

Afghanistan

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On March 21, former King Zahir Shah will arrive in Kabul to a mammoth public welcome after nearly 30 years in exile from Afghanistan. His arrival will kick off intense politicking as tribes and ethnic groups prepare to select their representatives for the Loya Jirga, or grand tribal council, through indirect elections in June. The last genuine Loya Jirga was held in 1964.

The Loya Jirga will choose a new head of state and transitional government for two years and establish the mechanisms to write a new constitution and hold elections in 2004, after 24 years of war. However this vital political process is still fraught with dangers. United States troops and their Afghan allies are still battling the last redoubt of some Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters holed up in the snow-clad mountains south of Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. Hundreds of people have been killed in what has become the largest U.S. ground offensive of the war against terrorism. Warlordism is still rampant in several parts of the country: In the north there have been skirmishes between warlords, and a pogrom against the Pashtun minority. And there are severe ethnic strains in the cabinet of the interim government.

But Kabul today is abuzz with activity and awash with potential. The streets are full of life; there is great excitement now as 1.7 million children prepare to return to school on March 23 under a Unicef programme. Interim government leader Hamid Karzai is deluged with visitors, from ethnic tribesman to western businessmen, all trying to position themselves as the country is rebuilt.

But despite the gold-rush spirit, there is little money in Afghanistan, and little security. As the country tries to end warlordism and enters the first of several critical stages in the political process to establish a new government with a wider popular consensus, there is mounting concern among the Afghan interim government and international peacekeepers on the ground that the West is failing to address critical issues on which the success of the political process and the future stability of Afghanistan depend.

The most critical need is security: Afghans seek an expanded international security force and the funding for a new national Afghan army and police force. "The issue of security is the highest priority facing the international community and the Afghan interim government," Maj.-Gen. Sir John McColl, head of the British-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, told the REVIEW.

The ISAF has been generally well-received in Kabul. When British soldiers, patrolling the streets of Kabul stop their armoured vehicles for a moment, there is an instant traffic jam as hordes of well-wishers including women in blue burqas and laughing children crowd around them. The ISAF has been the most visible sign so far of the international community's commitment to help stabilize war-torn Afghanistan. "Naturally there have been moments of wild optimism and deep frustration, but it's a real privilege to be a part of this," McColl says.

But the 4800 troops drawn from 19 nations that make up the ISAF are limited to Kabul. The vacuum created by the lack of an international presence outside the capital is encouraging Iran and Russia to support different warlord armies. International reluctance to expand the ISAF has in turn made it difficult to disarm warlords and move towards the establishment of a national army. "It is clear that if funding is not made available for the central government to build a new army, the warlords will refuse to demobilize and disarm their men," says a Western ambassador in Kabul.

At present, the warlords see the army of interim Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim, which controls Kabul and northeastern Afghanistan, as just another ethnic faction. Fahim, the successor to the anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmad Shah Masud, commands a largely Tajik army, which helped the U.S. defeat the Taliban, but which warlords from other ethnic groups deeply resent.

Masud hailed from the Panjshir valley north of Kabul and belonged to the Jamiat-e-Islami party. Fahim is one of three Panjshiri leaders in the government, alongside Interior Minister Younis Qanuni and Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who now wield enormous power in Kabul. This troika has been accused by ministers from other ethnic groups of stuffing ministries, the army and the police with Panjshiris.

"If the resources are not there then Fahim will just rebuild his army as he is already doing and call it the national army, and he will be backed by Russia and Iran," says an Afghan cabinet minister. Other ministers say 30 of Fahim's 32 army divisions are led by Panjshiri commanders, and that the police hierarchy, the intelligence service and the foreign ministry are all dominated by Panjshiris. Western military officers are suspicious that Fahim's real intentions are to build a Panjshiri-led army rather than a genuine national army.

Fahim strongly denies the charge. Under pressure from the ISAF and the U.S., on March 5 Fahim called all the warlords and commanders to Kabul to discuss the new national army, and the disarming and demobilization of factions. "We give assurances that we will make all efforts to stop anyone who tries to push this country to renewed instability and fratricide," Fahim told the conference. "We will not allow that and deal with it quickly. I promise that there will never be chaos and war in this country again."

On the ground, there is a different reality. Fahim's commander in the north, Gen. Mohammed Atta, has been trying to regain territory and influence from Uzbek and Hazara warlords, which has led to several serious clashes. The non-Pashtun groups have launched a vicious campaign to oust the minority Pashtun population from their villages in the north, because of their alliance with the Taliban.

Other Panjshiri commanders are attempting to buy influence among Pashtuns south of Kabul, including installing as commanders in Wardak province those Pashtuns who are known for their loyalty to the Jamiat's bitter rival Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar, who was in exile in Iran, is now rumoured to be in Afghanistan.

At the March 5 meeting, Fahim urged the warlords to stow their heavy weapons in depots under their own control until the Loya Jirga, and then, in a second stage after June, agree to hand them over to the Defence Ministry.

Although warlords verbally agreed, implementation is unlikely when they still feel threatened by Fahim.

Meanwhile, the warlords threatened by Fahim are lining up different alliances. Uzbek general Rashid Dostum and Pashtun warlords in the south are strongly backing the returning Zahir Shah, while Gen. Ismail Khan in western Afghanistan is backing the former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the rival of the Panjshiris within the Jamiat party.

These ethnic and inter-ethnic tensions are made worse by the fact that interim leader Hamid Karzai has been unable to build a constituency among his fellow Pashtuns. Among Pashtuns there is political anarchy and rampant warlordism-much of it fuelled by the Americans, who continue to fund warlords to hunt down Al Qaeda, and decline to pressure them to be loyal to the central government. The Pashtun warlords Hazarat Ali in Jalalabad and Gul Agha in Kandahar, who have built up armies of over 12,000 men each courtesy of U.S. largesse, are unwilling to pay court to Karzai.

The ultimate prize is political: Every group is trying to position itself to exert the maximum influence in the Loya Jirga. But many of these tensions could be reduced if the international community expands the ISAF outside Kabul and funds a new, multi-ethnic army monitored by the ISAF and the UN.

Only such firm international action would place the necessary pressure on Fahim and the warlords to behave. But with limited funding and support, the ISAF is already facing increasing demands due to poor security outside Kabul. Royalists are demanding that the ISAF protect Zahir Shah when he returns to Kabul and travels to Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif in April, and the commission which will set rules and approve candidates for the Loya Jirga is demanding ISAF protection for its large public meetings in Kabul and elsewhere.

"Everywhere we go the people's first demand is that ISAF be deployed to other cities in preparation for the Loya Jirga," says Mohammed Ismail Qassimyar, the former supreme court chief justice who chairs the 21-member Loya Jirga Commission.

Even before the ISAF is expanded, its position in Kabul must be resolved. The UN Security Council mandate for Britain to lead the ISAF expires in mid-April. Britain has declined to renew its leadership role, while several European countries who were initially expected to take on that task have now backed out, leaving Turkey as the only lead nation. Many Afghans are nervous about Turkey taking on the leadership role, because in the past Turkey has been involved in supporting the Uzbek warlord Dostum and they fear that Turkish troops will not be as impartial as the British.

The Turks have their own concerns, which they are discussing in ongoing meetings with the U.S. and Britain, McColl says. Turkey seeks funding from Western nations, and wants continued U.S. air cover for its forces.

The expansion of the ISAF to other cities is now supported by the UN and by British, American and French generals in Kabul, but not by their governments. "It's a political decision," says a U.S. general in Kabul.

"There is a huge demand by the Afghans to expand the ISAF to other cities, but that is a matter for the international community to decide, not for a soldier," says ISAF leader McColl.

Karzai has been touring Western nations urging the world to meet this demand. Western governments have so far failed to agree to an expansion, because it could be an expensive and risky operation, and because European nations are waiting for the U.S. to take the lead while the Bush administration remains divided on the issue. The UN Special Representative to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi disagrees. "The expansion of ISAF to other places is necessary and does not require large numbers of troops, it need not be expensive and their presence is not required for long," he says.

building a national army

As for the creation of a new national Afghan army, British and U.S. forces are also leading the effort, with the spoken support of Defence Minister Fahim. British officers are training a new 600-man Afghan battalion drawn from 29 of the country's 32 provinces to act as a Presidential Guard. It will be "the central symbol of a new Afghanistan and its security structure," says McColl.

In Karzai's view, "If we want to have a strong, independent Afghanistan we need a national army." The U.S. military will begin training a brigade of 1800 men in April. "Our trainers will learn from the British experience before we begin training on April 6," says the U.S. general. Fahim says 200,000 troops are needed for a national army; western participants say no more than 50,000 are needed.

"For a country so devastated the first reconstruction project has to be in the security sector," says Brahimi. "The ISAF expects that [building a national army] will take two years, but I think it can be done in one year if resources are committed to this by the international community."

Without international funding however, once troops are trained they will have no barracks, salaries, transport or equipment. Although a January donor conference in Tokyo pledged \$4.5 billion towards reconstruction, no money was allocated for the country's security needs. "The funding for a new security architecture is not clear and needs urgent resolution as well as for the process of demobilizing soldiers and disarming them," says McColl.

U.S. diplomats are trying to get U.S. Congress to be more generous by inviting legislators to Kabul. "The poverty and devastation is much more than we ever anticipated before we came," says U.S. congressman David Hobson, who led a congressional delegation to Kabul in early March.

Congressional aides told the REVIEW that they are hopeful Congress will table a bill in May for \$250 million aid for Afghanistan for this year, in addition to the \$296 million already pledged in January. This may include \$50 million for the new Afghan army.

Western diplomats said two key U.S. officials dealing with Afghanistan, James Dobbins at the State Department and Zalmay Khalilzad at the National Security Council, are lobbying hard for the money. Western and UN diplomats in Kabul are also pushing for a mini-conference in April amongst donor countries, which would raise money for the new Afghan army and police force.

On a positive note, despite the failure of the international community on several counts and the rising ethnic tensions, no warlord or group is prepared to take on the central government or attack Kabul. With Zahir Shah set to return, the spring festival of Nauroz due to start, and the return to a sense of normalcy in the country with children going back to school, Afghans are still optimistic that the Loya Jirga will be held on time, and that it will usher in a new political relationship between the factions.