

Afghan Cauldron Is Boiling Over on U.S.

by Ramtanu Maitra

Events in two of Afghanistan's largest cities on Sept. 5 have brought to full view the rapid deterioration of the Afghan situation. The much-touted "crushing military victory" announced by U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld last Winter, proclaiming to all not only the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda at the hands of the U.S. troops and the Northern Alliance, but also the stabilization and rebuilding of Afghanistan, begins to appear a piece of grandiose rhetoric.

The events which exposed the untenable U.S. position occurred within hours of each other. At Kandahar, the bastion of the former Taliban regime, four shots were fired at interim President Hamid Karzai. Providence saved his life, but one shot hit the Governor of Kandahar province, Gul Agha Shirzai—a close ally of the United States and an avowed enemy of the Taliban. The second event was more macabre. In Kabul, the only city which the government fully controls, a huge car-bomb ripped through a crowded bazaar, killing at least 36 people and injuring 200 others.

President Karzai, shaken up at Kandahar, returned to his capital in the midst of mourners and growing fears. Since then, he has left Afghanistan for the United States to attend the United Nations General Assembly session and, of course, to discuss the strategy to survive, with his protectors in Washington.

What Is Going On

To have an idea of how bad things have become in Afghanistan consider the following:

- U.S.-backed President Karzai is now surrounded by U.S. Special Operations Forces, because Afghans cannot be trusted to protect him. Although Karzai has been identified by the United States as the representative of the majority ethnic Pushtuns, the attempt on his life was made at Kandahar, the center of Pushtun nobility. The President, even with his American bodyguards, cannot travel to the Pushtun-majority southern and eastern regions lest he be assassinated. In northern Afghanistan, he remains wholly at the mercy of the ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, who remain dedicated to denying the Pushtuns power in Kabul. In Herat in western Afghanistan, the provincial governor Ismail Khan rules the roost, and refused to pledge his allegiance to Karzai.

- Two high-level Ministers in the Cabinet have been assassinated. One was beaten to death at the Kabul airport, while

the other, Haji Abdul Qadir, the vice president and a powerful Pushtun leader from eastern Afghanistan, was assassinated in front of his office on his first day at work. Hamid Karzai, and his American patrons, not only failed to provide adequate security to Haji Qadir, but could not even investigate his murder, lest it open up a Pandora's box.

- For almost a year, reports have multiplied, that the Tajik soliders of the Northern Alliance, who have kept the government afloat, were involved in the killing of hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda suspects while transporting them from the south to northern Afghan prisons. These Pushtun victims were buried in the middle of a desert in mass graves. The location is known, but the Karzai government won't investigate, lest it be destabilized.

- Despite the promises by the United States and the Kabul government, Afghanistan had a bumper opium crop. Total production will be close to 3,000 tons—below the 4,400 tons harvested by the Taliban in 2000, but more than substantial. The opium warlords, some of whom are "helping" both the Americans and the government, have overruled Karzai's edict. It also means that the farmers, fearing the warlords, rejected the government's cash enticement not to grow poppies. Come Winter, the warlords will dominate, fattened by the drug money and armed with new weapons.

- The U.S. Army's Operation Mountain Sweep in south-eastern Afghanistan in the last week of August, was a failure. Operation Mountain Sweep, designed as a top-secret, surprise combing operation to look for al-Qaeda and Taliban renegades and arms caches, flopped because, when the U.S. troops arrived at the villages, they found to their surprise that the villagers were waiting for them. Renegades had disappeared, and whatever arms existed had been removed. The U.S. forces do not know who works for them, and who for their enemies.

Behind the Kandahar and Kabul Attacks

Reports indicate that the assassination attempt at Kandahar was carried out by some recent recruits to the Afghan army, which Washington is involved in building. It has pinned the blame for the attack on al-Qaeda and Taliban. In reality, however, almost the entire Pushtun community has turned against Hamid Karzai and his protectors. The assassination of Haji Abdul Qadir, the killing of at least 1,000 civilian Afghans by U.S. bombings, and Kabul's inability to even investigate the killing of Pushtun prisoners by the Northern Alliance troops, have helped turn the Pushtun tide against both the United States and Karzai.

The Kabul bombing is of similar significance. Those who propagate the theory—and there are many in Washington, including President Bush's National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice—that Afghanistan is much safer now than during the Taliban days, always cite Kabul as their point of reference. Kabul is protected by 7,000-8,000 International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) under the leadership of

Turkey. It is the only place where the President's writ prevails. On Sept. 5, that illusion was destroyed, with the lives of dozens of Kabulis.

The facts are, however, no secret. The bomb explosion was the handiwork of a former U.S. asset—as Osama bin Laden once was—Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In the 1980s, Washington invested heavily in Hekmatyar to put the Hezb-e-Islami into power in Kabul. The Reagan Administration pumped in money and weapons and lined up Pakistan to back him to the hilt. Once that failed, Hekmatyar was dropped by the U.S. like a hot potato. Later, when the Taliban took over in the mid-1990s, he cooled his heels in Iran. With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Hekmatyar came back; but Washington already had Karzai, and Hekmatyar got short shrift.

Since then, Hekmatyar has gotten in touch with the Push-tun-Taliban and his large Hezb following, and has taken on Karzai. Reports indicate he is organizing support in Logar, Ghazni, Kunar, and Kandahar provinces, and one would expect more trouble ahead from these quarters.

Hekmatyar has also received support from across the border where the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which played a key role in organizing the rag-tag Afghani guerrillas against the Soviets, and later the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, is now backing Hekmatyar. In August, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah was in Pakistan, urging the ISI to withdraw that support. But the ISI neither admits nor denies its support; It is likely that it is scheming to regain control of Afghanistan, with Hekmatyar in the forefront, while the Taliban followers play a lesser role.

Elsewhere, overall security is deteriorating fast. In the eastern province of Khost, Badshah Khan Zadran, a warlord who has claimed the governorship of the province, shortly after the Sept. 5 attacks stormed the Karzai-appointed Gov. Hakim Taniwal's palace. The encounter killed 15, but Zadran's mission got aborted for the time being. What is interesting, is that the U.S. troops were helped by Zadran, for a price, in the American-run Operation Anaconda last Spring.

In the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the Northern Alliance stronghold, three main factions battle for its control. The city was formerly under control of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who is no longer in the Karzai Cabinet. It is now nominally controlled by Usted Atta Mohammad, a Tajik commander, challenged by Dostum and a commander of the Hezb-e-Wahadat Shi'ite group. Dostum has given an ultimatum to the other groups to leave the city. But thousands of men from all three factions, armed with assault rifles and light machine guns, have been roaming the streets of Mazar.

Will U.S. Troops Leave?

According to observers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States, with its eyes trained to attack Iraq, has begun to signal its willingness to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

The *New York Times* reported the first week of September that commanders of the U.S. military's elite Special Operations Forces are demanding that the troops be freed from the fruitless hunt for Osama bin Laden. According to the *Times*, some senior officers in the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) have concluded that bin Laden was probably killed in the American bombing raid at Tora Bora last December. To press their point, they are leaning heavily on Pakistan's President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who has said the same thing on a number of occasions.

But General Musharraf has a good reason to say that. He is finding it politically dangerous to continue supplying the Americans with soldiers to hunt down bin Laden, who is considered a hero to many Pakistanis, both military and civilian. The decision to allow the Americans to hunt the Taliban and al-Qaeda within Pakistan, has swelled the ranks of anti-American and anti-Musharraf Pakistanis.

Washington's shift was also noticeable in the recent utterance of the hawkish U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. Speaking to Pakistan's *The Nation* in August in Washington, Wolfowitz said: "I do think increasingly our focus is shifting to training the Afghan national army, supporting the International Security Assistance Forces, supporting reconstruction efforts—those kinds of things that contribute to long-term stability. . . . My biggest single concern is that the economic aid which was promised at the Tokyo conference [of international donors in January], which I think is crucial, not just for economic purposes but for political and security purposes, is just not coming through at the levels that were pledged. I don't know all the reasons why, but I don't see any reason why that should be the case." In fact, less than 30% of the \$ 1.8 billion promised has shown up.

Wolfowitz indicated that the United States would like to see the ISAF, under the leadership of Turkey, deployed beyond Kabul to other troubled cities. Observers believe that if the United States succeeds in achieving this objective, its troops will be moved out of Afghanistan. But Wolfowitz admitted that Washington is not sure who would take the leadership of the ISAF once Turkey's term ends in December (it took over from Great Britain on June 20). The force, which fields soldiers from a variety of countries, came under Turkish command after a long debate over how much ground it could cover. Thus, the Sept. 5 assassination attempt and Kabul car-bombing have served to intensify the debate about ISAF's capabilities.

Karzai and some UN officials have long urged an expansion of ISAF's mandate to Afghanistan's provinces, where warlords often use American aid and equipment to maintain their militias. The United States has resisted the idea until recently. Now, U.S. officials are veering towards expanding the ISAF role, but also insist that the question of the ISAF leadership be resolved before any expansion plan can be given a serious consideration.