

Wretched Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

This is a moment of despair for Afghans and their country -- a country that has been at war for 22 years. Tens of thousands are fleeing Kabul and Kandahar to escape expected U.S. bombing, while the humanitarian crisis has worsened with the pullout of all international relief agencies. Senior U.S. officials need, at the very least, to make it clear to the American people and the world that America is not at war with Afghanistan and Afghans but with the terrorists who live there.

This can in fact be a moment of hope, if the United States and its allies are prepared to remain engaged in Afghanistan and the region once the military action is over. But the U.S. record on this count is not good. The United States walked away from Afghanistan in 1989, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from that country. Washington allowed two allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to run with their own proxies -- first Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who destroyed most of Kabul with rocket attacks in 1993, and then the Taliban. Iran, Russia, India, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan backed other factions, thus ensuring that the civil war, fueled so heavily by outsiders, would continue.

The United States has failed to give adequate political support to successive special representatives of the U.N. secretary general who for the past decade have been trying to make peace in that blighted land. In 1994-96, the Clinton administration supported Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's military and financial aid to the Taliban. The mood changed in Washington only after Osama bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan in 1996 and Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright were deluged with appeals from American women's organizations concerning the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women.

U.S. policy shifted slightly -- not, it appears, because Washington had evolved a strategic vision for the region or because the Taliban were giving sanctuary to Islamic extremist groups from a dozen different countries, but because the Clinton administration was facing domestic criticism from such as Jay Leno. The Clinton administration's focus was never on making peace in Afghanistan but on apprehending bin Laden -- as if that alone would resolve the problem of the international network and the 3,000 Arab fighters in Afghanistan who fight for the Taliban and have committed horrendous atrocities against Afghan civilians.

Since January the Bush administration has been promising a new Afghan policy that would not revolve around Osama bin Laden. But it was repeatedly delayed as Afghanistan again slipped off the radar screen in the White House. Meanwhile, the U.S. media continue to be marked by a lack of introspection, debate and criticism of a decade of failure in U.S. policy on Afghanistan. To be sure, credit must be given to many mid-level U.S. officials who understood this failure, but they were never able to convince their superiors that Afghanistan was important enough to care about.

The fear now is that U.S. military action could cause the region to unravel, with Pakistan and the Central Asian republics dissolving into chaos and economic meltdown, while public support increases for an Islamic fundamentalist takeover of these states. Such dangerous consequences can be averted if Washington remains engaged after the war and uses the international coalition it is now building to force the pace of a peace settlement inside Afghanistan and a new government of national unity.

The U.S.-led international alliance needs to give strong political backing to the United Nations' special representative, Francisc Vendrell, who has been trying to help the Afghans form a new government. The alliance also needs to pledge now, rather than later, a substantial sum for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. That would do much to strengthen the U.N. political efforts, strengthen the anti-Taliban Afghans who want an equitable peace settlement, demonstrate the U.S. long-term commitment to an Afghan peace and convince Afghanistan's neighbors that there will be economic benefits to them if they stop meddling.

Most important, the U.S. military campaign should not be left solely to the Pentagon. It must have a strong

political component so that as the military campaign continues, anti-Taliban Afghan groups are encouraged to form an alliance under the leadership of the Loya Jirga, or tribal council, which is being put together by former King Zahir Shah. The U.S. military can provide air cover to these Afghan forces as they mop up Taliban and bin Laden forces. There will also be thousands of defections from Taliban ranks, and it is critical that they have somewhere and someone to defect to: Afghan forces on the ground, not American troops.

But once the military campaign is over, will the Bush administration have the stamina and interest to sustain Congress and the American people's support long enough to help construct and support a new government in Kabul? Or will the United States walk away once again, leaving Afghanistan in another civil war and the neighbors back in the business of propping up proxies?

The Bush administration needs to spell out its intentions now in order to give the Afghan people some hope.

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