

No Democracy

Not yet. And between battles and bureaucracy, the June date for elections will be hard to meet

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The last time that United States Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld visited Kabul, in early May, he proudly announced the end of major combat operations there against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. At the same time, the government of President Hamid Karzai was looking ahead to the disarmament of the country's warlords, the establishment of a constitution and national polls to put in place a fully elected Afghanistan government.

This time, when Rumsfeld arrived in Kabul on September 7, 200 Taliban had been killed in the past two weeks, according to a U.S. military commander. U.S. troops and Afghan government soldiers had just wound up a nine-day battle with Taliban fighters in the arid mountains of southeastern Afghanistan, and the country had just endured its bloodiest month since the Taliban were defeated in 2001. In August, 220 Afghan soldiers and civilians were killed in a series of skirmishes, mine explosions and mortar attacks. For the first time, the U.S. army admitted that the Taliban is not simply mounting a campaign of harassment. "We believe that strategically the anti-coalition forces seek to remove the existing national government of Afghanistan and re-establish a Taliban regime," U.S. military spokesman Col. Rodney Davis said a day before Rumsfeld arrived.

The worsening security situation has impeded the democratization process chalked out by the United Nations and the international community in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001. It will now be more difficult to make the deadline for long-awaited general elections scheduled for June 2004. Karzai had already been having little success overcoming numerous delays in the political process. A \$50-million programme to disarm the forces of Afghanistan's regional warlords that was due to start in June has been impeded by reluctance in the Ministry of defence to carry out reforms. The Loya Jirga, or grand assembly, due to be held in October to validate the country's new constitution has been pushed back to December because of disagreements within the 35-man constitutional commission, which Karzai appointed, over the details of the document. And Karzai has failed to issue an expected decree allowing political parties to function.

A joint UN-Afghan government programme to register 10.5 million voters has not started for lack of funding. Reginald Austin, chief electoral officer for the UN, says he needs 60% of the \$76 million budgeted for the project immediately to hire 4,000 Afghan staff and buy vehicles. Western donors have contributed less than \$10 million so far. Meanwhile, an expected U.S. initiative to deliver \$1 billion for reconstruction projects has been delayed by disputes between the State and Defence departments over who will control the funds and by wrangling over from where to get them. President George W. Bush has asked Congress to approve the funds, along with \$11 billion to pay for the U.S. military effort.

So far international aid projects have stalled where the Taliban are most active, in eastern and southern Afghanistan. As of May, only \$190-million worth of reconstruction projects had been completed nationwide, out of a total aid disbursement of \$1.2 billion between December 2001 and May 2003, according to a study by Barnett Rubin of the Centre for International Cooperation in New York. "So far reconstruction has had little meaning for the Afghan people," says Rubin.

That sum does not include a \$180-million U.S.-funded project to rebuild the strategic Kabul-Kandahar highway. Bush has promised that the highway will be completed by December, but on September 1 the Taliban attacked guards protecting construction crews, killing 11 Afghan guards and civilians. Despite the setbacks there are some positive signs. Nato, which in August took over command of the 5,000 troops of the International Security Assistance Force based in Kabul, is considering expanding peacekeeping forces to other cities. But with deep divisions over Iraq between the U.S. and European nations-the countries that would provide such troops-it is still uncertain how Nato can muster the necessary forces. But the U.S. is galvanizing international support for reconstruction. U.S. pressure has also persuaded Pakistan to begin clamping down on the Taliban, who use Pakistan's border provinces as sanctuary. After setbacks in Iraq and in the Middle East peace process, the challenge in Afghanistan has become a major test of U.S. credibility in the Islamic world.

