

## Eyes Wide Shut

The U.S. is upbeat about the Central Asian nation. Critics say it shouldn't be.

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The United States may have scaled back its military operations in Afghanistan, but continuing insecurity poses a threat to the implementation of democracy and the eradication of terrorism in the Central Asian nation.

Under an agreement reached in Bonn in December 2001, the United Nations is meant to begin the disarmament and demobilization of some 100,000 men under arms in July. The UN also hopes to launch a nationwide public consultation process on a new constitution in the same month.

But neither process can begin unless there is stability in the countryside. And that looks unlikely as the central government struggles to impose its authority over provincial warlords and as it battles remnants of the former ruling Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies. President Hamid Karzai, during a meeting in mid-May, scored a rare victory by managing to persuade 12 governors and two warlords to hand over millions of dollars in unpaid revenues to the central government. But ensuring that they comply will be a major test.

The U.S. claims that Afghanistan has turned a corner. U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently gave an upbeat assessment about the security situation. "We're at the point where we have clearly moved from major combat activities to a period of stability and stabilization activities," Rumsfeld told a news conference during a flying visit to Kabul on May 2.

But many people in Afghanistan, including aides to Karzai, European diplomats, aid workers and even some senior U.S. officials, believe that while large-scale fighting may be over, the situation is less rosy than the U.S. makes out. United Nations Special Representative to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi, addressing the UN Security Council just four days after Rumsfeld's Kabul visit, said: "The issue of security casts a long shadow over the whole peace process and, indeed, over the whole future of Afghanistan." He appealed once again for the deployment of international troops outside Kabul. The 5,500 strong International Security Assistance Force has no mandate to deploy beyond the capital.

The U.S. position is seen by many as dangerous. "U.S. strategy for stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan is falling apart, and unless Washington carries out a major policy review, the country may rapidly return to the state of anarchy which gave rise to the Taliban and allowed Al Qaeda to take over the country," says a European envoy in Kabul.

patchwork solutions

The critics say the U.S. has only been applying patchwork solutions to the critical agendas of disarmament, reconstruction and national reconciliation. They believe that it needs to do much more to strengthen Karzai's position and to bring the warlords into line. They also say Washington should take a lead in boosting the security situation by pushing for foreign troops to be posted around the country.

Challenges to Karzai within his own government are, among other things, hindering efforts to create a national army. Karzai is from Afghanistan's majority Pashtun community, but Defence Minister Muhammad Qasim Fahim is an ethnic Tajik. Fahim, whose forces spearheaded the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001, continues to defy the Bonn agreement by refusing to withdraw his Tajik troops from the capital and demobilize them. His obduracy will make it difficult to persuade other warlords to dismantle their forces. And, as Barnett Rubin, of New York University's Centre on International Cooperation, warns: "Without demobilization, writing the constitution is likely to prove a meaningless exercise because it cannot be implemented."

While the Americans are helping to build a 70,000-strong national army within the next three years, only 3,000 troops have been trained so far. At the same time an 11,500-strong U.S.-led coalition force is refusing to

provide security for the disarmament process or to put pressure on the warlords to comply.

Meanwhile, despite Rumsfeld's optimism there are signs that the Taliban are regrouping in the south and east of the country. There have been many attacks on U.S. and Afghan government forces in recent weeks, while aid workers have also been targeted. There has also been factional fighting in the north. Afghan officials say more than 2,000 people have been killed in such clashes since the start of last year. Aid groups have ceased operations in several provinces in the north. Consulting the people about the constitution under these circumstances would be very difficult.