The Mess in Afghanistan

Ahmed Rashid. 12/02/2004

By Ahmed Rashid

In late December 2001 Hamid Karzai set out for Kabul for the first time since the defeat of the Taliban. He had been fighting along with his fellow Kandahari tribesmen in the last battle against the Taliban over control of his home city. Earlier in December all the anti-Taliban Afghan factions, under the auspices of the United Nations, had signed an agreement at Bonn, which chose him as chairman of the new interim government of Afghanistan.

Karzai, a tribal chief from the Pashtun majority ethnic group, flew to Kabul in a US military aircraft, arriving in the evening. At the airport to receive him was the warlord General Mohammad Fahim, a Tajik from the Panjshir Valley (like his deceased leader Ahmed Shah Massoud), now defense minister and the head of the Shura-e-Nazar, or Northern Alliance, which had fought alongside US forces to defeat the Taliban and capture Kabul.

Fahim walked up to the plane accompanied by nearly one hundred bodyguards, loyalists, and ministers all bristling with weapons. Karzai got off the plane with just four companions. As the two men shook hands on the tarmac, Fahim looked confused. “Where are your men?” he asked. Karzai turned to him in his disarmingly gentle manner of speaking. “Why General,” he replied, “you are my men—all of you are Afghans and are my men—we are united now—surely that is why we fought the war and signed the Bonn agreement?”

Karzai told me this story one eve-ning late this past summer in Kabul. Perhaps more than any other story I have heard in twenty-three years of writing about the war in Afghanistan, it summarizes the kind of place Afghanistan has become, but also in which direction many of its people have wanted to take the country. General Fahim, more powerful than ever with his own army and sources of income, is essentially a man of the past who thinks of Afghanistan as defined by ethnicity and tribal rule and believes power can be exercised through the guns of his followers.

From March 2002 until September 2003, Fahim delayed implementing the reforms in the Ministry of Defense that would require him to replace his Tajik generals with a more ethnically balanced officer corps. Such a reform is a precondition for carrying out a $200 million UN-sponsored plan to pay off and disarm 100,000 militiamen loyal to the warlords. Fahim was clearly trying to block reforms until the US began to apply strong pressure on him to comply. Since September Fahim has begun to make the changes demanded by the UN, but they are as yet far from complete.

In contrast, Karzai, a well-educated and widely read man, has a vision of building a modern, democratic country that would no longer be a pariah state. He wants a cabinet that would bring together its ethnically diverse members, who have been at war with one another ever since 1989, when the former Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. He saw no need to fly in dozens of his fellow Kandahari tribesmen just to impress the warlords in Kabul. He wanted to set a different example.

Ordinary Afghans understand such symbols and gestures, since this is a culture where body language and actions are far more important than words. But the question on everyone’s minds, even at the beginning, was whether the powerful nations and most importantly the United States would back Karzai’s democratic vision or Fahim’s vision of maintaining the status quo. Would the Bush administration make the cheaper and easier choice to leave in place the warlords who had opposed the Taliban, or would the US genuinely help to start the process of nation-building in a country where there was neither a functioning state nor national unity? Until very recently, it has chosen to stick with the warlords.

In Kabul the US backs the Karzai government; in the countryside the US has failed to forcefully challenge warlords like Fahim and their gross abuses of human rights, their heroin smuggling, their defiance of the

central government, their desire to maintain their fiefdoms, and their resistance to democracy. The US continues to provide money for aid projects and for building a new army and police force; but it has not been using its power as effectively as it should to bring the country closer to democratic self-government.

Late in the summer of 2003, with American forces bogged down in Iraq and Saddam Hussein still at large, the Bush administration appeared to have what one senior US official in Kabul described to me as an epiphany. With no turning point in Iraq in sight, he said, no accomplishment that might help the President's approval rating as the country entered an election year, Bush's advisers decided that Afghanistan needed to be turned into a success story. If Osama bin Laden could not be caught, at least there should be an Afghan presidential election that could be publicized as a major step forward in the war against terrorism. For that to happen, more money was needed, reconstruction had to be accelerated, and the creation of new Afghan security forces speeded up. And, for the first time, the official said, the US began to recognize that to carry out these plans, the warlords had to be neutralized.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the new US ambassador to Kabul and President Bush's special representative to Afghanistan, describes US policy somewhat differently. The administration, he told me in Kabul in December, now believes that by pumping money and effort into the country at a quicker rate and achieving more rapid results, the US can speed up its withdrawal.

The US is now determined that elections go ahead by June, as stipulated in the Bonn agreement of December 2001. But almost all other key forces—the UN, most European and NATO countries, Western and Afghan NGOs, as well as many Afghans—have pleaded with the US to postpone them for at least a year. That much time is needed, they say, to increase security, build more infrastructure, strengthen the central government, and complete important building projects. However the final decision rests with Karzai. UN officials recently told me that too many parts of Afghanistan are still a war zone, and at least half of Karzai's cabinet would prefer to delay the elections. "The security situation has to improve and real reconstruction must start before elections can be held," Vice President Amin Arsala told me in December. Karzai himself acknowledges that the country has reached no more than "only 40 to 50 percent of the administrative ability that a government in a country like ours should have." Still, Karzai and some who are close to him strongly supported early elections, cooperating with the Americans in upholding the image they are trying to project of a stable, post-conflict state where free and fair elections can be held.

In the winter of 1994–1995, I went on a long journey to try to understand the new Islamic movement, which called itself "Taliban," or "movement of Islamic students," that was emerging in Kandahar. I knew virtually all of the Afghan Communist and Mujahideen leaders but had no knowledge of the Taliban leaders—who they were, where they'd come from, or what they believed in. I traveled first to Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, where thousands of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban students from the madrasas, or religious schools, set up by Pakistani Islamic parties there were being taken by bus into Kandahar to join the advance Taliban forces.

I learned that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) together with the government of then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was providing support to the Taliban. The ISI was to become the main prop for the future Taliban regime, which would soon join up with al-Qaeda when Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in 1996. The Afghan drug mafia and the Pakistani trucking mafia wanted to revive their trade in smuggled goods between Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia; they were enthusiastically funding the Taliban, because the Taliban were clearing Afghanistan's roads of the warlords' checkposts.

When I arrived in Kandahar, I found that the Taliban, under their one-eyed leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, were establishing bizarre so-called Islamic laws which had nothing to do with Afghan or Pashtun history or culture, or with Islam itself. They were inspired by the jihadi ideology of Pakistani extremist groups who had earlier given the Taliban shelter. The Taliban stood for an imported ideology, first from Pakistan and later from al-Qaeda.

Nearly a decade later, this past autumn, I made the same journey again. What I saw was history repeating itself—in some respects in ways that were worse than before. "The Taliban are gathering again in the same places from where they started, it's like a rerun of an old movie," says Ahmed Wali Karzai, the President's brother, who is based in Kandahar. "They are," he said, "attacking reconstruction projects and educational establishments—that is their main enemy. Yet they have no popular support. The biggest problem the people face is the lack of security and an effective administration."

Pakistan's Jamiat-e-Ullema Islam (JUI) party now forms part of the governing coalition that rules Baluchistan. It is using its madrasas and mosques to house and mobilize thousands of a new, even younger generation of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to fight the Karzai government and terrorize southern Afghanistan. After prayers are over, the young Taliban—many of them in their teens—flood into the tea stalls of Pushtunabad, a Quetta suburb, in their distinctive black clothes, black turbans, long beards, and unkempt hair. They talk of the progress of the Taliban offensive in Afghanistan today. Taliban fighters, I was told, are better equipped than they were in 1994. They are buying Thuraya satellite telephones and hundreds of Honda motorbikes to carry out guerrilla raids; they are also importing night-vision equipment from the Arab Gulf states.

President Karzai and other Afghan leaders have been harshly critical of the support the Taliban receives from the JUI and elements in the ISI. Even though Pakistan's military regime arrested some five hundred members of al-Qaeda in Pakistan, it still has not arrested a single Taliban leader. The drug mafia is flourishing and providing money to the Taliban and to al-Qaeda, and both the warlords and the Taliban are obtaining huge revenues by imposing taxes on goods smuggled between Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. In 2003, Afghanistan produced 3,600 tons of opium, or 76 percent of total world production. Opium is now produced in twenty-eight of Afghanistan's thirty-two provinces, as compared to just eighteen provinces in 1999.

Since August over four hundred Afghans—soldiers, policemen, aid wor- kers, civilians—and four US soldiers have been killed by the Taliban in their indiscriminate terror campaign. International aid agencies such as Oxfam have fled the growing chaos in southern Afghanistan. The UN has decided that more than half of the country's provinces are too dangerous for its aid workers. Armed attacks against Western and Afghan aid workers have risen from one a month last year to one every day or two this summer and autumn, according to CARE, a leading Western NGO. On November 16, in broad daylight, two Taliban in Ghazni assassinated Bettina Gioslard, a twenty-nine-year-old French-born official of the UN High Commission for Refugees. The event led to near panic among aid workers, and UN officials warned that they might be forced to pull out some eight hundred foreign staff, as they had earlier in Iraq.

This is the first time in twenty-five years of continuous war that Afghan rebels have deliberately targeted aid workers, women, and children. The major difference between 1994 and 2003 is that the Taliban, rather than just seizing power in Kabul, are now backed by al-Qaeda forces, which remain elusive but well armed, and have adopted the rhetoric of global jihad against the US. Along with Osama bin Laden, the Taliban's Mullah Mohammad Omar is still at large.

2.

In August, after months of conducting hit-and-run raids from their bases in Pakistan, over one thousand members of the Taliban in Afghanistan's Zabul province, which borders Baluchistan, fought a pitched battle with US and Afghan government forces. Despite heavy US bombing the Taliban resisted for nine days before retreating, leaving behind some two hundred dead. The Taliban leaders claimed this as a major victory because they stood up to the Americans for the first time since their defeat in 2001. Yousuf Pashtun, the governor of Kandahar province, believes that in the next phase of their terror campaign the Taliban will try to capture district headquarters in the southern provinces and engage in urban terrorism in Afghan cities. On January 6, two bomb blasts in Kandahar claimed some fifteen lives, many of them children. US and Afghan forces have tried to clamp down on such attacks by relentless patrolling in the south. On December 2, just before the recent Loya Jirga, or grand tribal assembly, met in Kabul to discuss and ratify a new constitution, US forces launched their biggest offensive since the defeat of the Taliban regime. The action, which took place in seven provinces, was designed to keep Taliban insurgents off guard while the Jirga was in progress.

This Jirga was the second to be held since the fall of the Taliban. (The first, in June 2002, elected Karzai as president.) It had originally been scheduled for October, but was delayed for two months because of the worsening security situation in the south. The program of "disarmament, deregistration, and reintegration" to disarm the warlord armies was also delayed, although a pilot project began on October 24.

The Loya Jirga convened on December 14 and was expected to endorse the new constitution within ten days. However, it continued for twenty-two tense days while the US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the UN special representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, worked out back-room compromises between the government and those opposing the envisaged strong presidential system. On January 4, the 502 delegates, of whom one hundred were women, eventually agreed to a constitution of 160 articles, which conceded more powers to an

elected parliament, granted equal rights to women, and provided for language and other rights to be accorded to the ethnic minorities. John Sifton of Human Rights Watch made a cautionary comment about the constitution that seems apt: "There are several provisions enunciating basic political, civil, economic, and social rights, but little strong language creating institutions to uphold them."

The intense and often bitter debates and frequent near breakdowns of the entire process demonstrated that the acute ethnic divisions in the country, which sustained the civil war in the 1990s, were still rampant. The majority Pashtun population, which have been alienated from the rest of the country for the past two years because the Taliban arose largely among them, backed fellow Pashtun President Karzai's call for strong central rule; they believed this would help them make a political comeback. However, the ethnic minorities in northern Afghanistan—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turcomens—demanded greater autonomy, more powers for parliament, and the right to be educated in their own languages. Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalists from all ethnic groups, led by the former fundamentalist Mujahideen leader Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, backed a constitution that would have much more Islamic content.

The compromises reached will not end these tensions. The continuing ethnic divisions and the strength of the Islamists today are as much a reflection of the civil war as they are a result of the world's failure to help rebuild the country. Many Afghan delegates told me that jobs, education, security, better communications, and governmental institutions are needed to foster greater unity and nation-building, and to blunt Islamic extremism.

Also delayed because of worsening security and the lack of funding from Western donors was a UN and Afghan government program to register 10.5 million Afghani citizens for the elections that are supposed to take place in June but now seem likely to be delayed. Reginald Austin, the head of the UN electoral division, told me in Kabul that, by mid-December, only 50,000 people had been registered, as opposed to the 500,000 who are supposed to have been registered by that date according to the plan. He also said that the threat of Taliban attacks against his staff had forced him to close down registration stations in Kandahar on December 13. For Afghan civilians the lack of security remains the main issue. The 5,300-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has not moved much beyond Kabul since it was established at Bonn. In August NATO took command of the ISAF force—the first time it has moved outside Europe. NATO has pledged to expand the ISAF incrementally outside Kabul, first to Kunduz in the northeast. Some Afghans scoff at this because Kunduz is one of the most peaceful places in the country.

The Pentagon has resisted expanding the ISAF, because it has not wanted any interference in the US-led coalition's attempts to capture bin Laden. In a belated half-measure the US and its allies established Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs, in Bamiyan, Kunduz, Gardez, and Mazar-e-Sharif, each consisting of between sixty and one hundred soldiers and technicians to administer aid projects in rural areas where security was poor and to help establish the writ of the central government. But the PRTs were too small, too poorly funded, and they had no mandate to provide security to the local population or to help resolve local conflicts. The warlords and drug smugglers continued to thrive under this arrangement because they knew the Americans would not interfere with their illegal businesses. On December 21, the US military announced plans to increase the number of PRTs from five to twelve, and to give them additional powers to provide security. They are expected to be working in the field by March.

Although the US has spent $500 million to help train a new national army and police force, only seven thousand soldiers have been trained so far and the CIA continues to fund some warlord militias in the field as part of the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In a multilateral division of labor, the US is training the new Afghan army; Germany is training the new police force; Italy has responsibility for legal reform; Japan is responsible for disarming warlord militias; and Britain leads the anti-narcotics effort. Now, two years after the defeat of the Taliban, none of these programs has been particularly effective. They lack sufficient funds, expertise, and willingness to confront major problems.

Beside the problem of security, the Afghans' other major concern is the lack of international funds for reconstruction. "We are trapped in a vicious circle," Governor Pashtun of Kandahar told me. "If there is no money for reconstruction there can be no peace, and without peace and a stable law-and-order situation, there can be no reconstruction." Barnett Rubin of the Center for International Cooperation in New York has estimated that as of November 2003 only $110 million worth of reconstruction projects were completed in the country, out of a total UN aid disbursement of $2.9 billion between December 2001 and November 2003. (Of that total, the US contributed $1.1 billion.) Meanwhile, the US-led coalition forces spend $1 billion a month to

maintain over 11,000 men and women in the field.

In January 2001 at a donors conference in Tokyo the World Bank estimated that Afghanistan needed $15 billion for the next five years. The nations present pledged only $4.5 billion for Afghanistan's reconstruction for five years. Even that money has been painfully slow in coming, and little of it has been spent on basic infrastructure—building roads and electric power stations and restoring irrigation networks. Afghanistan's minister of finance, Ashraf Ghani, now estimates that his country requires $30 billion over the next fifteen years, but with the huge needs in Iraq it is unlikely that either the US or its allies will ever contribute anything approaching that sum. Under these conditions warlordism and drug production have thrived.

In September the US pledged to deliver some $1.2 billion in additional aid for the current fiscal year (2003–2004), more than doubling the amount it had earlier pledged for the year. It also sped up a $180 million project to rebuild the Kabul–Kandahar highway, which was completed in December and is potentially of great importance both militarily and economically. The US pledged to complete the training of the Afghan army and police before the planned June elections. But throwing new money at the country will not bring about the changes that are needed unless Washington is genuinely willing to aggressively target warlords and drug smugglers, to put pressure on Pakistan to halt its support of the Taliban resurgence, and to decisively back the central government.

In Washington there continues to be infighting between the Pentagon, which wants to maintain control of Afghan policy, and the State Department and the US Agency for International Development, which have been pushed to the sidelines. A significant difference between Iraq and Afghanistan is that most Afghans still welcome NATO peacekeeping troops and the American presence—even if their frustration with both forces is now increasing.

Since the end of 2002, most of the major US think tanks, human rights groups, and Western NGOs have persistently pointed out the flaws in US strategy and suggested the fairly obvious changes that need to be made. As in Iraq, however, the Bush administration is extremely reluctant to admit its mistakes or rectify them publicly or even make reliable information available.

3.

In this situation, the reports of the New York–based Human Rights Watch (HRW) have become extremely important. On a shoestring budget and with no permanent Western experts or large office in Kabul, frequently harassed and criticized by the US, the UN, and the warlords, HRW has documented practically every aspect of the growing crisis in a series of detailed reports which have offered sensible recommendations. Cogent and eminently practical, these reports have gone far beyond an account of human rights abuses in the country.

Along with organizations such as Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Crisis Group, and many of the eighty Western NGOs that work in Kabul, Human Rights Watch has repeatedly made the point that creating an increased respect for human rights is not simply a matter of pointing to abuses but must be seen as part of a process of nation-building in which people will be protected. Security cannot be achieved as long as warlords trample on people's basic rights. Political stability is impossible unless there is both a constitution and an accepted legal system that encourages free debate. Today's crisis in Afghanistan was foreseen by HRW more than a year ago; some of the reports it issued in 2002 and early 2003 can still be read as accurate accounts of what is happening now. In the HRW report issued in December 2002, the organization pointed out that the opportunities by the US and the international community that have been missed are still being missed today. "After the overthrow of the Taliban," the report stated, "the US employed a 'warlord strategy' in order to relieve it of its security and human rights responsibilities":

Warlords now represent the primary threat to peace and stability in the country…. The power of the warlords has made it impossible for [the government] to establish its authority much beyond Kabul…. The enduring system of "fiefdoms"…reinforced by the policies of the US…is simply not conducive to long-term stability or to the protection of human rights.

The report contained other prescient warnings. HRW demanded that the US accept responsibility for disarming the estimated 100,000 troops under the control of warlords and urged the US military to become directly engaged in the process and not hand it over to the undermanned UN. HRW demanded that the ISAF expand its forces beyond Kabul, saying that "the primary reason ISAF has not been expanded has been the opposition of the United States." NATO, which now heads the ISAF, has promised to establish a larger presence but, as I

write in early January, has hardly done so. HRW criticized the failure of US resolve in dealing with interferenceby Afghanistan's neighbors. Iran, it pointed out, has been arming its favorite warlord, Ismail Khan, in Herat; Pakistan has been allowing the Taliban to regroup on Pakistan's territory. HRW also criticized the UN for not more effectively monitoring human rights abuses and making them public.

In two reports at the end of 2002, HRW described the horrific situation in western Afghanistan where Ismail Khan had established a dictatorial fiefdom over three provinces, ignoring the Karzai government with tacit approval from the US. In an HRW report entitled "'We Want to Live as Humans': Repression of Women and Girls in Western Afghanistan," several women described the situation under Khan as virtually similar to living under the Taliban. Local police were stopping girls in the street and forcefully carrying out virginity tests. "Herat is the worst province for women in Afghanistan," said a UN official working with women's groups in Afghanistan.

Women were allowed to study only in segregated schools, were discouraged from working, and were forbidden to ride in cars with foreigners. Those caught riding in cars with an Afghan male who was not their husband were taken off to hospitals where doctors would examine them to determine whether they had recently had sexual intercourse. Doctors said that up to ten girls a day were being tested and many girls were too ashamed even to talk about it.

Ismail Khan has also revived the Taliban's much-feared Department of Vice and Virtue, which encourages young male goons to walk around streets and schools to make sure that segregation is being enforced. "You have the right to monitor whether people obey Islamic rules, whether it be inside school, outside school, or even in the national park," Ismail Khan told a group of schoolboys who were being trained as a vigilante squad in early October 2002. By the end of 2003 the Department of Vice and Virtue was still banning all independent press and censoring television to the point where women appearing in movies were being replaced by a flower on the screen. The department continues to harass local civic leaders and journalists and to ban professional organizations such as women's and lawyers' groups, even a literary society where people read poems to one another.

The violence against women by Taliban members was memorable not just for their violation of genuine Islamic values but for their obsessive attention to sexual and gender detail. The same can be said about Ismail Khan today when he forbids women to wear makeup outside the house even though they must wear the burqa at all times. Men are forbidden to wear neckties or shake hands with local or foreign women.

Acts of torture were, and are, according to HRW, commonplace in Herat—"beatings…hanging upside-down, whip- ping, and shocking with electrical wires attached to the toes and thumbs." A torture victim described what happened to him and his friend:

Then they gave my friend electricity shocks. They used a crank generator. The had to crank it very fast to produce the shock. They tied two electrical lines to each of his big toes. Three or four times they shocked him…. Each time my friend's body would be thrown by the shock. After that, my friend signed the confession paper. Then I signed it also so that I would not be beaten.

All this has been happening while US Special Forces and diplomats and UN officials are based in Herat. When US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Herat on April 29, 2002, he described Khan as "an appealing person, thoughtful, measured, and self-confident."

In July 2003, in a report on southeastern Afghanistan, where much of the Taliban resurgence is now taking place on the Pakistan border, HRW gave a vivid account of abuses by local forces, who claimed to be loyal to the government. The result has been that the region is all the more vulnerable to the Taliban incursions. "Afghanistan's window of opportunity is closing fast," said the HRW report. The "continuing insecurity, at its heart, is due to policies …of local government actors": soldiers, police, military, intelligence officials, and government ministers. These abuses are not unavoidable because many of these actors were brought to power by the US and the international community or are dependent on them now for support. In the southeast a local expression describes abuses by gunmen as happening "'right under the mustaches' of the Americans."

Hazrat Ali, the warlord in the northeastern provinces of Nangarhar and Laghman, whose forces fought alongside US troops in the Tora Bora battle against al-Qaeda, is still a favorite of the US military. He is named by HRW as one of the most prominent violators of human rights in eastern Afghanistan. His commanders and troops rob, steal, kidnap, and violate women and indulge in sexual violence against young boys. "Many of the soldiers in the military unit with Hazrat Ali are just teenagers, and the commanders use them for sex

purposes," says a university student in Jalalabad.

In Paghman, just an hour's drive from Kabul, the former fundamentalist Mujahideen leader Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf enforces a local regime which comes closest to the Taliban system in today's Afghanistan. In Paghman women are forced to stay at home and cannot work or shop in the bazaar. Sayyaf's troops regularly appear in the western suburbs of Kabul at night to rob homes and rape women. Kabul's police are too scared to touch them, and ISAF forces do not intervene.

Many Kabul householders are forced to keep dogs to frighten away Sayyaf's soldiers even though they cannot afford to feed them. Sayyaf, who is a Wahhabi and receives much of his funding from Saudi Arabia, is today trying to cobble together an alliance of fundamentalist warlords to put up a candidate to oppose Karzai in next June's elections.

Sayyaf's power was apparent in the elections of delegates for the December Loya Jirga. Through acts of intimidation, threats, and bribery that have been documented by the HRW and the UN, Sayyaf controlled the elections in the provinces around Kabul where he had influence. He forced many delegates opposed to his views not to compete for seats to the Loya Jirga. Once the Loya Jirga began and Sayyaf had taken his place inside the huge white tent set up near Kabul, he tried to discredit anyone who expressed opposition to his views. When Malalia Joya, twenty-five, a female social worker from western Afghanistan, courageously stood up in the assembly and accused Sayyaf and other warlords of crimes against Afghanistan and humanity, Sayyaf called her a Communist and threatened her. The UN had to provide her with bodyguards during the remainder of the Loya Jirga.

HRW also sharply criticizes the Amniat-e Milli, the intelligence service of the former Northern Alliance, which is all-powerful in Kabul and other cities. Its members regularly torture prisoners—often innocent citizens whom officials shake down for money. Prisoners are shackled, beaten, hung upside down, given electric shocks, or hung from their fingertips and covered with a thick blanket teeming with lice. The editor of a Kabul magazine that published an offending cartoon was told by an Amniat official, "Look, we have thirty bullets in our clip. I can shoot thirty of these bullets into your chest right now and there is no one who can stop us."

In early 2003, considerable friction emerged between Human Rights Watch and the UN. HRW charged that the UN had not held warlords accountable for their past crimes, that it had failed to strengthen UN teams monitoring current human rights abuses, and that it had not given substantial support to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which the UN established as part of the Bonn agreement. "The UN pursuit of a 'light footprint' has proven inappropriate and ineffective to protect human rights," said HRW in November 2002.

In private, UN officials told me that until the US and ISAF backed tougher measures, they had no means of dealing with human rights abuses. Under pressure from human rights groups and NGOs, the UN during 2003 spoke out more frequently as abuses continued around the country. On the other hand the Bush administration has never admitted that it has not done enough to protect Afghans from human rights abuses. Nor does it pay compensation to, or even acknowledge, the hundreds of Afghans who have been killed by mistake by US forces.

In two bungled air bombings of villages in the first week of December, US aircraft killed fifteen Afghan children and two adults in eastern Afghanistan. The US government neither apologized nor offered compen-sation to the victims' families. "The US military takes precautions to minimize civilian loss of life during its operations—but obviously not enough," said HRW's John Sifton in Kabul on December 13. "There is now a pattern of mistakes, apparently as a result of faulty intelligence, that has led to too many civilian deaths and no clear changes in the way the US plans are carried out in military operations," he added.

Through much of 2002, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, headed by Sima Samar, the former minister for women's rights and an activist, had neither the manpower nor the resources to be effective. Moreover the commission lived in fear of the warlords. Samar, who was in Karzai's cabinet until the June 2002 Loya Jirga, received frequent death threats and at one point had to take refuge in a UN office.

HRW has been instrumental in supporting Samar's commission. In September 2003 it released a devastating report showing how warlords and ministers were involved in a land grab of some of Kabul's best urban property, while forcibly removing returning refugees who had made their homes there. "There is no rule of law, the police that are responsible for the rule of law, they themselves are violators and are acting against

the law," Nadir Nadiri, the commission's spokesman, said on September 15, 2003.

Last summer, in a joint report, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Asia Society issued a similar grim warning:

Unless the situation improves, Afghanistan risks sliding back into the anarchy and warlordism that prevailed in the 1990s and helped give rise to the Taliban. Such a reversion would have disastrous consequences for Afghanistan and would be a profound setback for the US war on terrorism.

The report urges the US to do the very things that Human Rights Watch has been recommending ever since the American victory and that are still not being adequately addressed: speed up training of the Afghan army and police force, provide at least $1 billion for reconstruction—over and above relief aid—for the next five years, help the ISAF expand or make peacekeeping part of the mandate for US troops, and undertake a major diplomatic initiative to bolster Karzai and prevent neighboring countries from interfering in Afghanistan.

That the Taliban are returning in force two years after their defeat is testimony enough that the West's support and strategy for rebuilding Af-ghanistan have so far been a failure. The war against terrorism is still to be won in the Afghan mountains and deserts and among the Afghan people as well. Their nation, the largest and most tragic victim of terrorism, is not being rebuilt. Until that happens there is little incentive for al-Qaeda or extremists elsewhere to lose heart.

The urgency of the Afghan situation was emphasized by Kofi Annan in a UN report issued on December 3. "Unchecked criminality, outbreaks of factional fighting and activities surrounding the illegal narcotics trade," he said, "have all had a negative impact." He warned that "the international community must decide whether to increase its level of involvement in Afghanistan or risk failure."

http://www.hrw.org/news/2005/07/07/afghanistan-bring-war-criminals-justice