

Allies 'Differ' Over Afghan Settlement

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Britain and US appear to have differing views on the establishment of a post-Taleban government in Afghanistan.

The British foreign secretary Jack Straw this week committed Britain to a costly programme of political and economic reconstruction in Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Taleban, a pledge that included a guarantee that the next government will be decided by ordinary Afghans, in spite of the country's history of factional fighting and its lack of democratic experience.

Analysts said Straw's commitment went far beyond an acknowledgement earlier this month by Prime Minister Tony Blair and by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell last week that Pakistan should have a significant say in determining who rules Afghanistan when the Taleban are eventually deposed by American-led military action.

Foreign Office sources attributed the apparent discrepancy between US and British plans for a post-Taleban political settlement to "differences in thinking" about Afghanistan. "But there is a coalescence of views on the future," the source said, "that any government has to be broad-based and to have the support of all Afghanistan's neighbours."

Straw told an audience at the influential International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, "Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network find safe havens in places, not just Afghanistan, where conflict, poverty, ethnic and racial tensions, exploitation, corruption, poor governance, malign interference from outside or just plain neglect have brought the collapse of responsible government and civil society.

"Our message to the people of Afghanistan is this: in the past, we have let you down. But we will not turn our back on you again. We will work with you to build a better future for you and your children."

Straw identified four guiding principles for the resolution of the crisis in Afghanistan. They include self-determination for Afghans, with the UN taking the lead in the political process, a massive reconstruction programme, and the "political will to finish the job".

Citing the UN's successful record of political and economic rehabilitation in Cambodia, Kosovo and East Timor, Straw outlined a programme of rebuilding Afghanistan after the Taleban have been ousted that could stretch into decades. He said that the cost of rebuilding Bosnia had been 5 billion US dollars, but that Afghanistan had four times the population and the task would take longer.

Straw did not elaborate how a new Afghan administration might function in a country with no history of democracy and where more than a third of the population live in refugee or displaced camps - except to say that the UN had the instruments and expertise to implement it.

But last week, the UN special envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi dismissed the possibility of the organisation taking over Afghanistan's administration, while cautioning against the insertion of a foreign, peacekeeping force after the collapse or defeat of the Taleban. "We are in contact with everyone, here and elsewhere," said the former Algerian foreign minister. "What needs to be done is being done, but we cannot produce a solution out of a hat."

Straw's speech marked an advance on the ruling Labour party's thinking about Afghanistan since his

statement on the coalition's campaign objectives to parliament last week. The reintegration of Afghanistan within the international community then came in third place among Britain's strategic goals, after the elimination of terrorism and the deterrence of states supporting it.

The creation of a broad-based government representing all Afghanistan's 55 ethnic groups, led by ex-king Zahir Shah, underpins Western thinking about the shape of the war-torn country after the Taleban have been driven from power. In addition to Western humanitarian aid, an internationally recognised government in Kabul would see a flood of reconstruction funding arrive from global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as the Asian Development Bank and development funds run by oil-rich governments in the Gulf.

"We have a duty to the people of Afghanistan," Straw concluded, "just as we have a duty to our own citizens. Today, it is clear that these duties coincide. Bringing order out of chaos is one of the great tasks of the first part of the 21st century."

The gist of Straw's speech contrasts sharply with recent US assurances to President Pervez Musharraf that, in exchange for the use of Pakistani bases and air space for operations inside Afghanistan, Islamabad will be consulted over membership of the first, post-Taleban government.

Musharraf has pushed for the inclusion of the elusive moderate wing of the Pashtun-dominated Taleban movement, while disputing the possible involvement of the opposition Northern Alliance, which is largely composed of the minority tribes of north and central Afghanistan. Nor is Pakistan enamoured of the restoration of Zahir Shah, although the former monarch has said he is not interested in becoming king.

British foreign ministry staff prepared for Straw's policy speech by consulting a number of Afghans living in London, including members of the Harrow-based Afghan Society, NGO employees and other exiles.

"It's time for the West to be more clear about its objectives," said Afghan analyst Zahir Tanin. "Russia and India said last Friday in New Delhi that they cannot agree with the Taleban remaining in government. Musharraf wants Pakistan to have a say in the next government. It's time to make clear that, taking into account the interest of all our neighbours, no country has a right to have a say in what kind of government Afghanistan should have. That's the right of Afghans."

But how that right will be exercised in practice - and whether is the UN or a multinational force that will defend it - still remains to be seen.

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