agreement will be known, could not be more timely.

Washington will withdraw about 4,000 of its 19,000 troops from Afghanistan this spring. The responsibility of both peacekeeping and fighting the resurgent Taliban is being handed to Nato, though the alliance's main European members - Germany, France and Spain - are reluctant to take on a combat role.

Britain's announcement that it will send up to 4,000 additional troops to Afghanistan's volatile south is intended to inspire other Nato countries to come up with the troops.

Al-Qa'eda and the Taliban are better organized than ever, their coffers flush from the proceeds of trafficking in Afghan opium. In the past four months they have carried out 30 suicide bombings in urban areas.

Yet guided by the Bonn Agreement of 2001, Afghanistan has undergone a dramatic political transition with an elected parliament, a president and a constitution.

"The purpose of Bonn was to re-establish permanent government institutions; the purpose of the compact is to make them work for the Afghan people," said Barnett Rubin, of New York University, who helped draft the documents.

The compact's most significant feature will be the setting of timetables and deadlines: building a new army of 70,000 men, linking 40 per cent of villages with roads, improving education, and providing alternative crops to poppies.

Mr. Karzai's government has been angry at western donors for giving most of its funding to western aid agencies and carrying out development plans without involving Afghan ministries.

Western donors have been frustrated at the growing corruption, nepotism and drugs culture at senior levels of government in Kabul, the lack of capacity in many ministries and the failure to deal with human rights abuses.

Mr Karzai wants donors to boost funding for reconstruction to £2.3 billion this year, to be channelled through the Afghan government. He will also be urging the international community to put more pressure on Pakistan to stop the cross-border infiltration of Taliban and suicide bombers.

Britain and the US have preferred to keep quiet about the issue in case criticism undermines the military regime. But now that Britain will have some 5,700 troops facing the brunt of Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan, Mr Blair cannot be expected to be totally silent on the issue.