

## Best Interests

The whole world, including the Taliban, wave the flag of Afghan nationalism in a bid for legitimacy

Far Eastern Economic Review- 17/10/2001

By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

North of Kabul in the Panjshir valley, leaders of the opposition United Front met for a critical all-day meeting on October 14 to map their plans for seizing the capital. Commanders were pushing for an early assault on Kabul, while the political leadership of the organization faced intense international pressure to hold them back until an alternative government to the ruling Taliban can be formed. Their decision had important long-term consequences for the United States-led military campaign in Afghanistan and its hunt for Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization.

When United Front Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah emerged to tell reporters that the group would postpone an attack on Kabul for at least one month, there was a sigh of relief as far away as Washington. That's because for the U.S., says a European ambassador in Islamabad, "The need to help the Afghans construct a multi-ethnic, broad-based government in Kabul has become as vital as the U.S. military campaign to eliminate bin Laden."

To the surprise of no one, the U.S. is looking to the United Nations to help build a new government. "Clearly the UN will be playing a major role. No one government will be able to handle it," Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters on his way to Islamabad on October 15. Richard Haass, who heads policy planning at the state department, and Geoffrey Lunstead, a seasoned diplomat and Afghanistan expert will be the U.S. point men to work with the UN.

The topic of a new government dominated Powell's visit with Pakistan's leader, President Pervaiz Musharraf, and for the first time, Powell hinted that moderate Taliban could have a role. But the Taliban, despite enduring intense international political pressure and U.S. bombing, are neither splitting apart nor defecting in the numbers that the U.S. coalition hoped they would. For that to happen, Taliban defectors will have to be assured that the continuing attempts to set up a broad coalition led by former King Zahir Shah in Rome will include prominent Pashtuns-the majority ethnic group to which most Taliban belong. The Taliban are unwilling to defect to the United Front, which is drawn from the north's ethnic minorities, whom the Taliban have brutally suppressed over the past five years.

Zahir Shah and the United Front have seats open for the Taliban on his provisional council. The former king's aides in Rome say that "moderate Taliban are welcome to join and we are talking to many of them through the king's representatives in Quetta and Peshawar." But no prominent Taliban will defect until a provisional government led by the former king is in place-a fact the U.S. belatedly recognizes.

Meanwhile, the hardline Taliban are reasserting their own claims as Afghanistan's leaders by shifting from the rhetoric of jihad to a nationalist rhetoric, calling all Afghans to defend the country against the American invaders. In an unprecedented shift, Taliban intelligence chief Qari Ahmadullah urged United Front fighters to defect. "We will forget the past problems with those people who join us because now it is the question of our religion and country," he told an Afghan news agency on October 14.

Can the UN handle the challenge? "The UN is trying to figure out what to do," says Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin of New York University. "None of the UN's previous experiences can be a model for Afghanistan. It can't be Kosovo or East Timor. They were predicated on military occupation." The UN would have to handle more than domestic pressures. "The Afghanistan challenge is not the process of reconstruction but the need to neutralize everyone who lives nearby," says Paula Newberg, a former UN adviser on Afghanistan.

The position of Pakistan, the most influential of neighbours, is already heavily compromised. It is deeply distrusted by the former king and the United Front because of its earlier support for the Taliban. That won't stop Islamabad from trying to convince Powell to back its candidate for Kabul. He is Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, a moderate religious leader who led the National Islamic Front during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. Since then, Gailani has been closely affiliated with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and for that reason is distrusted

by the United Front and Zahir Shah.

Gailani took a large delegation to meet Zahir Shah in Rome on October 14 as the former king sent his representative, Hedayat Arsala, to meet with Musharraf. "Any Afghan candidate backed by Pakistan is like the kiss of death," says a senior Western diplomat in Islamabad.

Moreover, Washington has to balance Islamabad's demands with conditions set by Iran, Russia and the Central Asian republics, which have stepped up arms supplies to their favourite-the United Front. In particular the U.S. is now heavily obliged to Uzbekistan, which is now hosting U.S. troops and attack helicopters at Khanabad air base.

Uzbekistan and Turkey back the Afghan Uzbek commander Gen. Rashid Dostum, who is part of the United Front and whose forces are close to capturing the largest city in the north, Mazar-e-Sharif. The city could form an effective bridgehead for U.S. special forces to launch attacks on possible hideouts of the Taliban and bin Laden in the south of the country. Iran backs the Shia party Hizb-e-Wahadat of the ethnic Hazara. Russia would not tolerate any government that does not give a prominent role to all United Front factions.

The need to prepare a transition has become even more pressing as winter approaches in Afghanistan, the humanitarian crisis inside the country gets worse and instability in Pakistan increases due to the prolonged war next door.

"We need massive access at the moment to the civilian population in Afghanistan and you cannot have access when there is military bombardment," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson said in Geneva on October 14. U.S. military might is now being dwarfed by other more pressing political and humanitarian problems.

*Murray Hiebert in Washington contributed to this article*