

Afghanistan And Pakistan - Safe Haven For The Taliban

Two years after the U.S. war on the Taliban began; the group is escalating its attacks in Afghanistan and undermining efforts to build a democracy there. So it may be frustrating to their enemies to find the Taliban living openly next door, in Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid/Quetta, Kandahar and Brussels

AS THE United States government re-plans and refinances its troubled nation-building effort in Afghanistan and continues its long search for Osama bin Laden, its enemy, the Taliban, are living in plain sight just across the border. In Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, thousands of Taliban fighters reside in mosques and madrassas with the full support of a provincial ruling party and militant Pakistani groups. Taliban leaders wanted by the U.S. and Kabul governments are living openly in nearby villages, and the families of Taliban have found safe haven in refugee camps inside Pakistan, where approximately 1 million Afghan refugees are living.

After evening prayers in the Pushtunabad suburb of Quetta, Afghan and Pakistani Taliban—distinctive with their black clothes, black turbans, long beards and unkempt long hair—pour into the streets. At the second anniversary of the launch of the U.S. military campaign that ousted the Taliban regime, their rhetoric shows no sign of surrender. "The puppet regime of [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai is on the verge of collapse and the Americans will flee Afghanistan," says a Taliban mullah in Quetta. Adds Maulana Hafiz Hussain Sharodi, Baluchistan's information minister and a leader of the Jamiat-e-Ullemat Islam (JUI), which openly backs the Taliban and is a partner in the coalition that rules the province, "Karzai's time is finished. Only the Taliban can constitute the real government in Afghanistan."

The Taliban may be a long way from retaking Kabul, but their dominance in Quetta and a recent increase in attacks across the border continue to vex the U.S., its ally Karzai, and its Pakistani ally President Pervez Musharraf, who has been finding it hard to convince the world that his military government is not backing the Taliban. Afghan leaders accuse the Pakistan military's Inter-Services Intelligence of giving direct support to the Taliban. They cite as evidence the level of organization the Taliban have acquired in their attacks in recent months. Pakistan rejects claims that it is supporting the Taliban.

The U.S. government has also been publicly encouraging Pakistan to do more to stop cross-border Taliban attacks. "I personally believe that President Musharraf is genuine when he assists us in the tribal area," U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told Congress on September 30 before leaving for Kabul and Islamabad. "But I do not think that affection for working with us extends up and down the rank and file of the Pakistani security community."

In what appeared to be a response to Armitage's comments, one day prior to his arrival in the region Pakistan launched a commando raid in Waziristan, killing eight alleged Al Qaeda militants and capturing 18 others. When Armitage reached Kabul on October 5 he was brimming with confidence, predicting that the recent surge in Taliban attacks was a sign of their increasing desperation and fear. "They see the writing on the wall," he said.

But Armitage's comments seemed unrealistic to most Afghans after the killings of nearly 400 Afghan civilians, soldiers and aid workers in Taliban attacks since August, largely in the Pashtun region of southern and eastern Afghanistan. At the end of September and in early October, 17 people were killed in attacks in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, including two Afghan aid workers. Reconstruction projects in the area have ground to a halt. Mercy Corps, one of the oldest and largest Western aid agencies working in the country, is now active in only six districts in southern Afghanistan, down from 42 districts in the spring, due to security concerns.

On October 7, U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, who is ambassador-designate to Kabul, told reporters that the Taliban might "in desperation" carry out more "spectacular"

attacks. He also said that Pakistan must still do more to halt cross-border attacks. Many Afghan leaders are convinced that the Bush administration has been muted in its criticism of Pakistan because it is conspiring to hand over control of Afghanistan's Pashtun belt to the Pakistanis. In fact, the Bush administration faces severe pressure from Congress and the U.S. military to curb Taliban mobilization in Pakistan.

"We see the Pakistani army posts on the border waving in Taliban groups and then waving them out again," says a frustrated middle-ranking U.S. Army officer in Afghanistan. "Washington needs to do something." "We are fed up with Pakistan's policy," says Yousuf Pashtun, the governor of Kandahar province. "Do the Americans want to keep quiet about Pakistan's support to the Taliban at the risk of destabilizing Afghanistan?" The alternative: Stabilizing Afghanistan at the risk of destabilizing Pakistan and Musharraf. While Washington may want to rein in the Pakistani military, at the same time it wants Pakistan to deliver 9,000 troops to Iraq and wants Musharraf's help to capture bin Laden-ideally before the U.S. presidential election next year.

Musharraf is playing a deft game, exploiting his leverage over the Americans while doing just enough to curtail overt U.S. criticism.

That is not enough to satisfy Karzai. "For us to be truly satisfied, we need all such terrorist attacks to stop in Afghanistan," Karzai said after meeting Armitage in Kabul. "As long as these attacks continue, [Pakistan's] efforts won't meet with our acceptance."

Pakistan has in the past sought to hold sway over Afghanistan's Pashtun belt, chiefly in the interest of security and stability among Pashtuns on the Pakistan side of the border. To do this, the Taliban have been Pakistan's most willing allies.

Pakistan's intelligence agencies covertly backed the Taliban in the 1990s, and Western and Afghan intelligence officials in Kandahar claim they are doing it again, charges that Islamabad denies. "All security agencies are answerable to the president and they follow his direction faithfully," says Foreign Ministry spokesman Masood Khan.

But Taliban leaders and their families are now living openly in Quetta. In late September, Mullah Dadullah, the notorious Taliban corps commander who organized attacks in southern Afghanistan, attended a lavish wedding in a village near Quetta where some 50 members of his extended family live. Dadullah, who is allied to the JUI and Al Qaeda, carried out several massacres of non-Pashtuns during the Taliban's rule and is considered responsible for the widely condemned destruction of the giant Buddha statues at Bamiyan in 2001. The International Committee of the Red Cross suspects he ordered the murder in May of senior Red Cross official Ricardo Munguia, the first expatriate aid worker to die in the current Taliban offensive.

Taliban on motorcycles have been attacking aid agency vehicles and isolated police posts. Vehicle dealers say the Taliban have bought 900 motorcycles in the past three months in the Quetta region and another 250 in Loralai, north of Quetta. The favourite machine is a 125 c.c. Honda, which has become a symbol of Taliban mobility.

Western and Afghan intelligence officials in Kandahar believe that before winter sets in, the Taliban plan to send up to 2,500 fighters in small groups into Kandahar province from the Pakistani border crossing at Chaman, into Zabul province from Qila Saifullah and Loralai and into Paktika province from Zhob-all towns north of Quetta. Kandahar province's Yousuf says the next Taliban escalation will come in the form of "widespread urban terrorism" in the south, including bombings and assassination attempts, primarily in Kandahar.

This has been made possible in part by overt support from the JUI. The JUI's madrassas and mosques have an open-door policy to house and feed the Taliban, most of whom escaped from Afghanistan after they were defeated in December 2001. The JUI played a similar role in 1994 when the Taliban movement began.

Secular Pashtun politicians in Baluchistan are fearful and opposed to the Taliban presence. "The [Pakistan] army has resurrected mullah power in Baluchistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan," says Hamed Khan, a leader of the secular Pashtunkhwa National People's party. "We are being

drowned." Karzai has publicly lashed out at JUI mullahs and named names, including the Shaldara madrassa in Quetta, which is run by JUI leader Maulana Nur Mohammed. Karzai called Shaldara a Taliban headquarters. Says Nur Mohammed's deputy, Maulana Abdul Qadir, "Our job is to make sure that the whole Pakistani nation supports the Taliban."

But Karzai can't blame all his failures on Pakistan. Himself a Pashtun, Karzai has failed to build political support among the Pashtun tribes in the south since he became president nearly two years ago. Consequently, most Pashtuns in Afghanistan feel alienated from the power structure in Kabul. They see themselves as trapped between a resurgent Taliban and a keen Pashtun desire to usher in a constitutional monarchy led by the 87-year-old former king, Zahir Shah. Such a desire has more to do with nostalgia than political reality, especially as the king's sons are not considered up to the task of following him.

Disaffection could have a significant impact on the democracy process, which is meant to move ahead with a December meeting of the Loya Jirga, or grand council, to ratify a new constitution and pave the way for elections next year.

The draft of the new constitution has not been released, but Afghan officials say it sets out a strong presidential system and gives only an honorific role to the king. Up to 100 Pashtun delegates to the 550-member meeting could boycott the proceedings if they are dissatisfied, say Pashtun leaders in Kandahar.

Tribal leaders see Karzai as ineffective and trapped by the powerful ministers in his government who were members of the former Northern Alliance, which is dominated by Tajiks from the Panjshir valley. Karzai has tried to curtail their power and force them to disarm their militias, but hasn't been able to cement his authority.

While Karzai was abroad in late September, Northern Alliance leaders gathered prominent warlords-predominantly non-Pashtun-from around the country and discussed setting up a new party that would oppose Karzai's nomination as president in next June's elections. Warlords included Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim, Herat's Ismail Kahn, Uzbek leader Gen. Rashid Dostum and former President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

At the gathering, they discussed choosing their own candidate to run against Karzai. Such a move would be devastating for the country's already fragile ethnic unity and could set in motion a return to the worst times of the civil war in the 1990s, when the Pashtun Taliban lined up against non-Pashtuns.

In New York at the end of September, Karzai warned that the present crisis may force him to postpone the June 2004 elections, as peaceful polling would be next to impossible in southern Afghanistan. However, the Bush administration appears to be keen to conduct polls in order to show a success in the war against terrorism before U.S. elections in November. The U.S. has asked the UN to look into the possibility of holding a limited election for president, rather than the scheduled full parliamentary elections, according to Western diplomats in Kabul.

Also in aid of national stability, after much deliberation, Nato, which oversees international peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan, agreed on October 6 to send a contingent of German troops to Kunduz in northeast Afghanistan, and agreed in principle to send additional troops to be based outside Kabul. The new deployment will need a new UN Security Council resolution to proceed.

But Nato officials in Brussels say they are concerned that the expansion will have to face intense Taliban attacks. On October 2, two Canadian soldiers under Nato's command in Kabul were killed in a mine blast. In Kabul, Armitage said that the Bush administration was seeking \$800 million in addition to the \$1.2 billion already pledged for Afghanistan, to bring the 2003-04 totals to \$2 billion. That's unlikely to yield dividends unless the U.S. can find a realistic strategy to deal with the Taliban, its Pakistani supporters, the warlords in Afghanistan and the challenges from within Karzai's own cabinet.