

US-British Bombing Raids Seek To Cripple, Not Rout, Taliban Forces In Kabul

Eurasia Net - 10/09/2001

By Ahmed Rashid

US and British bombing runs on the Taliban have so far not targeted Taliban armor and artillery emplacements around Kabul in order to delay an attack on the capital by the opposition Northern Alliance (NA). The early fall of Kabul to the NA could create even greater chaos, as long as there is no alternative Afghan transitional government in place.

Already, Ismail Khan, a legendary commander of NA forces in western Afghanistan, is close to capturing Chagcharan, the capital of Ghor province. This puts Khan's forces in position to take the strategic city of Herat, opening a military supply route for his forces from Iran.

In three days of strategic bombing of Taliban targets, the US and Britain have so far taken out Taliban air power, airports, communications and command centers, while special forces are reported to be combing the mountains looking for terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

However, the US has held off attacking Taliban armor and artillery positions both around Kabul and in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban have about 200 tanks and hundreds of pieces of medium and heavy artillery in both regions. Washington is calculating that once it attacks Taliban armor, killing their crews and support troops, Taliban units will quickly fragment and massive defections will start. The expected disintegration of Taliban fighting units would allow the NA to march on Kabul.

The Western alliance is reluctant to see the NA to take control in Kabul at this early stage in the campaign. The NA's premature capture of the capital could create administrative chaos and a vast exodus of refugees from the city. The NA is divided into four main factions that loosely represent the major ethnic groups in northern Afghanistan - Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara and the Persian-speaking Heratis in the west of the country. The danger is that, as each NA faction takes a major city, they will set up separate administrations - replicating the warlordism that prevailed after the collapse of the Afghan communist regime in 1992.

A repetition of the 1992 scenario would completely alienate the majority of Pashtuns who live in the south of the country, and from whom the Taliban are drawn.

Western diplomats say that the US and Great Britain are convinced that there can be no stability in Afghanistan without a major role for Pashtun moderates.

The only legitimizing authority in Afghan politics at present is former King Zahir Shah, who on October 1 set up the 'Supreme Council for National Unity of Afghanistan' from his exile in Rome. The King is a Pashtun although his mother tongue is Persian. The Council, which includes NA representatives, is still far from becoming an organized political entity capable of taking control of Kabul and other cities - even if the NA is willing to cede control to the Council.

The Council now has to nominate its 120 members - a process that could take weeks of discussion and haggling in Rome. Only after the composition of the Council is agreed upon, can an interim government be chosen from among its members.

In the meantime, NA forces are on the move. Troops under Ismail Khan have captured the airport outside Chagcharan, the capital of Ghor province, and are now moving on the town itself. Ismail Khan claims that the civilian population is now rising against the Taliban. "The most important fact is that civilians in these provinces are rising against the Taliban, they do not want to be under Taliban rule," he told a news agency by satellite telephone three days ago.

Khan who returned from exile in Iran to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban earlier this summer, said that "to win we need more money, men and weapons and we are willing to accept help from whoever has our best interests in mind." So far he has received no help from the United States.

Major military advances by the NA and the fall of Afghan cities to the NA would also cause concern in Pakistan, which is opposed to the NA taking control of Kabul.

In his visit to Islamabad last week British Prime Minister Tony Blair emphasized that any government in Kabul could not be unfriendly to Pakistan.

The Pakistani military has been wedded to the Taliban for the past seven years and has alienated every other ethnic group and even the Pashtun elite in Afghanistan.

The NA still sees Pakistan as the enemy along with the Taliban. "If Pakistan is allowed to play a key role in shaping the future of Afghanistan, it will play a spoiler's role," says Mohammed Eshaq, the NA envoy to Washington.

At the same time, if Pakistan carves out a large role in the formation of Afghanistan's new political order, it will fuel immediate opposition from Russia, Iran and the Central Asian republics, which all support the NA, and have always detested Pakistan's fundamentalist Afghan proxies in Afghanistan. Such tensions could split the fragile military alliance in the region, built up painstakingly by the US and Britain.

One way out of this dilemma is for the US and Europe to go back to the UN Security Council and work to pass a resolution that would provide a UN mandate to help form an equitable broad based government in Kabul.

Zahir Shah has said that the UN could play a role in Afghanistan, as it did in Cambodia in the 1990s. The UN is already preparing for such an eventuality. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has appointed the highly experienced former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi as overall coordinator for the UN's humanitarian and political strategy. Yet Brahimi cannot operate until the international community, and especially Washington, gives him a mandate. "The US needs to clearly define its political strategy for Afghanistan in the next few days, otherwise their bombs will only add to the political rubble that is today's Afghanistan," says a European diplomat.

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and author of the book "Taliban: Militant Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia." A truncated version of this story appeared previously in the Los Angeles Times.