

How to end the war in Afghanistan

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by Ahmed Rashid

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid says talking to the Taliban could be the only way to end the war in Afghanistan.

The London conference on Afghanistan was being billed as a dud - hastily conceived, under prepared and potentially a political face-saver for two unpopular leaders, Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai.

Instead the conference has united the international community for a further commitment to Afghanistan's future - albeit for a shortened period.

Even more significant, there is broad agreement that talking to the Taliban is the only way to bring the insurgency to an end.

No longer are the US, Nato or Afghanistan's neighbours talking about militarily defeating the Taliban, rebuilding the country from top to bottom or promoting democracy.

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Instead there is a single purpose in mind - how to provide sufficient security for development while at the same time allowing foreign forces to leave.

Six months ago major stakeholders such as Russia, India and Iran were against such a strategy - now no longer.

Stalemate

The turnaround has happened not because Nato is winning, but because Nato is perceived to be "not winning" or at best in a stalemate in the war against the Taliban.

What every country fears in an even more prolonged conflict is a collapse of will at home (in Europe and the US) and in Kabul to resist the Taliban.

Talk and fight is the new mantra.

The turnaround was so astonishing that the conference communiqué was swiftly overtaken by reports that Kai Eide, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, had already met with Taliban leaders in Dubai on 8 January.

UN officials tell me the report was false and that Mr Eide was in New York at the time.

The London conference clearly stipulates that any talks will be led by the Afghan government, which has already been quietly talking to Taliban representatives through the good offices of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis are now demanding that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar give a clear commitment in writing that he is breaking with al-Qaeda - something the Taliban have only hinted at in several of their communiqués.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has had close relations with the Afghan Taliban, since they were given sanctuary by Pakistan's military regime after their defeat in 2001.

The ISI are the gate-keepers for access to most Taliban leaders, giving it considerable clout in any future

negotiations - something that is resented by the Kabul regime and some Taliban.

However there has also been considerable Western contact with the Taliban.

Disturbed

According to my last count and information, diplomats or intelligence agents from Britain, Norway and Germany as well as several humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross have met with Taliban officials either in Pakistan or Afghanistan over the past 12 months.

For humanitarian agencies it has been a question of making sure that their staff are not attacked, persuading the Taliban to allow medical and food distribution and immunisation campaigns to be carried out in areas they control.

Humanitarian agencies are not holding peace talks with the Taliban but trying to improve the quality of life for ordinary Afghans no matter where or who they are.

The UN has been particularly disturbed as to why the Taliban are now targeting its offices and killing UN personnel in both Pakistan and Afghanistan - something they have never done since they appeared in 1994.

There is widespread suspicion that such attacks have been launched by al-Qaeda and its allies, rather than the real Taliban under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar.

For European states contacts with the Taliban have been limited to trying to discover where their nationals are - nationals who may have trained or fought with al-Qaeda or the Taliban and are about to launch suicide attacks in their home countries.

The London conference was also all about making it clear that the West's intensive commitment to Afghanistan is going to be short-lived.

In 18 months US troops will start handing over responsibility to the Afghan army, province by province, and start withdrawing.

Tough call

Some European contingents are likely to make an even quicker dash for the exit.

Although there will be substantial long term Western funding for building Afghan security forces and economic development, the Afghans will essentially be on their own after 10 years of hand-feeding by the West.

It will be a tough call because the 30-year-long war has bred a kind of dependency among the Afghans - whether as refugees or as free citizens - that prevents their leaders taking real responsibility.

The Afghan government does not see the need for accountability because the Western donor community is blamed and always held accountable and culpable for all short-comings, be it too few troops or corruption.

Despite the London conference rhetoric of "Afghan ownership" of the peace and development process, the last nine years has still not created real ownership for the Afghans.

There is still no semblance of a working Afghan state with basic governance institutions such as a functioning bureaucracy, judiciary and police.

Nato's job in this surge of commitment is to make sure that the Afghans do not just increase their dependency on the West, but actually take charge, become responsible and make themselves accountable for their actions.

President Karzai should realise this is a tougher job than talking to the Taliban.