

## Fledgling Afghan Government Faces Scourge Of Warlordism --- Local Leaders Who Ousted Taliban With Aid Of U.S. Are Restoring Old Fiefs

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

In the 1980s, Washington backed anti-Soviet Afghan militias which in victory produced the factionalism that brought the Taliban to power. Now, the same forces, which with U.S. backing ousted the Taliban, are threatening to return the country to warlordism all over again.

Warlords whose armies acted as proxy U.S. ground forces in the anti-Taliban campaign are now refusing to disarm or accept the writ of the country's fledgling interim government. They are even defying the Americans, say Western diplomats. And as warlordism takes root again, Afghanistan's neighbors are doing what they have always done: pursuing their own vested interests by supporting one faction or another, in turn undermining Afghan unity.

That leaves the interim administration unable to secure law and order, extend its mandate across the country, help the United Nations deliver humanitarian aid, or begin reconstruction, which would allow millions of Afghan refugees to return home.

A good example is Gul Agha Shirzai, a notorious former warlord ousted by the Taliban in 1994. Mr. Shirzai received arms and millions of dollars from the Americans to liberate the southern city of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. But now, as governor of Kandahar province, he is defying both the Kabul government and the Americans. Last week, he freed three Taliban leaders that the U.S. had hoped to interrogate about the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. He gave them amnesty and allowed them to live in Kandahar.

In the north, Gen. Rashid Dostum, also heavily armed by the Americans, is protecting former Taliban leaders and his own commanders, who are carrying out widespread pillaging and looting, making it impossible for U.N. agencies to start humanitarian relief operations. Dostum loyalist Hawaz, who was armed and trained by U.S. Special Forces in October as backup for the U.S. bombing campaign of Mazar-e-Sharif, was killed near there on Jan. 2 while looting villagers. (Like many Afghans, Mr. Hawaz goes by one name.) Gen. Dostum has refused to discipline Commander Hawaz's men, even though interim Prime Minister Hamid Karzai appointed Gen. Dostum deputy defense minister in a bid to co-opt him.

In the east, Jalalabad Governor Haji Qadeer, funded lavishly by the U.S. to mobilize Pashtun fighters to run down al Qaeda and help stabilize the region, has done nothing to secure the important Jalalabad-Kabul highway, where bandits make it impossible for relief convoys to travel safely.

All this is complicating things for Mr. Karzai, who wants to end warlordism and establish a professional army. But he is unable to garner support even from his own ethnic Pashtuns, who instead are loyal to various Pashtun warlords. Eastern Pashtuns hit hardest by the U.S. bombing warn that the assaults are taxing their loyalty to the new government. Even Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. special envoy to Afghanistan, made an unprecedented expression of "deep concern" about the Jan. 29 bombing that killed as many as 100 civilians in Niazi Qala, a village in Pakhtia province adjoining Pakistan.

Mr. Karzai needs Pashtun support if he is to equalize the sensitive power balance within the interim government, dominated by the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance leaders who control the crucial defense, foreign-affairs and interior ministries. "Karzai needs to show a proud people that he is a genuine leader and not doing America's bidding," says Zaid Mohseni, a prominent Afghan lawyer based in Sydney, Australia, who is close to the interim government.

As warlords revive chaos, neighboring states are taking advantage of it. "Turkey and Russia are supporting

Dostum but exercising little pressure on him to cooperate with the interim government," says a Western diplomat who recently visited Kabul.

Iran has resumed its meddling, giving money, weapons and humanitarian aid to Ismail Khan and other commanders who control three western provinces. Iran is preparing to set up a radio and TV station for Gen. Khan without permission from the central government. Gen. Khan is debating whether to re-install himself as the "Emir" ruling western Afghanistan, his position before the advent of the Taliban. He is also barely bothering to hide his contempt for Mr. Karzai and the interim government, and as long as he is backed by Iran he can afford to do so.

The U.S., meanwhile, accuses Iran of giving sanctuary to escaping al Qaeda militants. On Jan. 10, President Bush warned Iran against undermining the interim regime. If the Iranians "in any way, shape or form try to destabilize the government, the coalition will deal with them, you know, in diplomatic ways, initially."

But, say Western diplomats, as long as the U.S. uses unsavory warlords to pursue its interests, Iran and other neighbors see no reason why they shouldn't do likewise. That's worrying, because their interference was one of the main reasons Afghanistan's civil war has lasted so long. "Clearly the West needs to find a more creative political strategy that can combine the hunt for bin Laden with strengthening the interim government," says a European diplomat.

Some Western diplomats say more American forces should be deployed, both to find Mr. bin Laden and forcefully disarm the warlords - something called for by the Bonn agreement that established the interim government. The Afghan public and Mr. Karzai are demanding that the international security force now deployed in Kabul be extended to other cities. But the Americans refuse to support the idea for the moment, fearing such deployments will hinder the search for Mr. bin Laden.

Outside powers may be thwarting progress in other ways, too. Many donor countries want to run unilateral aid programs, which many say serve to prop up warlords and discourage establishment of a stable government that is essential to wiping out terrorism there. Western aid workers would like to see a single reconstruction fund, monitored by the U.N., the World Bank, the antiterror coalition countries and the Afghan government.

Many hope that such issues will figure prominently in a crucial donors conference that starts in Tokyo Jan. 21. But early indications are that the international community has no clear agenda for the talks.