

## Afghanistan - Great Leap Backwards

The U.S. has no long-term political strategy for Afghanistan. This raises the danger that ethnic divisions and Islamic fundamentalism could again divide the country.

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By Ahmed Rashid/Washington and Kabul

As earthquakes, warlordism and coup reports continue to sweep through Afghanistan, there is mounting criticism within the Bush administration in Washington and the interim rulers in Kabul that the United States military and Central Intelligence Agency's continuing control of U.S. policy is preventing creation of a U.S. political and economic strategy that would help strengthen the interim government.

"The war in Afghanistan is over and what is left is a mopping-up operation in a few provinces, but the Department of Defence is still controlling policy," says a U.S. official in Washington involved in Afghanistan affairs. Adds Edmund McWilliams, a retired U.S. diplomat who served in Afghanistan in the 1980s: "Policymakers in Washington have failed to recognize that the key challenges are no longer simply military, but instead increasingly political."

Since the fall of the Taliban in December, U.S. military operations have taken place in only three of 32 provinces in the country. However, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld does not let a day pass without reminding journalists that the war is continuing.

Although the Al Qaeda terrorist network still poses a major international threat, its influence in Afghanistan is now small. "For 95% of the population there is no war and what people want now is greater security and reconstruction," says a senior aide to Hamid Karzai, chairman of Kabul's interim government. "But the U.S. doesn't get it."

A U.S. political strategy could strengthen the interim government through reconstruction aid and support its efforts in calling the loya jirga, the grand tribal council that is to convene in June to establish a new transitional government. The lack of such a strategy has been cause for concern in the interim government and the offices of the United Nations Special Representative for Afghanistan.

Some U.S. officials say that the fault lies in the same small group of senior officials who have run the war. This group is drawn from the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council. Secretary of State Colin Powell has not made a single statement on U.S. policy towards Afghanistan since February, while other arms of the government such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, have little or no say in setting policy direction for reconstruction.

The lack of a political strategy is having its effect on the ground. The Pentagon and CIA's support for Pashtun warlords in southern and eastern Afghanistan in order to mop up Al Qaeda members has led to the arming and financing of some 45,000 Afghan mercenaries. These "American warlords," as some officials in Kabul call them, often battle with each other, and pay scant attention to Karzai's government. Some have tricked U.S. forces into bombing their rivals rather than Al Qaeda forces. Others are overseeing harvesting of a new poppy crop, which is refined into heroin near U.S. bases around Kandahar.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and a National Security Council official, told reporters in Kabul on March 26 that there was "no contradiction" in the U.S. policy of trying to discourage warlordism by arming new warlords.

Meanwhile USAID, which has nearly \$300 million to spend this year for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, has been unable to establish a single reconstruction project from its strategic programme. It has farmed out some support through other aid organizations and small grants. But several USAID officials are reportedly in the process of resigning, disillusioned with their agency's inability to adequately contribute to reconstruction.

The U.S. has also rejected demands to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) outside Kabul. This

means there is little security for the elections to the loya jirga, which start on April 23. The Pentagon says that foreign peacekeepers would disrupt the war against terrorism.

In Kabul, many Afghan ministers are frustrated that the U.S. military has made no attempt to rein in the growing power of the Panjshiri Tajiks, who were the key U.S. ally in the war against the Taliban and run the three most powerful ministries in Kabul-Defence, Interior and Foreign Affairs.

"The Panjshiris are alienating the Pashtuns and undermining Karzai's ability to extend the writ of the government," says a minister in the interim government. "Karzai cannot rein them in as long as the Americans say nothing to them."

From April 3-5 the Panjshiris, who also run the intelligence service, arrested some 300 people, mostly Pashtuns, without informing the UN, the ISAF or the interim cabinet, saying there was a plot by Afghan extremists to destabilize the government. Although the majority were quickly freed, it has widened the rift between the Pashtuns and the Tajiks.

Washington appears partly cognizant of the problems, but its remedies are questionable. On April 3 at a meeting of 35 donor countries in Geneva the U.S. pledged to lead the effort to fund a new 60,000-strong Afghan army at a cost of \$235 million, while Germany promised to help rebuild a 70,000-strong police force. But the creation of a new army is still several years away and it is not clear who will lead it-the Panjshiris or a new, neutral and professional Afghan officer corps.

Meanwhile, the urgent need for reconstruction has prompted the CIA to fund "quick impact projects" using its Afghan mercenaries, according to officials in Washington and Kabul. Such projects bypass the interim government and UN agencies, and are likely to further strengthen the warlords and alienate the Karzai government. Western relief agencies are already highly critical of the U.S. military carrying out relief operations in uniform.

There is the danger that ethnic divisions could again split the country and Islamic extremism take root. For Rumsfeld, the war against terrorism remains a war, but for most Afghans it is now all about how to build the peace. Says McWilliams: "Failure to develop an independent political strategy and insensitivity to human rights are strongly reminiscent of the mistakes U.S. policymakers made in the 1982-92 period."