

## Rebuilding Afghanistan

The Nation Magazine - 08/01/2004

By Ahmed Rashid

After twenty-one tension-filled days of raucous speeches, poetry readings, threats, bribery and walkouts, Afghanistan's loya jirga, held to endorse a new Constitution for Afghanistan after twenty-six years of war, concluded on January 4. The powerful presidential system demanded by President Hamid Karzai and the Pashtun population was watered down after strident demands by the country's ethnic minorities to include greater powers to an elected Parliament and minority language rights. Not surprisingly, the eventual compromises were pushed through from behind the scenes in marathon all-night sessions by the US ambassador and President Bush's special representative to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the UN Secretary General's special representative, Lakhdar Brahimi.

Two years after the defeat of the Taliban, the loya jirga demonstrated the fact that Afghanistan's acute ethnic divisions—the underlying cause of the 1992-2001 civil war—are still rampant and that a bloc of neo-Taliban Islamic fundamentalists, who helped US forces defeat the Taliban in December 2001, can still exercise enormous influence. On the positive side, there has been a reassertion of the Pashtuns, who make up 40 percent of the country's population but have been alienated and humiliated since 2001 because the Taliban drew their support from them. The Pashtuns supported a strong presidential system because they saw a strong center as being in their self-interest. Karzai, himself a Pashtun, must now insure that the Pashtuns do not antagonize the minorities and instead help create a truly multiethnic nation-state rather than dominate the minorities, as they have done for hundreds of years. Despite apprehensions, Afghan women fared well. The delegates doubled the number of seats guaranteed to women in the new Parliament to 25 percent of the total, and women's rights were specifically mentioned in the Constitution despite efforts by the fundamentalists to have the item scratched.

The underlying reason ethnic tensions still exist two years on is the utter and irresponsible failure of the international community to live up to the promises made at Bonn in December 2001, which set out the road map for Afghanistan's future. Security in the countryside is abysmal, Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar are still at large, and the 11,500 US-led coalition forces in the country are too few to stop the resurgence of the Taliban, who have killed some 400 Afghan soldiers, policemen, civilians and Western and Afghan aid workers and contractors since July. The 5,500 NATO-led international peacekeeping troops still cannot deploy outside Kabul, because European countries have failed to find the troops to accompany them. (The Europeans were willing to provide more troops immediately after the defeat of the Taliban, but Washington blocked the move then, fearing that more peacekeepers would interfere with the hunt for bin Laden.) Nor has the international community disbursed adequate funds for the reconstruction of this blighted country.

The United States is insisting that elections be held by June, as set out by Bonn, or September at the latest. This is primarily because President Bush wants a success story to show to American voters for the US elections in November, given that the good news out of Iraq is likely to be sparse. On the other hand, the UN, many European and NATO states, Western and Afghan NGOs, and many prominent Afghans, including at least half the Afghan Cabinet, say elections should be postponed for at least a year. The Bonn summit stipulated that presidential and parliamentary elections be held at the same time, but the Americans say presidential elections should go ahead this year while parliamentary elections can be delayed. Reginald Austin of the UN's voter-registration unit, which in December started registering 10.5 million voters—two months late because of lack of funding—says his job cannot be done in time. Lack of security in the south, where the Taliban have threatened to kill his registration teams, has slowed down the process. Never mind, say some US officials: We will ink voters' thumbs if ID cards cannot be supplied. To Washington's credit, it approved an additional \$1.2 billion in late 2003, bringing its total aid commitment to \$2 billion for 2004.

American forces are setting up six more small Provincial Reconstruction Teams in the Pashtun belt to improve security in Taliban areas. By March there will be twelve such teams around the country, but they are too small, and there are too few of them, to provide security to the Afghan population. Unfortunately, the United States has failed to persuade the European and Muslim nations to increase aid and money. The Europeans in particular, still enraged over US unilateralism in Iraq, now see the American agenda in Afghanistan as being equally unilateral-serving Bush's political needs-and thus see no reason to back it with money. The war in Afghanistan started out as a multilateral effort, while the Bonn agreement, under the auspices of the UN, drew similar international support. The Europeans say the United States has undermined this multilateral approach and is setting the agenda in Afghanistan, as it has done in Iraq. The United States, for its part, is bitter about the lack of European commitment to Afghanistan, while President Karzai is also frustrated. Only the provision of livelihoods, security and reconstruction will ease ethnic, religious and regional tensions so that elections can be held in a meaningful and peaceful manner. Several important programs have just started and will certainly not reach fruition before June.

These include a UN-led effort to disarm and demobilize 100,000 militiamen; a World Bank-led effort to provide money to each of the country's thirty-two provinces to kick-start rural reconstruction; and a US-led effort to build a new national army and police force and create a new civil service and judiciary. Nobody has yet thought of how to tackle the burgeoning drug problem. While the Taliban had cut opium production virtually to zero by the last year of their rule, by 2003 Afghanistan was producing 3,600 tons annually, which helps maintain the warlords in power. Afghanistan's elections should be postponed through a new UN/international community/Afghan government agreement. Lakhdar Brahimi has in fact proposed a Bonn II meeting. And the United States must bring the Europeans, the UN and others into the international decision-making process over Afghanistan. The war on terrorism cannot be fought over the skies of Washington and New York-much less in Iraq, where it didn't exist before the US invasion-but must continue by other means in helping to rebuild a nation that was hijacked by Osama bin Laden and still has the potential to become the world's epicenter for an Al Qaeda revival. The Afghans need enormous help, but so far the world has failed to live up to its promises. Ahmed Rashid