

Time and Policy Almost Exhausted in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Bush Administration, running out of time in Afghanistan, is making yet another half-hearted effort to restore peace and stability in that country. On Sept. 23, President George Bush named his special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad to Afghanistan as the new Ambassador to that country. Prior to Khalilzad's official appointment, and in the wake of mounting violence and a worsening security situation, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was in Kabul on Sept. 7; and on Sept. 18, Treasury Secretary John Snow. What exactly these senior Bush Cabinet members did in Afghanistan, beyond assuring the increasingly jittery interim Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, is anybody's guess.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 23 and pleading for the UN's help to repair some of the wreck of his Administration's war policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. President George W. Bush avoided addressing the realities, and said instead: "The United Nations has been a friend of the Afghan people, distributing food and medicine, helping refugees return home, advising on a new constitution, and helping to prepare the way for nationwide elections. NATO has taken over the UN-mandated security force in Kabul. American and coalition forces continue to track and defeat al-Qaeda terrorists and remnants of the Taliban. Our efforts to rebuild that country go on. I have recently proposed to spend an additional \$1.2 billion for the Afghan reconstruction effort, and I urge other nations to continue contributing to this important cause."

Inadequate Aid

It is evident that President Bush is unaware where this money actually goes. For instance, a recent press report in *The Scotsman* says that a private employee of an American security firm charged with guarding the CIA headquarters in Kabul, is paid \$545 a day! The much-stated \$1.2 billion allotted for the year 2004 consists of \$400 million which the State Department belatedly provided in its aid budget, after the Congress pointed out that the original budget had included no money at all for Afghanistan; and \$800 million that President Bush had requested. It is reported that the Americans will be looking for the \$600 million promised by other donors at the pledging conference in Tokyo last year. It is evident that not more than \$2 billion will be available for the fiscal year, against the estimated \$20 billion

for five years—considered a highly conservative estimate by many analysts—put forward by the Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani.

Bush's avoidance of realities should not surprise anyone. Secretary Rumsfeld, who had boasted of total victory in Afghanistan back in 2001, is not so sure any longer. Rumsfeld, referring to the present situation in Afghanistan, told reporters on Sept. 7 that the "situation is improving." Snow winged his whole visit, saying the United States "cannot allow the people of Afghanistan suffer a return to the humanitarian disaster of the past 2 years, in which a lawless land with the promise of much more, unfortunately became a haven for terrorists and drug traffickers."

The ground realities cannot be ignored any longer. The very Taliban militia that got routed by the U.S. security forces in Rumsfeld's "total victory," is now back with a vengeance. In the last 10 days of August, the Taliban assembled some 1000 troops in the two tribal provinces of Afghanistan, Zabul and Uruzgan, to launch a massive attack on U.S. and Afghan troops. Like the Tet offensive in 1968, when the Viet Cong made known to the U.S. forces that they were far from being destroyed, the Taliban sent the same message and staggered the Afghan regime in Kabul. On Sept. 22, Amir Shah of the Associated Press reported a meeting of Taliban commanders with their supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. The Taliban spokesman, Sayed Hamid Agha, said: "Over the last few days, we established a *shura* (council) under the leadership of Mullah Omar and the *shura* appointed four committees—military, political, cultural, and economic—to regulate all relevant matters."

This suggests Afghanistan has two governments: One, based in Kabul, where President Karzai is surrounded by the American bodyguards and the capital is protected by the NATO troops; the other, headed by Mullah Omar, is based perhaps somewhere on the Pakistan side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders, and dominates most of southeastern Afghanistan. The rest of Afghanistan, for all practical purposes, is under a number of warlords, like Ismail Khan of Herat, Abdur Rashid Dostum of Mazar-e-Sharif, among others. What is most disturbing for the Karzai government are the reports from Kandahar which indicate thousands of seminary students from the Pakistani provinces of Baluchistan and North West Frontier Provinces are pouring in to join the Taliban movement. The scarcity of reconstruction work in Afghanistan's southern regions, where people lack healthcare, education, or even wells for drinking water, has boosted their recruitment drive.

Taliban Stronger

Since mid-August, small groups of Taliban and anti-U.S., anti-Kabul forces have kept up their attacks on troops, and on soft targets such as the foreign non-government organizations (NGOs). Four Afghans working for the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) were killed in execution-style shootings in early September.

DACAAR has since abandoned its operations in the country. The United Nations in August suspended road missions across much of southern Afghanistan following a series of attacks which left seven dead, including a Mercy Corps worker, and 15 injured, including 10 Afghan aid workers who were severely beaten. The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), an umbrella organization representing NGOs, warned on Sept. 16 that the worsening security situation is threatening reconstruction work in Afghanistan. "The security situation is forcing aid agencies to reconsider activities in more and more areas, and is restricting aid and development, resulting in growing public support for radical movements," said Barbara Stapleton, advocacy coordinator for ACBAR. As if the lack of funds and security threats from the Taliban and other anti-U.S., anti-Kabul forces, were not enough to create a greenhouse situation for President Karzai, the interim Afghan president is under pressure also from the United States to carry out political "reforms" in disunited Afghanistan.

Reconstruction of Afghanistan, right now, is a daydream. What the United States is looking for, however, is a way out of the mess without looking "defeated." What Khalilzad & Co. believe is that if the United States could pressure Karzai, a handmaiden of Khalilzad, to produce a new constitution, and then hold general elections, the whole affair then could be called a success, and forgotten. There is no doubt that the objective of Khalilzad as U.S. Ambassador, will be to see that President Karzai delivers this face-saving formula.

The question then is: how difficult is it to deliver this formula? The difficulty that Karzai faces is directly linked to the Pushtun issue and the Taliban. When the United States ousted the Taliban and placed Karzai in charge of the country, it did so with the help of Afghan ethnic minorities—Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. The Taliban militia was almost 100% Pushtuns. So, the Pushtuns were kept out, and the minorities were given all important portfolios. A disproportionate number of powerful ministries went to the Tajiks, and the Pushtun population did not like this one bit. In a recent report, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), which remains very active in Afghanistan, warned that Pushtun perceptions about not being meaningfully represented in the Kabul government, particularly in its security institutions, could undermine hopes for enduring peace in Afghanistan.

President Karzai, on the other hand, is a Pushtun, and he is now accused by the Pushtun community of handing over power and wealth to the minorities, in order to stay in power and to satisfy the Americans. In fact, some non-Taliban Pushtun leaders launched a new political movement in August, called National Unity, which advocates the restoration of constitutional monarchy. Karzai's deputy intelligence chief, Hakim Nurzai, resigned to join the group. It is not likely that the National Unity will pose a threat to the Karzai government or

the Taliban. But what it means is that one section of the Pushtuns who do not see eye-to-eye with the Taliban, are not with the President, either. It makes Karzai's mission doubly difficult.

Not all Pushtuns are Taliban or Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, if anyone cares to go back to the 1970s, one would find the backbone of the Afghan communist movement was provided by the Pushtuns. This faction of the Afghan communists was known as the Khalqis.

The constitution should have been ready this Summer, but is not. The *loya jirga* (grand council) was scheduled to reconvene this October to approve the constitution; Karzai, citing the commission's inability to draft it in time, has postponed the *loya jirga* till December. The general elections are scheduled for June 24, 2004, but that is too far away to discuss now. By postponing the *loya jirga*, President Karzai bought some time. He knows it cannot be convened under the present circumstances, not only because of the security situation, but because the Pushtuns will not participate. It could be even worse. It could trigger another phase of bloody civil war.

Therefore, under pressure from the United States, Karzai, just before leaving the country to attend the UN General Assembly, fired two Tajik defense chiefs and appointed a handful of generals of different ethnic backgrounds. He did not touch the powerful Defense Minister and head of the Tajik groups, Mohammad Qaseem Fahim. According to observers, the reshuffle will change little. It will not satisfy any significant section of the Pushtuns.

Belling the Cat

To convene the *loya jirga*, President Karzai not only must shift the power base from the ethnic minorities to the Pushtuns—a process which itself may collapse the Kabul government—but also able to disarm the powerful drug-trafficking warlords, who control their territories with thousands of their own militia. On paper, Kabul has already a codename "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Re-integration Program" (DDR). Scheduled to begin in June, it has not, for obvious reasons. International donors are demanding that unless reforms are carried out within the Defense Ministry, DDR cannot begin. The DDR program will first count the weapons and their owners belonging to armed units around the country, and then demobilize them, incorporating at least some of the men into the national army.

So far Kabul, helped by the Americans, has raised not more than 4000 Afghan soldiers. In contrast, there exist a few warlords—some of whom are Pushtuns, some Uzbeks, and some Tajiks—who have more than 40,000 members militia each. This is their powerbase. Secondly, the disarmament experiments earlier led to another distortion. Stronger warlords, under the program, secured the weapons and kept them. They also incorporated the men into their militia, making themselves stronger in the process.