Afghanistan - Old Rivals, Old Tunes

Murders and a bit of mayhem were anticipated during the peace-building process. But nobody expected a lack of international unity to destabilize the interim government in Kabul so quickly

Far Eastern Economic Review -20/02/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

In the first weeks of February, Abdul Rahman, 49, the jovial Afghan minister for tourism and civil aviation, had been joking with reporters about how quickly he intended to turn Kabul back into a tourist destination-just as it had been for hippies in the 1960s. Instead, on the evening of February 14 on the tarmac of Kabul airport, Rahman became the first high-level victim of Afghanistan's lethal internecine conflict since the interim government was installed in power in December.

Rahman was stabbed to death by intelligence officials of the Jamiat-e-Islami faction of the Northern Alliance-who also happened to be officials of the interim government. Rahman had been a leading member of Jamiat before 1996, when he left after differences with its former leader, Ahmad Shah Masud.

Some of the killers were camouflaged within a group of 800 Afghan pilgrims travelling to Mecca for the haj, who were castigating Rahman on the tarmac for long delays in their flights.

The interim government, headed by Hamid Karzai, was immediately plunged into crisis. Many Afghans feared the start of multiple conspiracies and assassinations, and that Rahman's murder could split the cabinet. "This is Karzai's biggest test so far," says a Western diplomat in Kabul. "It is the general climate of impunity that is fuelling this violence. People still believe they can get away with anything."

The government-a shaky coalition of rival factions just barely united by their opposition to the Taliban-was a gamble that depended on international support to take shape and now depends on that support to succeed. By failing to give adequate support, Karzai and other Afghans believe, the international community has played its part in the erosion of the government's authority.

Since December, the international community has refused to deploy more international peacekeepers and failed to provide desperately needed cash from the $4.5 billion reconstruction fund pledged in Tokyo in January-a bureaucratic failure in what is essentially an emergency situation.

Karzai has been campaigning for support, saying he has no means of pressure yet-be it a national army that answers to him, or the cash to get the country running-to keep rivals in line.

Rahman was an ardent supporter of former King Zahir Shah and was preparing the ground for the king's return to Kabul from exile in Rome in March. "The murder was clearly intended to warn off Zahir Shah and even other expatriate Afghans from returning home," says a senior Afghan official in Kabul. An aide to the former king, Zalmai Rassoul, has been appointed to replace Rahman.

A number of people have been arrested in Kabul but the three principal suspects, all belonging to the Jamiat faction, fled to Saudi Arabia. Karzai has demanded their extradition.

Karzai admitted to reporters on February 15 that Rahman "was killed by people who planned it and . . . some of those people were working for the Afghan security forces." He tried to downplay the murder saying it was a conspiracy carried out "for personal reasons." But the sense of fear and mistrust was palpable. In two raucous cabinet meetings, ministers loyal to Zahir Shah demanded that their Jamiat bodyguards be replaced by international peacekeepers.

The Jamiat, the most powerful faction in the interim government, controlling the ministries of defence, foreign affairs and internal security, was quick to denounce the murder and order the arrests of its own security officials.

The three absconding perpetrators were all Panjshiri Tajiks, the key Tajik clan that dominates the Jamiat under the command of Panjshiri Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim.

Sources in Kabul told the Review that on February 16, Fahim offered his resignation to Karzai, who refused to accept it. Karzai has appointed two cabinet ministers to investigate the murder-one of them allied with Zahir Shah-though some cabinet ministers fear that if the investigation implicates Fahim, the crisis between the Northern Alliance ministers and others, such as Karzai and the monarchist supporters of Zahir Shah, could worsen.

Karzai's high-wire act on the international stage-where he has received accolades from everyone from United States and European leaders to American fashion designers-has faltered at home. This is not due to lack of trying, but because of a lack of international support where it is needed. In recent weeks Karzai has toured world capitals trying to galvanize support for extending the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, to Afghanistan's four other major cities: Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad. His appeals have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Afghans argue that if the ISAF were more plentiful and assertive, the assassins may not have been emboldened enough to kill Rahman. The British-led ISAF, which has now deployed some 3,200 troops from 15 different countries in Kabul, has stabilized the capital, allowing embassies and aid agencies to open. But outside Kabul warlordism and banditry is widespread and aid agencies are unable to deliver relief to wide swathes of the country. In northern Afghanistan, over the weekend following Rahman's murder, factional fighting between followers of Deputy Defence Minister Gen. Rashid Dostum and a faction loyal to Defence Minister Fahim and the Jamiat-e-Islami left five people dead.

Karzai's argument is that a troop presence in other cities would allow for the distribution of aid, allow people to begin growing crops again, and allow for the same mixture of incentives and pressure to disarm that moved most Northern Alliance soldiers out of Kabul and stabilized the capital in January. While it would increase the spoils for warlords, it would also raise public pressure for them to get in line.

"The alternative," says an Afghan aide to Karzai, "is the unravelling of the interim government in Kabul." The current goal is to make sure members of the interim government are committed to beginning the process of reconstruction and holding the country together at least until June, when the current government's mandate ends and a loya jirga, or supreme council, meets to assemble a new transitional government.

foreign states exert influence

The lack of ISAF detachments in other cities is also encouraging neighbouring states to try to exert their influence by arming and funding local warlords. In recent weeks, Iran has provided money and weapons to warlords in and around the western city of Herat, while Russia is doing the same in northern Afghanistan. The U.S. continues to support its own local allies as well, in southern Afghanistan.

Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy to Afghanistan, has also tried unsuccessfully to lobby the UN Security Council and the U.S. to put their weight behind an extended security force. The Americans, say Western diplomats, are reluctant to get involved as long as their military campaign in southern and eastern Afghanistan to capture terrorism suspect Osama bin Laden continues. "It's very difficult to have a major peace operation in Afghanistan without the Americans involved," Brahimi told reporters in Washington on February 10.

Four days later UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan met with U.S. President George W. Bush to plead the case for the ISAF's extension-but he too came away empty-handed.

Even Kabul's international security force is in jeopardy. Britain has said that it will give up its lead role by the end of April and no country has stepped forward yet to take over. There are several reasons why no European country is stepping forward to lead the ISAF and galvanize the 25,000-30,000 troops that would be needed to set up detachments in other cities, according to a European diplomat in Kabul. "There is growing concern that any ISAF force outside Kabul may get involved in a shooting war with the warlords, countries are not prepared to foot the heavy bills and everyone is looking to the Americans for a lead," he says. Any extended force would also need a new UN Security Council mandate, and there is no sign of one at present.

Equally disturbing has been the lack of funds. Little of the $4.5 billion pledged in Tokyo, of which $1.8 billion was committed for 2002, has reached Kabul. The UN and the government are still strapped for cash. In New York, Brahimi has been struggling to put together a $20 million budget in order to keep his office running. The government owes five months' salary to Afghan civil servants.

Although Tokyo was successful as a pledging conference, it failed to set up an appropriate mechanism to speed up delivery of cash, and failed to create a mechanism to put funds to use, as many donor countries wanted to operate independently. This has left the UN and the government without control over what they consider economic priorities.

"Unless the interim government can show economic results on the ground it will lose out on both its authority and its popularity," says a senior UN official in Kabul.

Under such conditions it is not surprising that warlords remain emboldened in charting out their own agendas. In early February, Defence Minister Fahim went to Moscow and-without consulting the cabinet-signed a deal for the Russians to help rebuild the new Afghan army. Karzai, after an angry reaction to the deal from the Americans and the British, turned around and told Moscow the deal was not valid. The U.S. response: sending Maj.-Gen. Charles Campbell to Kabul to help build a national army-though Bush had said earlier that the U.S. would leave this task to others (see article below).

Nobody ever doubted that bringing peace to Afghanistan would be a long shot, or that murders and a bit of mayhem would continue to be part of the peace-building process. The Bonn agreement that established the interim government in December was clearly only going to succeed if there was an effective partnership between the international community and the government. "We cannot clap with one hand," says a senior aide to Karzai.

The real fear in the region is that the Americans have already begun to drift away from Afghanistan. If that drift becomes a stampede the Afghans will once again be left alone to deal with putting their country back together again-something that they cannot achieve alone.

Afghanistan - Why Help Is Scarce

Every country has its own agenda in Afghanistan

By Murray Hiebert

During his recent visit to Washington, Afghan leader Hamid Karzai told journalists that his government would hold American and other international security forces as "prisoners" in Afghanistan for "as long as the war on terrorism is on." Karzai, of course, was joking-the previous day United States President George W. Bush had rebuffed the interim leader's plea for U.S. participation in an enlarged multinational force.

Bush has said that involving U.S. troops in peacekeeping would distract the military from its focus on the war. American officials say that the limited mandate set by the United Nations Security Council means that expanding the size of the peacekeeping force would not help rein in feuding regional warlords or keep roads safe from bandits hampering aid deliveries. "Doing police work and military patrols isn't part of their mandate," says a Pentagon official. "Maybe there needs to be discussion [in the UN Security Council] on changing their mission."

Bush told Karzai that Washington saw its role as helping to set up and train a new Afghan army and police force. On February 18, Maj.-Gen. Charles Campbell, chief of staff of the U.S. Central Command, arrived in Kabul with a team of 15 experts to study how to train and equip a new Afghan military.

"A lot of the discussions will be about the size and structure of the Afghan forces and how to equip them," says a U.S. defence official. "They have decades of experience, so you don't have to teach them how to fight. You

have to teach them how to get organized and do command and control."

Some specialists say Washington's emphasis on military training misses the point. "You can't train a military if there are no peacekeepers controlling the warlords," says Barnett Rubin, of New York University. "Many [militia fighters] would rather do something else, but they need alternatives. They need to be sure if they put down their arms their rivals won't attack them."

Meanwhile, the aid needed to bolster Karzai's government is only trickling in, despite the $4.5 billion pledged in Tokyo in January. The pledges were mostly bilateral, which means that donors want to work directly or through non-government organizations instead of with Karzai's administration, UN officials say. Furthermore, Kabul lacks a reliable banking and accounting system-making it difficult to distribute even the funds needed to get such a system running.