

A Difficult War

The war has entered a new and complex chapter with the execution of a prominent opposition leader, an unyielding Taliban and a UN that wants to solve problems its own way

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By Ahmed Rashid/Peshawar and Islamabad

In the vast global panorama of the United States-led fight against terrorism-the shaky alliances that are holding the U.S. military campaign in place, the bombing of Afghanistan, the human suffering and anthrax scares-the capture and execution by the Taliban of commander Abdul Haq was just a blip on the horizon.

Haq had gone into Afghanistan on October 21 to try to mobilize Pashtun tribesmen to rebel against the Taliban. He was arrested and shot by the Taliban on October 26. "It was the will of God. The whole of Afghanistan is in mourning," says Haq's brother, Din Mohammed, whose 22-year-old son Izatullah was also captured and possibly executed with Haq. "I have other sons who can take Izatullah's place, but my brother was a national leader who was known across the country and the world," he added.

Haq's death was a major blow to attempts by exiled former King Zahir Shah to stir a Pashtun uprising in the Taliban heartland of southern Afghanistan and to form a new broad-based government in Kabul.

Helping in the formation of such a government is also the objective of the United Nations secretary-general's special representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi. The former Algerian foreign minister significantly made Islamabad his first stop on October 28 in an itinerary that will take him to Iran and the Gulf states to discuss the possible shape of a new government in Kabul.

A few days after the U.S.-led bombing campaign started on October 7, American and British leaders were in "a panic," according to U.S. officials in Washington, that the Taliban might fall quickly and there would be a vacuum in Kabul. President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair asked Brahimi to get moving and put together a peacekeeping force for Kabul even as the war continued. Brahimi, the UN's most senior negotiator, a veteran Afghanistan mediator and author of an important UN report on peacekeeping, could not comply.

As a senior UN diplomat in New York puts it, "The UN cannot get involved while the war is on. The Americans never consulted us before they started bombing-now they should finish their business and then we will see what we can do."

In fact, for the U.S.-led alliance, the war is going badly. After weeks of bombing, the Taliban are holding strong. Their front lines have not crumbled as anticipated by Washington, no major Afghan city has fallen to the anti-Taliban United Front and there have been no Taliban defectors, despite efforts by Pakistan to lure them out.

Taliban morale has strengthened and they have been able to muster more recruits to fight, even though many are conscripts rather than volunteers.

In the meantime the anti-war crusade by Islamic parties and peace groups around the world is picking up momentum, as nightly images of civilian casualties from U.S. bombing raids fill TV screens.

Pakistan, which has provided four air bases to the Americans, is feeling especially vulnerable. By mid-October it seemed that anti-government demonstrations by Islamic parties attacking President Pervaiz Musharraf's support of the U.S. campaign had decreased. But now the relentless bombing has intensified the opposition to Musharraf.

There is a tense stand-off on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where some 10,000 Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen are waiting to cross over and fight for the Taliban. In northern Pakistan, militants have seized a small airport and blocked a strategic road that links China with Pakistan through the Karakoram mountains. On October 28 a massive demonstration by the Jamaat-e-Islami party in Lahore, the capital of the previously peaceful Punjab

province, shook the country's military rulers. Qazi Hussain Ahmad, chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamic political party, urged the army to topple Musharraf and threatened a massive march on Islamabad and a sit-in there until Musharraf is removed.

The failure of the bombing campaign and the growing disquiet of Pakistan's top generals prompted an urgent visit to Islamabad on October 29 by Gen.

Tommy Franks, head of the U.S. Central Command, which is directing the U.S. campaign against the Taliban. "We are not in the loop of what the Americans are trying to do and we are worried about the increasing civilian casualties in Afghanistan, which is increasing the political fallout in Pakistan," says an angry Pakistani official.

In private, U.S. officials retort that Islamabad has failed to deliver "moderate" Taliban defectors and food and fuel supplies to the Taliban continue to be smuggled into Afghanistan by their sympathizers in Pakistan. "The Taliban are stocking up for the winter and they have easy access to everything in Pakistan due to the porous border and the help they receive from Pakistani supporters," says the Afghan head of an Afghan non-governmental relief agency in Peshawar. The United Nations arrives Enter Brahimi. In behind-the-scenes discussions in Washington and London, the UN is being asked to help the war effort by putting together either a multinational peacekeeping force or one led by Muslim countries that could secure Kabul. The UN has refused, saying it cannot and will not play a role until the capital is secure and the Taliban have been removed. Talk of a Muslim-led force under the UN umbrella has temporarily ceased after the most likely candidates-Turkey, Jordan and Morocco-indicated their refusal until Kabul is secured.

So instead Brahimi is first tackling the perennial problem of rivalry among Afghanistan's neighbours, something that has stymied the UN's attempts to end the Afghan civil war for the past decade (see interview on page 15). "Unless there is first agreement between Pakistan and Iran on the shape of the future government in Kabul, both have the power and influence to act as spoilers," says a Western diplomat in Islamabad.

In fact, the U.S.-led coalition of countries in the region is already a victim of growing rifts. Pakistan is trying to create a bloc of Taliban defectors to ensure that the pro-Pakistani Pashtuns in the south remain dominant in any future government. Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising 38% - 45% of the population of 25 million. Pashtuns also form some 20% of Pakistan's population of 140 million. Pakistan is also vehemently opposed to a major political role for the United Front, also known as the Northern Alliance, which is made up of Afghanistan's ethnic minorities. "The United Front has neither the political capacity nor the military capacity to govern Afghanistan," Musharraf told Pakistan television on October 23.

Musharraf's tough stance has angered Russia, Iran, India and the Central Asian republics, which have stepped up military and political support for the United Front and refuse to accept the Taliban in any future government.

Iran, the Review has learned, has demanded that 30% of government seats go to the United Front. "We don't see any place for the Taliban, but we see all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan in the new coalition government," Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi told reporters in Dushanbe on October 19.

India, which is also arming the United Front and is providing refueling facilities for U.S. aircraft, has told Washington that it is ready to pledge \$100 million for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and wants in return to have a major role in influencing any post-Taliban government-a demand that has infuriated Islamabad.

Russia is playing hardest to get. In a provocative move on October 22 in Dushanbe, President Vladimir Putin signed an arms-supply and cooperation agreement with Burhanuddin Rabbani, the United Front leader whose only claim to fame is that the UN still recognizes him as the country's president.

Brahimi says his first task is to try to iron out these differences-a tough call because it was precisely these regional differences that forced Brahimi to resign from the same role as UN mediator for Afghanistan in 1999. The irony of course is that this regional power play is taking place even before the U.S. is anywhere near to defeating the Taliban. And if the U.S. does succeed in driving the Taliban out of Kabul, these rivalries will only increase.

BRAHIMI INTERVIEW

Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations special envoy for Afghanistan, spoke with the Review's Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad about the UN's three agendas. Excerpts from his comments:

The events of September 11 and what has happened since have made people understand that even a small, distant and far-away country like Afghanistan cannot be left to break up into anarchy and chaos without consequences for the whole world. People now realize that globalization is not only for the multinationals and the circulation of money. Globalization is also playing a role in helping drug trafficking and terrorism, which now circulate in a global network. Afghanistan deserves to be helped out of its civil war and misery. This is where lies the hope that the time may have come for the problems here to be resolved.

We are working on three levels or agendas. The first is the humanitarian. Several million people inside and outside Afghanistan are destitute and desperately in need of help. In spite of all the difficulties the UN agencies are doing the best job possible to provide shelter, food and medicine. There is a story which is not being told strongly enough of the Afghan employees of the UN inside the country who are saving hundreds of thousands of lives every day by their bravery and nobody talks of them. We call them up and say, "Stay at home if the situation in your town is becoming too dangerous," but they are always at work.

Second is the political agenda. For the past 10 years the UN has been trying to help the Afghans end their wars against one another, but we have been unsuccessful. Let's not go into why that has happened. However, it does seem now that the international community, more importantly the powers that have influence and even more importantly Afghanistan's neighbours, realize that it is high time that they work together and not against one another. It also seems that the Afghans themselves want to avail themselves of this opportunity and all recognize that the UN is uniquely qualified to help bring them together.

The third point is that for some time the UN has been talking about helping in the reconstruction of the country, but there has never been any real commitment by the international community to provide resources for that. Now that commitment is openly proclaimed by important states-Japan, the EU, the U.S.A. and Saudi Arabia. There is a firm, clear commitment to provide resources and ideas to enable us to organize the Afghans towards starting the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction.