

Assassination, Bombing Incident In Afghanistan Pose Severe Political Challenge For Karzai's Leadership

Eurasia Net 07/08/2002

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President Hamid Karzai is confronting his biggest political challenge since assuming the leadership of Afghanistan's government in trying to retain the support of a restive Pashtun population. Two recent incidents - the assassination of Vice President Haji Abdul Qadir and the deaths of 48 civilians in the bombing of several Pashtun villages in the south by US aircraft - have undermined central-government efforts to extend its authority. The incidents have also strained the Karzai government's close relationship with the United States.

Qadir was gunned down outside his office in Kabul on July 6, was the leading Pashtun member of the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, which supported the US-led war against the Taliban. His driver and bodyguard were also killed, as the four gunmen escaped in a taxi. His death came just five days after 48 civilians were killed and 117 wounded in the July 1 bombing of four villages close to Deh Rawud in the mountainous southern province of Uruzgan.

The bombing in particular left Karzai and other Afghan government members feeling frustrated that US actions were hampering their struggle to extend central authority across the entire country.

"The surprising thing is that in all four incidents - this one and three earlier [bombing] incidents - the civilians being targeted [by the Americans] are my own people and my strongest allies and in the forefront in the war against the Taliban," Karzai said by telephone from Kabul. "We are not happy, we don't want any more Afghan civilian casualties," he added. Karzai's comments contradicted Washington's claims that those killed belonged to al Qaeda and were firing on US aircraft.

Other senior Afghan officials said they were angry that it took five days before President George Bush telephoned Karzai to offer condolences. They also were miffed that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had expressed no remorse or apology for the casualties. In a July 5 telephone conversation, Bush told Karzai about the "tragedy of the situation," but, as a senior Afghan adviser to Karzai pointed out, the US president stopped short of apologizing for the bombing. "The Americans should treat us with some respect," the adviser said.

US military officials have promised a formal probe into the bombing incident. However, US authorities insisted that US aircraft had been fired upon by anti-aircraft batteries manned by suspected members of the Taliban and al Qaeda. A US investigative team in Uruzgan could not confirm that assertion. Local villagers said they were firing in the air to celebrate a wedding - an Afghan custom.

Karzai has said that the war against terrorism would continue, but he added that changes would have to be made in his government's relationship with the United States. "I have asked that from now onwards everything should be closely coordinated between the Americans and the central authority of Afghanistan to make sure no such mishaps happen again," Karzai said.

Qadir served as a bridge-builder between the Pashtuns - the country's largest ethnic group - and Tajiks of the Northern Alliance who hold key positions in government and the military in Kabul. Qadir's death is a major blow to attempts by Karzai, who is himself a Pashtun, to heal Afghanistan's ethnic divide.

Adding to Karzai's woes is that there appears to be a dearth of Pashtuns who could fill the void created by Qadir's violent death. Karzai had hoped Qadir would help him persuade Pashtun warlords in eastern Afghanistan to accept government posts in Kabul, thereby enabling the central government to slowly extend its writ across the country. Qadir's death means that Pashtun warlords are far less likely to leave their fiefdoms and move to Kabul.

There are also fears that a power struggle could develop in Jalalabad and other eastern areas among those

warlords wanting to replace Qadir. Such infighting could seriously damage US attempts to eliminate the remnants of al Qaeda. Nangahar province and its capital Jalalabad, where Qadir served as governor, has become the main gateway for al Qaeda militants seeking to escape to Pakistan. The US military and the CIA have armed and financed several warlords in the province, who may now use their US supplied weapons to fight each other.

Meanwhile, criticism of the Bush Administration strategy in Afghanistan appears to be mounting, especially in European countries. Some critics complain that Washington lacks a political and economic strategy to deal with the new post-Loya Jirga Afghanistan. The critics believe greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening Afghanistan's central government, rather than focusing on the elimination of al Qaeda. At a high level conference in the Spanish city of Cordoba in early July, several European envoys criticized the US for bungling last month's Loya Jirga. They also complained about US moves to strengthen Afghan warlords by arming and financing them.

Several European participants favored the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force, now based in Kabul, to the rest of the country - although they admitted that many countries including the US were opposed to it. One of the conclusions drawn at the Cordoba meeting was a need to promote "alternative international security mechanisms to ensure that the objectives of the peace process are achieved."

Conference participants also discussed the lack of reconstruction funds for Afghanistan - an issue that has frustrated Karzai in recent months. "I called the major donors and ambassadors [on Friday] and told them in very clear words, my priority is rebuilding the infrastructure and in particular the highway network," Karzai said. "We don't want piecemeal money and piecemeal reconstruction, it should be real money for road building because that means employment, it creates a lifeline, links the country and is very visible."

At the Cordoba conference, donors said that out of US \$1.8 billion pledged to Afghanistan in 2002, more than \$1 billion had already gone to humanitarian relief and quick-impact projects, leaving very little money available this year for reconstruction. Even if more aid were available, however, one European delegate said that until the United States "developed a more comprehensive political strategy, aid can only have a temporary effect."