

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's lack of a nationwide peacekeeping force is allowing local warlords to jeopardize efforts to unite the country politically and deliver humanitarian supplies, according to Western diplomats and Afghan officials in Kabul and Islamabad.

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

A British-led international security force has now deployed some 3,200 troops from 15 countries in Kabul, bringing stability and enough security to the capital for diplomats and aid workers to set up offices. They have begun working with the interim government to deliver humanitarian and development assistance to the rest of the country.

But outside Kabul, warlords and bandits have become so pervasive that aid agencies are unable to deliver relief supplies to large swathes of the country. Meanwhile, the lack of any centralized military authority has opened the door for neighboring countries to arm and fund local warlords willing to promote their interests.

Increasingly, Western diplomats worry this could disrupt the political unification under way in Afghanistan. A vastly expanded peacekeeping force, with troops posted in other main cities, may be the only way to keep the country on track and humanitarian supplies in the pipeline, some say. "The key to consolidating the peace process lies in an expanded international security force," says a European ambassador in Islamabad. "And that will not be attained without a larger international force deployed in other cities." In recent weeks Hamid Karzai, chairman of an interim government in Afghanistan, has toured world capitals trying to galvanize support for extending peacekeeping operations to Afghanistan's four other major cities-Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad. He is to visit Germany and France this month with the same request.

Afghan political and tribal leaders and Afghan relief-agency officials also have been pleading for an expansion of the international security force. "The entire Afghan population wants foreign peacekeepers, and let's face it, if they don't come, Karzai cannot extend his authority or hold onto power," says a senior Afghan official working for a Western aid agency. Last week, Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations envoy to Afghanistan, appealed to the Security Council to support an expansion of the security force.

He has also asked Washington, which isn't participating in the current peacekeeping force in Kabul, to lend a hand. "It's very difficult to have a major peace operation in Afghanistan without the Americans involved," Mr. Brahimi told reporters in Washington earlier this month.

But Western diplomats in Kabul say the U.S. is occupied with its military campaign and efforts to capture Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leadership. Washington has shown little appetite for adding peacekeeping to its mission. Indeed, Kabul's own security force could be disbanded when the new transitional government takes the reins in June. Britain has vowed it will give up its lead role then. So far, no country has agreed to replace it. Germany, one potential candidate, faces an upcoming election and divisions in its cabinet about getting more involved in Afghanistan. Turkey, another candidate, doesn't have the money. Ethnic Pashtun tribes in the south of the country are also wary of the Turks, whom they see as too closely allied with the largely non-Pashtun Northern Alliance faction.

Diplomats cite several reasons no European country has stepped forward to lead the security detail, known as the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF. Some 25,000 to 30,000 troops would be needed to set up detachments in other cities. "There is growing concern that any ISAF force outside Kabul may get involved in a shooting war with the warlords.

Countries aren't prepared to foot the heavy bills, and everyone is looking to the Americans for a lead," says a European diplomat in Kabul. But Washington was reluctant to accept an ISAF force even in Kabul, fearing that would hamper its effort in the south to round up the remnants of Mr. bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network. Although ISAF's success in Kabul has changed the minds of some senior U.S. officials, others, particularly in the Pentagon, remain adamant the U.S. shouldn't get involved at least until it has mopped up al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, attempts to establish peace among warring factions are hampered by the lack of a nationwide security force. Last week in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, some 40 people were killed in armed clashes between the mainly Uzbek forces of Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Tajik forces of Gen. Ostad Atta Mohammed. Since then, the two warlords have been joined by a third, Mohammad Mohaqqueq, who heads a Hazara faction. All three have now agreed to form a 600-man joint security force for the city. They have persuaded their excess soldiers to leave Mazar, removed all tanks and heavy weapons and drawn a demarcation line around the city where arriving Afghan are disarmed.

But they have gotten no response to their requests for an ISAF contingent in Mazar to further consolidate the agreement. "Even when warlords come to an agreement among themselves, there are no international forces willing to implement the agreement," says Barnett Newman, director of New York University's Council of International Cooperation and an expert on Afghanistan.

Neighboring countries have also grown bolder in interfering and building up zones of influence inside Afghanistan. And splits in the Afghan cabinet are becoming commonplace as factions position themselves for an uncertain future. "The success of the interim government rests on an effective partnership between the international community and ourselves-we cannot clap with one hand," says an Afghan official in the interim government.