

Afghan Crisis

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Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

Growing factionalism in Kabul and fighting between warring groups in outlying provinces is undermining Afghanistan's interim government and making Western countries more nervous about providing additional peacekeeping troops to stabilize the situation, according to Western diplomats and Afghan officials in Kabul and Islamabad.

The murder of Abdul Rahman, Afghanistan's minister for tourism and civil aviation, on Feb. 14 at Kabul airport was a major blow to the credibility of the two-month-old government. Fighting between rival warlords in the north and east of the country has killed or wounded scores of people. "If this continues, many countries may well decide to pack up and walk," said a senior Western diplomat in Kabul.

Aides to interim leader Hamid Karzai said his ability to rein in factionalism has faltered because the international community has failed to extend the 4,000-strong International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, to cities outside Kabul or provide cash on an urgent basis. "Karzai is unable to pay salaries of civil servants or start any meaningful reconstruction projects," one adviser said.

A U.S. official in Washington said a recent Central Intelligence Agency report concludes that, despite recent signs of increasing ethnic tension and violence in Afghanistan, civil war isn't imminent. The 10-page classified report, which was completed Feb. 4 and was reported by the New York Times, says there are "seeds of possible internal chaos," the official said. It mentions conflict between ethnic Uzbek and Tajiks in northern Afghanistan and in areas of the south, where Pashtun tribes are still contending for power, the official said.

President Bush has rebuffed the pleas of Mr. Karzai for U.S. participation in an enlarged force, saying that involving U.S. troops in peacekeeping would distract the military from its focus on the war.

American officials say that the limited mandate set by the United Nations Security Council means that expanding the size of the peacekeeping force wouldn't help control feuding regional warlords or keep roads safe from bandits.

Mr. Bush instead said the U.S. would help set up a new Afghan army and police force. On Monday, Maj. Gen. Charles Campbell, chief of staff of the U.S. Central Command, arrived in Kabul with a team of 15 experts to study how to train and equip a new Afghan military.

"A lot of the discussions will be about the size and structure of the Afghan forces and how to equip them," said a U.S. defense official. "They have decades of experience, so you don't have to teach them how to fight. You have to teach them how to get organized and do command and control."

Until last month President Bush had said the U.S. wouldn't be involved in training a new Afghan army, but he changed his mind at the urging of Mr. Karzai, who met with him and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the White House on Jan. 28.

The increasing violence and uncertainty is being fueled by the start of the political process mapped out in Bonn in December, when the United Nations brokered the deal that led to the installation of the interim government and a political road map for the next two years. Next month former King Zahir Shah will return to Kabul from his exile in Rome to help convene the Loya Jirga, or grand tribal council, in June. The Loya Jirga, which will include hundreds of participants from all parts of the country, will set up a constitution-making commission and create a transitional government for the next two years.

Mr. Rahman, the aviation minister, was stabbed to death in full view of ISAF troops and hundreds of Afghans waiting to travel to Saudi Arabia for the hajj. He was allegedly killed by intelligence officials belonging to the Jamiat-e-Islami faction of the Northern Alliance, which controls the ministries of defense, interior and foreign affairs in the interim government and has the largest army in the country. Mr. Karzai and the Jamiat Defense Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim<NO1> ordered the arrest of five officials in Kabul and asked Saudi Arabia to extradite three more who had fled there on the night of the murder, ostensibly to perform the hajj. Gen. Fahim offered his resignation, but Mr Karzai refused to accept it, according to Afghan officials.

Mr. Rahman was a supporter of the king and was preparing the ground for his return. Since Mr. Rahman's murder, cabinet ministers loyal to Zahir Shah have demanded that their Jamiat bodyguards be replaced by ISAF soldiers. Neither Zahir Shah's supporters nor Mr. Karzai have an army at their disposal, and Mr. Karzai has been unable to win support from his natural constituency-the Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan-because U.S. forces are still bombing and combing the south for remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Afghan officials and aid workers in Kabul say some hard-line Jamiat leaders are loath to give up their power in June, when it is hoped the Loya Jirga will set up a more broad-based and multiethnic government than the interim one. "People are positioning themselves for the uncertain future," said an Afghan aid official in Kabul.

The Jamiat is also determined to hold on to control of the army, even though it supports the idea of a new national army. In early February Gen. Fahim canceled an invitation to London, which had offered its support to build a new army. Instead Gen. Fahim visited Moscow last week, touring Russian military bases and meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Diplomats say Gen. Fahim discussed Russian help in building a new army-a move that went beyond his brief from the cabinet, annoying Mr. Karzai.

"Instead of going to London, Gen. Fahim went to Moscow, and that annoyed the international community," said a Western diplomat in Islamabad. Before Sept. 11, Russia and Iran were the only two countries that armed the Jamiat in its six-year war against the Taliban. "Russia has a great deal of influence with the Jamiat, and the Jamiat also has obligations to Russia which it cannot ignore," says the diplomat. The speedy arrival of Maj. Gen. Campbell's mission is seen by many Afghans in Kabul as a U.S. move to forestall a greater Russian military presence in the capital. Meanwhile, Gen. Fahim has talked of an army of 250,000 men, but that number has been rejected by ISAF, the U.S. and the U.N., because the Afghan government won't have the money to sustain such a large force. Maj. Gen. Campbell has said that an army of 50,000 to 60,000 troops "might be appropriate."

Outside Kabul, a political vacuum has emboldened warlords to chart out their own agendas.

In the north, the Jamiat commander Gen. Mohammed Atta, who has recently been rearmed by Russia, is trying to reduce the influence of his main rival, Uzbek warlord Gen. Rashid Dostum, who is backed by Turkey. Their rivalry has led to fighting in towns outside Mazar-e-Sharif and a halt to humanitarian aid deliveries. In the west, meanwhile, Gen. Ismail Khan has received Iranian military support.

The warlords are enlisting more and more men in order to increase their power base before the convening of the Loya Jirga. Gens. Gul Agha in Kandahar and Hazarat Ali in Jalalabad have more than 15,000 troops each. Both have been armed and funded by the U.S. military because they are helping U.S. special forces search for al Qaeda and Taliban soldiers. The contradiction in U.S. policy of supporting individual warlords while seeking to help build a national army will likely have to be addressed by Maj. Gen. Campbell.