

## Spain And Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid in Madrid

Nearly five years after the defeat of the Taliban and pledges by Western nations to quickly rebuild the country, Afghanistan is still facing acute problems. The growing Taliban resurgence which claims a dozen Afghan lives everyday and a drugs epidemic that is funding terrorism and fuelling corruption, are making the task of reconstruction much more difficult.

Meanwhile the fear of body bags coming home is also increasing opposition in several European countries, on deploying more NATO troops to Afghanistan. As the Spanish Parliament debates on sending another 150 Spanish troops to join the 540 already in Afghanistan, a recent poll shows that although Spaniards massively support humanitarian action in Afghanistan, they are less keen on deploying Spanish troops there.

A poll by the 'Elcano Royal Institute,' shows that although 79 percent of Spaniards believe in much greater support for humanitarian action, only 51 percent support the presence of Spanish troops in Afghanistan.

However only the commitment of Spanish troops can preserve Spain's humanitarian instincts and show the wider Muslim world that it is doing everything to bridge the gap between the two civilizations.

Spaniards often lump Afghanistan with Iraq. However Afghanistan is not Iraq. Although the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is likely to get worse before it gets better, Western troops have the overwhelming support of the Afghan population, which is not the case in Iraq.

For every layer of deception, subterfuge and the lack of international legality which constituted the United States reasoning for the invasion of Iraq, there was a parallel layer of transparency, international legality and massive public support when the UN Security Council, NATO and the European Union sanctioned the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001.

Immediately after the war was won, Western pundits cautioned that Afghans with their history would not tolerate a Western peace keeping force in Kabul for long. Yet five years on the Afghan government, its newly elected parliament, hundreds of Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the majority of its people still endorse a foreign military presence on their soil - because they see that as the only guarantee to reconstruct their country.

NATO countries including Spain made a commitment to Afghanistan after 9/11 that they would not abandon the Afghans. But Afghanistan took a back seat due to the Iraq war. Many Afghans now fear that Afghanistan will again take a back seat due to Iran dominating the global agenda.

However in January in London, the world's powers and the Kabul government signed 'The Afghanistan Compact,' which sets out the international community's commitment to Afghanistan and in turn Kabul's commitment to state-building over the next five years. It is vital that Spain plays a major role in this renewed commitment.

On May 18, Spain will host a major conference on Afghanistan which will bring together the Spanish and Afghan governments, NATO, the European Union, the United Nations and experts. The conference being hosted by Spain's Foreign and Defence Ministries and Elcano, should be a learning process for Spaniards, so they can understand what is at stake and inspire them to give more to Afghanistan.

It should also help convince the Afghans and the wider Muslim world that Spain is a partner in long term solutions for greater human understanding, just as it is a partner in the nuts and bolts of building schools or hospitals.

Afghanistan has made dramatic strides in creating a political infrastructure. In short order Afghanistan now has an elected President, a democratic constitution voted in through a national consensus, an upper and lower house of parliament elected in a largely fair electoral process and elected governing councils in all 34 provinces. These gains in one of the most destitute, but strategically important countries in the world are worth protecting.

However no further advances can be expected with the present state of insecurity and mayhem that exists in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban are now killing school teachers and women. Last year the Taliban-al' Qaeda insurgency claimed the lives of 1500 Afghans and over 100 American and NATO troops. This year 300 Afghans have already been killed.

The terrorist coalition are striking at NATO contingents, precisely to try and create a wave of public revulsion in European countries against further troop deployments. The south is also the centre of opium farming and a massive trade in heroin which the Taliban use to fund their movement.

This summer NATO will deploy 9000 extra troops to the south and west to combat the Taliban and provide security for reconstruction projects. US forces will remain in the east of the country. Spain is part of this mobilization and its troops have been deployed to western Afghanistan.

Some 400 Spanish troops are part of a joint Italian-Spanish 'Quick reaction force' based in the regional capital Herat, while another 150 have been deployed as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to Qila-e-Nau, in Baghdis province one of the poorest and most neglected parts of the country, where people have not seen any of the benefits of peace.

NATO intends to set up a PRT in all 34 provinces, in order to train local government personnel and provide security for Western and Afghan NGOs. The al' Qaeda-Taliban are prepared for a long war of attrition, which will continue until NATO and US forces show their staying power. Any weakness shown by NATO now will only bolster the morale of the extremists and claim more Afghan lives and ultimately strengthen terrorist groups in Europe and the Americas.