

No Respite in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

The November report of the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) on the war in Afghanistan has caused some flutter, and has reminded Americans that besides Iraq, U.S. troops are on a mission in Afghanistan to eliminate the Islamic extremists. The report card after six years of waging war there indicates that “success” is a mirage: that the wide-ranging strategic goals that the Bush Administration set for 2007 have not been met, even as U.S. and NATO forces have scored significant combat successes against resurgent Taliban fighters, according to U.S. officials.

Expressing concern over what the NSC report had to say, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates went unannounced to Kabul on Dec. 3. This was his third visit since he assumed his post in December 2006. Besides his scheduled meetings with President Hamid Karzai and the NATO commander, it is evident that Gates was there to evaluate the situation on ground. He was keen not to show any panic when he told newspeople: “I’m not worried about a backslide as much as I am [about] how we continue the momentum going forward. . . . One of the clear concerns that we all have is that in the last two or three years, there has been a continuing increase in the overall level of violence.”

Speaking about Gates’s visit, a senior U.S. defense official was quoted saying that the U.S. military is concerned, and is looking for definitive signs of greater activity by al-Qaeda and foreign fighters, but the United States has not seen enough proof to draw final conclusions. The official discussed the terrorist network on condition of anonymity because of the security concerns, CBS news said.

The NSC report, and Gates’s stated concerns, may come as a surprise to some Americans, who would like to believe what is pleasant, and not make much effort to know the reality. But long before this report was released, it was well established that “success” in Afghanistan is unrealizable, because it has not even been defined. The NSC report does not identify the “wide-ranging strategic goals of the Bush Administration” that the soldiers from the United States and Europe (NATO) were trying to achieve.

A Reality Check

Now, not everyone associated with the Afghanistan war would like to admit things are not going right. For instance, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, a clownish figure, who hops from one base to another, says, contrary to the negative media stories, “We see an increase in the standard



of living of Afghan people here and we see a lot of reconstruction and development going on. In other words, there is reason for optimism in Afghanistan.” One wonders.

Those who are interested in the on-the-ground realities, and are not willing to devour the fantasies spoon-fed by the powers-that-be, for the reasons-that-be, should evaluate the Afghan situation on the basis of the following four factors.

To begin with, it must be understood by now, after six years of warfare, that the Afghan terrain does not allow a conventional army to maintain control over rural areas—which means about 95% of Afghanistan. Conventional armies can win battles, decimate the enemies that they meet, but they will never successfully occupy Afghanistan. The British, in the early 1900s, and the Soviets in the 1980s, went pell-mell into Afghanistan, overestimating their own valor and underestimating the Afghans’ will to defend their nation, customs, and tradition. They got the lesson they deserved.

Nothing much has changed since. Despite the cacophony about having set up a democratic system in Afghanistan, the reality is different.

To begin with, it is difficult to fathom how the occupying forces can set up a democratic system, when the majority of the victim-nations are eager to destroy the occupiers. As a result, democracy has remained a mirage. Even President Hamid Karzai would agree.

In other words, the only way a reasonably stable Afghanistan can emerge—and it will, once foreign troops leave that country—is when a political process, however tough and time-consuming that may be, brings about a participation of Afghans from North, South, East, and West. Afghanistan cannot be occupied and controlled by foreign troops with the help

TABLE 1

Opium Production in Afghanistan

(Metric Tons)

1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
3,400	2,300	2,200	2,800	2,700	4,600	3,300
2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
185	3,400	3,600	4,200	4,500	6,700	8,200

Source: National Security Council.

of Afghan warlords and drug barons—the unspoken strategy of the Bush Administration to realize its “strategic goals”—whatever they may be.

Occupy To Protect, or Destroy, Opium?

Second, Afghanistan is now the world’s largest opium producer; it accounts for about 95% of world’s opium/heroin production and more than 50% of Afghanistan’s GDP comes from opium/heroin. Has it been like this ever since opium/heroin production was recorded? Not so.

Look at the some of the opium production figures (Table 1). There are three things to note here. The despicable Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in 1995. Opium production, which was hovering around 2,000-3,000 metric tons after the defeated Soviet Army left Afghanistan in 1989, rose to 4,600 tons in 1999. The next year, the Taliban went hammer and tongs against opium production and brought it down to 185 metric tons. In the Winter of 2001, the United States invaded to eliminate the drug-producing, terrorist-sheltering, Stone-Age Islamicists, the Taliban.

Look what happened after that: Thanks to the occupiers’ vigilance, opium production in Afghanistan began setting new records every year. In 2007, the recorded amount is 8,200 metric tons—about four times the amount produced in 1988.

Who benefits from such massive growth in opium production? Everybody does, according to a private group of analysts; narco-corruption is present at all levels of the Afghan government. Every corrupt governor, police chief, or ministry official is a recruiting agent for the Taliban. Public officials trying to build a new transparent Afghan state, where impunity is no longer the rule, are undermined by corruption around them. Local people see hypocrisy, when most counter-narcotics efforts appear directed at poor farmers—who may not even own the land—while the well-connected flaunt their drug wealth with lavish houses and SUVs.

Another ruse is used from time to time to smooth the ruffled feathers of anti-drug moralists in the United States and elsewhere. This ruse comes in the form of huge efforts made by the Afghan government, with the help of U.S. troops, to eradicate opium. One such lie came to light recently: The UN report on opium production in 2007 singled out the province of Balkh as a “leading example” of an opium-free province,

saying other areas should follow “the model of this northern region where leadership, incentives and security have led farmers to turn their backs on opium.”

But the fields of Balkh province in northern Afghanistan exhibit ten-foot-tall cannabis plants, flourishing where opium was previously planted! The crop—the source of both marijuana and hashish—can be just as profitable as opium, but draws none of the scrutiny from Afghan officials bent on eradicating poppies. Cannabis cultivation rose 40% in Afghanistan this year, to 173,000 acres from 123,550 in 2006, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimated in its 2007 survey. The opium crop is being grown in at least 18 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, according to the survey released in October.

In addition, even where opium was eradicated, it was done in such a way that it makes one wonder. A *New Yorker* magazine article cited an Uruzgan province farmer’s complaint to the Virginia’s DynCorps eradication team, that they had not only destroyed the poppies, but also wheat and vegetables. He also charged that only tribes alienated from the Karzai government had their fields eradicated, while those politically aligned with the government were “missed.”

What this private group either did not investigate, or did not tell us, is that in the era of globalization and liberalization, with massive subprime mortgage losses and slaughter of hedge funds, cash vanishes like camphor. But, opium brings in real money. It helps some of the liquidity-starved banks, which are now a part of the casino-style financial system, to generate cash and stay afloat. The opium explosion in Afghanistan is a reality, while the “strategic objective” of the Bush Administration in Afghanistan will remain a miasma, to say the least.

How Widespread Is the Enemy?

The third factor to measure is the conditions that prevail along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is known as the Durand Line, drawn in the sand by a long-dead employee of the British colonialists, Mortimer Durand, more than 100 years ago. It never existed in the minds of the Afghans, and it is defunct now.

When the Bush Administration jumped in to “smoke out” Osama bin Laden, those who had even a faint understanding of the terrain pointed out that the western part of Pakistan, west of the Indus River, would become as much an enemy territory—if not an extension of Afghanistan to the east—as Afghanistan itself. How do you handle that?

If you are trying to find out how “well” the foreign occupiers are doing in Afghanistan, check out the part of Pakistan west of the Indus River. In the real world, this part of Pakistan has become virtually independent. Islamabad’s writ does not extend that far west. Islamabad, for reasons not difficult to understand, does not want to press the issue more than it has done already.

It is likely that the Bush Administration in its haste to

“smoke out” Osama bin Laden, did not quite understand what it was doing. Perhaps London did, and instigated it. An independent nation, virtually underground, depending on others, is something the British Empire always encouraged. For London, it is not a bad idea, and, in fact, it is a great idea, to set up a tribal nation at the crossroads to Iran, Central Asia, Russia, and the Indian subcontinent. So, it is likely that the Bush Administration did not quite achieve its undefined “strategic objective,” but perhaps, London did.

Killing of the Innocents

The fourth factor is the level of violence. There is no question that violence begets violence: Just follow the indiscriminate bombing that the Afghan villagers were subjected to over the last six years (only a handful of them were Taliban sympathizers to begin with, but now most of those still living are anti-U.S. and anti-NATO). The numbers would add up to a few thousands. But, for the media consumption of American citizens, all of them were the despicable—but drug-eradicating—Taliban.

Now, this indiscriminate bombing is not liked by any Afghan, even those who are the beneficiaries of the U.S.-NATO presence. Consider for instance, President Karzai, an American puppet who endorses almost anything the foreign forces do. But, even he speaks out against this indiscriminate killing of Afghan men, women, and children. But do his protests end such actions? No.

On Nov. 29, Afghan officials reported that U.S. forces “mistakenly” killed at least a dozen road construction workers in air strikes in eastern Afghanistan. As many as 14 engineers and laborers were killed in the incident in Nuristan province, which officials blamed on faulty intelligence, possibly fed by the Taliban. The workers, who had been contracted by the U.S. military to build a road in the mountainous province, were sleeping in their tents when they were killed, according to Sayed Noorullah Jalili, director of the road construction company Amerifa.

“All of our poor workers have been killed,” Jalili said. “I don’t think the Americans were targeting our people. I’m sure it’s the enemy of the Afghans who gave the Americans this wrong information.”

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would have said, “stuff happens.” But this is not the only “stuff” that is happening out there, and these incidents will continue, with the policy Washington has embraced. And the nature of the “stuff” may get pretty dangerous.

Why No Accountability?

Coming back to the NSC report, it was evident that some lights were shone on the subject, to clear up facts which had been drowned out by earlier propaganda. Last Summer, columns and columns of copy appeared in mainstream media showing the success of Operation Medusa—launched against the Taliban in the drug-infested province of Helmand. The

report quotes Seth Jones of the Rand Corp. saying that in last year’s Operation Medusa, Canadian combat troops fought hard for control of the Panjwai district, south of Kandahar. “Four weeks ago,” he said, “the levels of Taliban in Panjwai ... were back up to pre-Operation Medusa.”

The report pointed out that experts said the Taliban’s control has extended beyond the group’s traditional southern territory, with extremists making substantial inroads this year into the western provinces of Farah, Herat, and others along the Iranian border, even as they regularly challenge eastern-based U.S. forces. “We’re seeing definite expanded strongholds,” said a U.S. official who declined to be identified by agency. “That’s not going to stop in 2008.... If anything, it’s gaining momentum.”

Northern Afghanistan, ethnically separate from the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, is still considered relatively peaceful, although officials regard a Nov. 6 suicide bombing in northern Baghlan province that killed more than 80 people—most of them children—as an ominous sign. Though U.S. intelligence officials initially questioned the Taliban’s denial of responsibility, they now believe the bomb was the work of Hezb-e-Islami, a Taliban ally, even as suspicion has grown in Afghanistan that most of the deaths were caused by Afghan police officers responding to the explosion. Hezb-e-Islami, headed by a mullah, beneficiary of a great deal of largess (American taxpayers’ money) and one of Washington’s former favorite blue-eyed Afghans, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, is active all along Afghanistan’s eastern border.

The report also debunks some of the bite-size opinions churned out by the Bush Administration’s propaganda machine. One such is about the suicide bombers. It was previously said that the suicide bombers were introduced in Afghanistan as a desperate measure, because the insurgents were in their last throes. But Afghanistan, which never experienced suicide bombers until 2007, is now terrorized by them. The report quoted a former senior U.S. commander who said that suicide attacks are a “hugely effective tactic,” imported from Iraq to Afghanistan, and convincing Afghans that the Coalition cannot protect them. “The idea that [suicide bombs] are a sign of desperation, that’s ludicrous,” he said.

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