

Going All The Way In Kabul

The Taliban tighten their hold on both Afghans and foreigners and launch a Summer offensive in the north; millions of people face starvation.

Far Eastern Economic Review- 14/06/2001

By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

The armed vigilantes who are the Taliban's religious police got a shock after storming into a hospital in the city of Herat in western Afghanistan on June 3. As they forcibly tried to shave the heads of doctors and male nurses as punishment for not keeping their beards long enough, a doctor was pulled away from the operating table. The unarmed staff fought back, injuring several Taliban, aid workers say. The patient who had been undergoing surgery later died.

Doctors then led a crowd of protesters to the governor's mansion where they complained of the religious police's excesses. Governor Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa reprimanded the police, leading to a tense stand-off with them. It was the first anti-Taliban demonstration of the year, and it may be followed by more-particularly if a hardline clique around Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar keeps up its harassment of United Nations and other foreign aid agencies.

To many aid workers, the Taliban appear to be intent on forcing them to leave Afghanistan, even though 1 million Afghans are homeless and millions more face starvation amid the civil war and the worst drought in 30 years.

"Ideally they want us to walk out ourselves, otherwise they will just kick us out," says the head of a foreign relief agency. Their withdrawal would leave the Taliban even more internationally isolated, endanger millions of civilians and probably trigger diplomatic repercussions against Pakistan's military regime, which supports the Taliban.

Since the Taliban destroyed two giant Buddha statues in March, a series of religious edicts and actions by the religious police have made it increasingly hard for UN relief agencies to cope with the humanitarian catastrophe. Hardliners now dominate the Taliban. "Moderate Taliban have lost out in a power struggle with a small clique of hardliners who now dominate decision making around Mullah Omar," says an Afghan tribal leader.

"They want to force out all Westerners in order to create the purest Islamic state in the world." According to some Afghans, the advisers to Omar include wanted Saudi-born terrorist Osama bin Laden, other radical Arabs and some Pakistani clerics.

Since late May, religious police have attacked three hospitals, shutting down two-including one for war-wounded Taliban in Kandahar run by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Local UN workers have been arrested in Kabul and Herat, while foreign UN staff are threatened by Arab militants. The Taliban have said an edict will soon be signed by Omar to force Afghanistan's small Hindu population to wear yellow badges on their clothes. After an international uproar, the Taliban claimed the badges were only to protect the Hindus against the religious police. Female foreign aid workers, meanwhile, have been forbidden to drive cars.

The most serious problem came on May 29, when six-month-long talks between the Taliban and the UN World Food Programme broke down with the Taliban refusing to allow the WFP to conduct a survey at 116 WFP-run bakeries, which feed nearly 300,000 people including widows and

orphans in Kabul. The Taliban barred the WFP from hiring Afghan women to conduct the survey. The WFP said it would close the bakeries on June 15 unless the Taliban backed down. The Taliban, however, have asked bin Laden and radical Islamic charities in Pakistan and elsewhere to take over the bakeries.

On May 31, the Taliban issued new forms for the 100 foreign workers in Afghanistan to sign, committing them to not breaking Taliban-imposed rules and placing themselves under the jurisdiction of Islamic law and the religious police. Aid workers would have to agree, for example, not to play music, wear "immoral" clothes, drink alcohol, interview Afghan women or photograph living things. If caught, foreigners could face punishments ranging from expulsion to stoning to death for adultery. Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil told reporters on June 1 that the UN aid agencies were being "influenced" by Jewish American women's organizations "that are against the Islamic emirate."

The UN sent the form to its legal department in New York, but it appears unlikely that UN workers can sign it without violating international principles and guarantees on their treatment. "The Taliban should come to terms with reality and start accepting that the UN are bound by certain basic principles and rules set by the international community," Erick de Mul, the UN coordinator for Afghanistan, told a news conference. He even compared Afghanistan to the Titanic, saying: "The ship is sinking and the officers on deck are reluctant to take note of danger signals."

Instead, the Taliban have launched a summer offensive against the anti-Taliban forces of the United Front led by Ahmad Shah Masud. According to de Mul, 30,000 fighters (many of them non-Afghans) are trying to capture Badakhshan province, Masud's last redoubt in the northeast. The Taliban are using aircraft, tanks and artillery to bombard Masud's forces and the civilian population, adding to the refugee crisis. However, Masud's forces, which have received fresh military supplies from Russia, Iran and India, are expected to hold the line for now.

As the Taliban cut themselves further off from much of the outside world, Western powers are pressuring Pakistan to end its support. Russia and France have presented evidence to the UN Security Council that Islamabad has broken UN sanctions against military aid for the Taliban. On June 11, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar left for London, Ottawa and Washington to explain Islamabad's position. Significantly, Sattar was accompanied by senior officers from the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, which is reputed to give covert support to the Taliban.

"Afghanistan is top of the agenda," says a European ambassador in Islamabad. "If the military regime does not roll back its support for the Taliban and bring about a change of policy, it will affect Pakistan's relations with the U.S. and the European Union across the board." Pakistan denies breaking the sanctions.

In a possible bid to appease Washington over both Afghanistan and Islamic groups fighting in Kashmir, Pakistani Chief Executive Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf on June 5 said Islamic militants were damaging Pakistan and driving away foreign investment. "The world thinks we're terrorists," he told religious scholars. Since January, Islamic parties in Pakistan have sent up to 4,000 students to fight with the Taliban, according to diplomats and Pakistani Islamic leaders. On June 9, Musharraf's government said it would launch searches for illegal weapons in refugee camps for Afghans.

But punitive measures against the Taliban have largely only strengthened the hardliners at home. In the longer term, incentives are needed—such as an international reconstruction fund. These would give Taliban moderates a stronger hand and encourage Afghans to demand peace. "A policy of more carrots and less stick could help change the political and military stalemate in Afghanistan," notes the ambassador.