

Instability Threatens Reconstruction

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Efforts to rebuild Afghanistan are being undermined by warlordism and the resurgence of the Taleban.

Despite considerable international efforts to bring about sufficient stability to allow the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan, the security situation is a long way from allowing this to happen.

The re-emergence of the Taleban and the continuing attempts by former Northern Alliance leaders to forge their own paths in defiance of central government are making a secure future more difficult to foresee.

The Taleban, supported by the equally extreme Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, have returned to the fray, enjoying relative freedom of movement as they conduct increasingly bold operations from the border areas with Pakistan.

The frontier has never been recognised by local Pashtun tribes and is an area in which Pakistan's security forces have difficulty operating. The latter have deployed there just once in the 55 years since partition. That was this spring following a request from the US that they act against suspected Taleban elements gathering there.

But further cooperation is unlikely given the hostility of the local population and the sporadic exchanges of fire between Taleban elements and US troops on the Afghan side of the border, as well as occasional clashes between US and Pakistani forces.

Meanwhile, the MMA government of the North-West Frontier Province voted to introduce Islamic law on June 2, thereby giving impetus to re-Talebanisation in the area. Baluchistan, which also has an MMA leadership, may soon follow suit.

In their efforts to contain the security situation from Kandahar to Jalalabad, the US military has sought to win support from local leaders. But these individuals are fickle at best, and have scant loyalty to an "invader" who seeks to buy them sometimes with cash, sometimes with weapons - adding to the proliferation of small arms in the region.

America's apparent inability to secure this area was highlighted with the recent tragic death of the ICRC worker Ricardo Munguia, ambushed by gunmen in Uruzgan province, a former Taleban stronghold. He was the first international NGO employee to be killed in Afghanistan since the overthrow of the old regime.

Away from the troubled southern regions, there is a different, but just as complex security problem. The transitional government holds some sway around Kabul and to the north, but President Hamed Karzai's authority is far from complete.

Former Northern Alliance commanders such as Defence Minister Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Abdul Rashid Dostum still have vested interests in their areas of the country.

Dostum in the north around Mazar-e-Sharif, and Fahim in the Panshir valley, have their own militias. Tellingly, the forces of the defence minister do not guard the president. This is done by US troops.

In Herat, Ismail Khan flouts central governmental rule, and has established his own cross border tariff regime with the Iranians. He has also reintroduced some restrictions on women's rights.

Moreover, there are the telltale signs of partisan support by neighbouring states to individual warlords and Afghan leaders. It is reported that Dostum has received assistance from Turkey and Uzbekistan. Russia is believed to have given support to Fahim. And Iran is helping Khan.

The Afghan National Army, ANA, now numbers some 4,000 men. But this is way behind the target figure of 70,000. The soldiers are poorly paid and many desert to join better paid militia groups, having received military training with the ANA.

The estimated total of the non-state armed militia groups loyal to warlords is 200,000. It is these groups principally which should be disarmed under the UN New Beginnings Programme. However, there is a crucial weakness in this programme, which is that the sum it offers for an AK-47 is 10 US dollars lower than the market rate. Moreover, the employment opportunities for those fighters disarmed and demobilised are sadly lacking.

Then there is the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, which has done good work in stabilising Kabul. However, despite the best efforts of Karzai to get an expanded mandate for the western military operation, there is no sign of this happening so far. Moreover, it seems unlikely that it will happen, as that would mean a greater contribution of manpower and funds from donor countries, which believe they are doing their bit already.

With all these negative signs on the security front, reconstruction efforts are severely hampered. It is hard for building companies, NGOs and others to operate without the requisite stability. And these uncertainties, in turn, create an environment ideal for the Taleban as well as warlords.

And finally, one should not forget the role of the opium poppy. This lucrative, easy-to-grow crop continues to produce a ready source of revenue which can be used for purchasing arms and paying fighters. This year will be another good one for the poppy, and efforts to introduce replacement crops are unlikely to succeed for some time to come.

In conclusion, Afghanistan's security situation is reverting very much to type. The race to bring the country to some kind of normality is being lost. Despite the best efforts of the international community, the vested interests of militaristic individuals and the fervour of extremists are still the more potent force.

It is notable that many of the aforementioned have been around ever since the war against the Soviet occupiers. These include Hekmatyar, Dostum, and Ismail Khan amongst others. And these leopards are unlikely to change their spots very easily or quickly.

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