

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

Afghanistan This Week

Report Number: 106

Week 7-13 2010

February, 14, 2010

Mohammad Amin

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Political Headlines Summary

Afghan police commander arrested in bomb ring

Reuters

02/07/2010

KABUL - An Afghan police commander has been arrested as part of a ring that planted roadside bombs, NATO-led forces said on Sunday, a sign of the difficulty Western troops face in setting up Afghan security forces they can trust.

NATO allies to shuffle Afghan pledges to add training

Reuters

02/07/2010

By Adam Entous and David Brunnstrom

ANKARA/MUNICH - NATO allies plan to reshuffle rather than expand existing troop commitments to Afghanistan, sending more military trainers in place of combat forces to ready the Afghan army and police to take control, senior U.S. and NATO officials said on Saturday.

As US begins Afghan surge, Canada plans troop exit

The Associated Press

02/07/2010

KHADAN - Fighting its bloodiest conflict since the Korean War, Canada has paid a heavy price 139 Canadian troops have died. With about 2,800 soldiers in the country, the third-largest contingent in the US-led coalition, the Canadians have taken more casualties, proportionately, than any other.

Afghans flee ahead of major anti-Taliban offensive

AFP

02/07/2010

By Nasrat Shoib

KANDAHAR - Thousands of people are leaving their homes on the Marjah plain in southern Afghanistan ahead of a massive military operation to clear Taliban militants from their last stronghold.

US hopes to route the Taliban in new front on the Afghan War

The Associated Press

02/07/2010

KABUL - A new and possibly decisive chapter of the Afghan war is unfolding. The U.S. is preparing a major attack on the Taliban, the militants are being squeezed in their Pakistani sanctuaries, and the Afghan government is trying to draw them into peace talks.

Karzai puts faith in King Abdullah

2010-02-08

By Suleman shah Durrani

By: Gulfnews .com

Afghan president wants Saudi Arabia to spur reconciliation with non-violent Taliban elements

Clinton lauds Karzai cabinet

Lalit K Jha - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:51

Pajhwok

WASHINGTON (PAN): US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has praised President Hamid Karzai and several members of his cabinet, saying he has really stepped up in his second term.

Karzai wants Afghanistan security handover to begin this year

CNN

02/08/2010

Afghanistan is prepared to begin taking over security from international forces in some parts of the war-torn nation by the end of the year, President Hamid Karzai said Sunday.

Karzai considers conscription to bolster ranks of Afghan army

The Associated Press

02/08/2010

By David Rising

Munich - Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Sunday he is looking at instituting conscription to build an army big enough to provide security without international help.

Afghan President demands judicial independence

Xinhua
02/08/2010

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Monday his country wanted to regain complete judicial independence as soon as possible.

Afghanistan's influential elders

Al Jazeera
02/08/2010

Afghanistan's influential tribal elders are key to the government's plan to bring Taliban leaders into the mainstream political process.

Pakistan's military sets Afghan terms

Asia Times
02/08/2010
By Syed Saleem Shahzad

Pakistan has rejected US proposals for the balkanization of Afghanistan

US, EU ignoring India on Af-Pak to appease Islamabad, says expert

Economic Times
02/10/2010

NEW DELHI - The US and Europe are ignoring India on Afghanistan to appease Pakistan, according to an article in the Foreign Policy magazine. Warning against keeping the only stable, secular democracy in the region out of the Afghan strategy, Kapil Komireddi in an article titled, Indian Motion, published in Foreign Policy wrote that the US has been wary of openly embracing India as a partner in Afghanistan due to Pakistan.

Pakistan Is Said to Pursue Role in Afghan Talks

The New York Times
02/10/2010
By Jane Perez

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has told the United States it wants a central role in resolving the

Afghan war and has offered to mediate with Taliban factions who use its territory and have long served as its allies, American and Pakistani officials said.

Iran against reconciliation package in Afghanistan

Times of India

02/10/2010

By

NEW DELHI - Iran has come out strongly against a reconciliation package for the Taliban in Afghanistan. "We don't believe in good or bad Taliban," Iranian envoy Seyed Mehdi Nabizadeh said.

Afghan government in tentative talks with insurgent leader

McClatchy Newspapers

02/11/2010

By Saeed Shah

KABUL - Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of Afghanistan's most brutal Islamist warlords, is holding tentative peace talks with the government of Afghanistan that could cause a split in the Taliban-led insurgency, Afghan politicians in Kabul said Wednesday.

Charlie Wilson, backer of 80s Afghan warlords, dies

AFP

02/11/2010

By

WASHINGTON – The former US lawmaker and hero of the film "Charlie Wilson's War," who championed covert CIA support for Afghans fighting Soviet troops in the 1980s, died at age 76, hospital officials said.

Taliban defenses near Afghanistan town

The Associated Press

02/11/2010

By Alfred de Montesquiou and Christopher Torchia

NEAR MARJAH - U.S. Marines fired smoke rounds Wednesday and armored vehicles maneuvered close to Taliban positions to test insurgent defenses ahead of an anticipated attack on the biggest militant-controlled town in southern Afghanistan.

Chilly weather kills 23 insurgents in N Afghanistan

Xinhua

02/11/2010

By

The continued snowfall and chilly weather in Afghanistan besides inflicting casualties on innocent civilians also claimed the lives of nearly two dozen anti- government militants in north Afghanistan, a private television channel reported Thursday.

Conscription idea seen as a non-starter

Pajhwok

02/11/2010

By Abdul Qadeer Siddiqui

KABUL - Some political and military analysts believe that forcing the ordinary people into active service in the current situation could be counter-productive, because this may prompt many to swell Taliban ranks.

New Battles Test U.S. Strategy In Afghanistan

The Wall Street Journal

02/11/2010

By Yaroslav Trofimov

Focus on Safeguarding Civilian Lives Frustrates Troops in Taliban Territory

Marjah offensive: Afghanistan civilians aren't taking the hint

McClatchy Newspapers

02/11/2010

By Saeed Shah

US forces are poised to move into the southern Afghanistan town of Marjah, and have warned civilians to leave the area. But only a few hundred Afghan families have responded.

Afghan interior minister calls on Taliban to give up militancy

Xinhua
02/11/2010
By

Ahead of launching a massive military operation against Taliban in Marja district of southern Helmand province, Afghan Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar Thursday called on Taliban militants to give up militancy and join the peace process.

Sherzai opposes cash payments to tribes

Pajhwok
02/11/2010
By Abdul Moeed Hashmi

JALALABAD - Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Sherzai has alleged direct assistance to tribal chieftains from foreign troops is promoting warlordism in the country.

Afghan security forces showing signs of professionalism

San Francisco Examiner
02/11/2010
By Jim Kouri

Afghan and coalition forces captured two suspected enemy commanders and seized caches of weapons and drugs in operations in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command reported.

Afghans plea for quick, careful attack on Marjah

The Associated Press
02/12/2010
By

KANDAHAR – Tribal elders in southern Afghanistan pleaded Friday for NATO forces to wage their imminent offensive on the Taliban stronghold of Marjah quickly and carefully to protect civilians in and around the town.

US and Afghan troops ring Taliban stronghold

The Associated Press
02/12/2010
By

NEAR MARJAH, – U.S. and Afghan forces ringed the Taliban stronghold of Marjah on Thursday, sealing off escape routes and setting the stage for what is being described as the biggest offensive of the nine-year war.

Blackwater 'billed US for prostitutes'

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

Two former Blackwater Worldwide employees say the security company repeatedly billed the US government for excessive or inappropriate expenses, including a prostitute for workers in Afghanistan and strippers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Warlord's offer complicates Afghan peace

United Press International

02/12/2010

By

KABUL - A peace initiative offered by Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could create tensions in the government's plans to court insurgents, lawmakers said.

NATO says night raid killed insurgents in Afghanistan; family says 5 innocents died

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

KABUL — A joint Afghan-NATO force killed several insurgents during a raid on a compound where troops found three dead women, NATO said Friday. Family members accused U.S. soldiers of killing five innocent civilians.

Afghan Immunity Law Stirs Up Anger

Truthdig

02/12/2010

By

Eliciting a cry from international and domestic human rights organizations, the Afghanistan government has passed a controversial law giving immunity from prosecution to Taliban fighters—no matter their deeds—who lay down their weapons.

Afghan power plant hit by new allegations of impropriety

McClatchy Newspapers

02/12/2010

By Marisa Taylor

WASHINGTON -- A \$300 million power plant project in Afghanistan that's paid for by American taxpayers and plagued by delays and cost overruns is now under scrutiny because of allegations that a security contract was awarded improperly.

Don't Let Pakistan Repeat Past Mistakes In Afghanistan

RFE/RL

02/13/2010

By M. D. Nalapat

The recently concluded London Conference on Afghanistan is the latest in a series of meetings that have sought to craft strategies for a country that has been torn by conflict since the Soviet Union invaded it in 1979. Back then, worried that Moscow would expand its footprint in the Pashtun heartland and pose a direct threat to the unity of Pakistan, the generals in Islamabad began a covert program of funding, training, and equipping Afghans willing to take on the Soviet Army.

US, Afghan troops sweep into Taliban stronghold

The Associated Press

02/13/2010

By

MARJAH – Thousands of U.S. Marines and Afghan soldiers stormed the Taliban stronghold of Marjah by air and ground Saturday, meeting only scattered resistance but facing a daunting thicket of bombs and booby traps that slowed the allied advance through the town.

Bombs, booby-traps slow US advance in Afghan town

The Associated Press

02/14/2010

By

MARJAH – Bombs and booby-traps slowed the advance of thousands of U.S. Marines

and Afghan soldiers moving through the Taliban-controlled town of Marjah — NATO's most ambitious effort yet to break the militants' grip over their southern heartland.

Marja 50 Years Ago: Model Villages and American Money

The New York Times

02/13/2010

By Stephen Farrel

Marja, an area of Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province, is the focus of an imminent NATO military operation. Tribal elders are being assured that government and NATO forces will rid the area of Taliban fighters, and that they will be consulted on the appointment of local officials and development project proposals.

Social Headlines Summary

Hundreds stranded on key highways

Pajhwok Reporters - Feb 8, 2010 - 20:15

KABUL (PAN): The non-stop snowfalls have blocked several key highways in different parts of the country, leaving hundreds of residents and travelers stranded, officials said on Monday.

Insecurity forces closure of 172 schools in Kandahar

Bashir Ahmad Naadem - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:05

Pajhwok

KANDAHAR (PAN): Tens of thousand of students have been deprived of their right of education in the insurgency-plagued southern province of Kandahar, mainly because of widespread insecurity, an official said on Monday.

Hundreds of Pakistani families move to Kunar

Khan Wali Salarzai - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:50

Pajhwok

ASADABAD (PAN): Up to 426 families have migrated from Pakistan's Bajaur tribal region to Shegal district of eastern Kunar province, an official said on Monday.

Snowfall claims six lives in Nangarhar

Abdul Moeed Hashimi - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:33

Pajhwok

JALALABAD (PAN): The continued snowfall in different parts of eastern Nangarhar province has left at least six people dead and dozens of head of livestock perished from exposure to the cold, officials say.

20 librarians receive training

Frozan - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:26

Pajhwok

KABUL (PAN): Twenty librarians, who were trained in books-keeping skills, received graduation certificates in Kabul on Monday.

Afghan avalanches kill 165, rescue underway

AFP

02/10/2010

By Shah Marai

SALANG — Rescuers recovered the bodies of 165 people killed by a series of avalanches on a treacherous Afghan mountain pass in one of the country's worst such disasters, an official said on Wednesday.

Afghanistan avalanche: vital pass remains closed as rescue continues

The Christian Science Monitor

02/11/2010

By Ben Arnoldy

Some 3,000 people have been rescued since an Afghanistan avalanche shut down a key pass linking Kabul to the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. The storied pass, which includes a series of tunnels and snow roofs, was built with Soviet help in the 1960s.

Economic Headlines Summary

Food packages distributed to more than 600 families

Pajhwok Report - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:55

KABUL (PAN): More than 600 families from the Jalrez district of Maidan Wardak province have received food packages funded by the Italian government and distributed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

Sowing delay to affect wheat yield

Ahmad Javed Javed - Feb 8, 2010 - 16:22

Pajhwok

MAHMUD RAQI (PAN): Farmers in central Kapisa province say they sowed the wheat crop pretty late due to a delay in supply of improved seeds and fertilizers, fearing a drastic fall in the yield.

Road blockade halts coal transportation

Ahmad Barat - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:29

Pajhwok

AIBAK (PAN): Heavy snowfall has blocked the Aibak-Dara-i-Sauf Highway, halting the transportation of coal from two mines in northern Samangan province, an official said on Monday.

Italy pledges 25m euros aid in first half of 2010

Zubair Babakarkhel - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:19

Pajhwok

KABUL (PAN): The Italian government will spend 25 million euros on promoting health, agriculture, reconstruction and some other sectors of Afghanistan during the first six months of the current year.

EU pledges agri aid to Samangan

Muhammad Barat - Feb 9, 2010 - 19:19

Pajhwok

AIBAK (PAN): The European Union would spend through the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) one million euros on agricultural projects in the northern province of Samangan, an official said on Tuesday.

Road blockades send fuel prices high in Ghor

Hassan Hakimi - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:31

Pajhwok

CHAGHCHIRAN (PAN): Fuel prices in northern Ghor province surged to an unaffordable level for its dwellers following an unprecedented snowfall blocked key roads, residents and officials said on Tuesday.

68 schemes executed in Khost

Saboor Mangal - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:28

Pajhwok

KHOST CITY (PAN): Sixty-eight uplift schemes have been executed under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) in southeastern Khost province, an official said on Tuesday.

Afghanistan to Seek Fresh Iron Ore Bids After Company Protests

Bloomberg

02/10/2010

By Eltaf Najafizada and James Rupert

The Afghan government said it will soon seek new bids to mine one of the world's richest iron ore deposits after abandoning a tender damaged by company complaints and withdrawals.

What Afghanistan needs: job creation

The Christian Science Monitor

02/11/2010

By Graciana del Castillo

New York – President Obama is leading two surges this year. One is for Afghanistan, where US troops are trying to secure the war-torn country. The other, in the form of business tax credits and government spending, is for the beleaguered US economy.

Political Headlines

Afghan police commander arrested in bomb ring

Reuters

02/07/2010

KABUL - An Afghan police commander has been arrested as part of a ring that planted roadside bombs, NATO-led forces said on Sunday, a sign of the difficulty Western troops face in setting up Afghan security forces they can trust.

International troops and Afghan security forces arrested the police commander in Mahmud Raqi, a district of mainly French-patrolled Kapisa province north of Kabul, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said.

"A known IED facilitator, he has been involved in the storage, distribution and installation of IEDs on the roads surrounding Mahmud Raqi," ISAF said in a statement. IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, are the military term for homemade bombs, by far the most lethal weapon used by insurgents.

"He is also involved in bribery and corruption related to road refurbishment. He has been clearly linked to criminal activities including a murder during the summer of 2009," the statement said. It did not name the commander.

Western troops are struggling to train an Afghan police force to eventually take over security in the country so they can withdraw, but acknowledge that the force is plagued by corruption, incompetence and infiltration by insurgents.

Last November, an Afghan policeman shot dead five British soldiers in southern Helmand province. The Taliban said he was one of their fighters who had infiltrated the force.

Many Afghans also complain about police corruption, one of the reasons that some have turned to the Taliban to provide law and order.

President Hamid Karzai has promised to root out corruption, but prosecutions are extremely rare.

NATO allies to shuffle Afghan pledges to add training

Reuters

02/07/2010

By Adam Entous and David Brunnstrom

ANKARA/MUNICH - NATO allies plan to reshuffle rather than expand existing troop commitments to Afghanistan, sending more military trainers in place of combat forces to ready the Afghan army and police to take control, senior U.S. and NATO officials said on Saturday.

The decision of some NATO member states to increase the proportion of trainers within existing troop pledges underscores the difficulty NATO and Washington have faced convincing European and other states to make new troop commitments.

A senior U.S. official said before a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Istanbul this week that Defense Secretary Robert Gates would urge allies to provide more than 4,000 trainers and mentors.

Yet NATO officials said France was the only country to make a firm new pledge at the two-day NATO meeting that ended on Friday -- offering just 80 instructors.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen nevertheless said he was confident the gap between what was needed and what was available would be filled, and that a force generation conference on February 23 would concentrate on this.

"I have already got positive responses from allies and partners to our requests for more trainers and training teams ... more will come from other countries," he told Reuters in an interview on the sidelines at a security conference in Munich.

Rasmussen also said it made sense to use existing resources to train the Afghan army and police, "so that we can already this year start the process of handing over responsibility for the security to the Afghans."

"It makes sense to use our resources to equip our training mission," he said. "I find it quite natural that we make sure that the composition of our troop contributions to the mission in Afghanistan reflects the strategy," he said.

GENERAL AGREEMENT

Gates made similar comments when asked by reporters in Ankara if he was concerned about the small commitment from France. He said what was important was the way contributions were shaped.

He said that there was general agreement in Istanbul that the more trainers there were in

the forces U.S. allies had committed to send to Afghanistan, the better.

"If there was one pretty clear theme at the NATO defense ministers meeting in Istanbul, it was: within the framework of the commitments you've made, trainers are the most important people we need ... It is important the right people go."

He said Germany had told its counterparts at the Istanbul meeting that it would significantly increase the proportion of trainers in its existing force in Afghanistan and reinforcements it plans to send.

But Gates warned his NATO counterparts their shared objectives would be achieved "only if the coalition continues to muster the resolve."

"No one wants to start issuing rosy predictions at this point, and a very tough fight lies in front of us. We are a long way from being done there," he told reporters in Ankara.

After Turkey, Gates was to take his call for more trainers to Rome, and then to Paris next week.

Nearly 120,000 foreign troops are now in Afghanistan, a number that will grow sharply in the coming months as new U.S. and NATO contingents arrive.

President Barack Obama has announced the deployment of 30,000 more U.S. troops and allies have committed almost 10,000 more with the aim of containing a widening Taliban insurgency and creating conditions for Afghan forces to take over.

The allies hope the big build of Afghan forces will allow them to start withdrawing some of the extra troops in July 2011.

Christine Fair, a professor at Georgetown University's Center for Peace and Security Studies, said it was important that U.S. allies did more.

"This is absolutely critical to the transition of security to the Afghans. We absolutely need these people (allies) to step up to the plate and provide mentors and money. It's a math problem. That being said, I'm not remotely optimistic," she said.

As US begins Afghan surge, Canada plans troop exit

**The Associated Press
02/07/2010**

KHADAN - Fighting its bloodiest conflict since the Korean War, Canada has paid a heavy price 139 Canadian troops have died. With about 2,800 soldiers in the country, the third-largest contingent in the US-led coalition, the Canadians have taken more casualties, proportionately, than any other.

But by the end of next year, they will be gone.

After four years of often-intense combat since moving down to Kandahar, the spiritual centre of the Taliban, Canadian military planners are now fine-tuning their exit strategy, bringing the Afghans in as closely as possible to ensure that their hard-fought progress doesn't evaporate after they leave.

We are killing insurgents with our right hand, and killing the insurgency with our left, said Captain Jade Watson, a planning officer for the Canadian Battle Group in Kandahar. We can offer a future. The insurgents can only offer a past.

Even as new US troops are flowing in to begin their surge, however, the Canadians have learned that progress can vanish as easily as footprints in the sand.

Their departure will be deeply felt. The Afghan police and army, who will be called upon to fill the gap, are understaffed and poorly trained. Their ranks are riddled with corruption, and they are often not respected or trusted by the Afghan people.

Out in the field, the shift toward winning hearts and minds and giving local forces as big a role as possible is striking, but problematic.

About three-quarters of the way through the Khadan compound search, the police chief, Shir Shah, said he had seen enough. A village woman had died, a grave was being dug, and he didn't want to disrupt village life any further.

So the Canadians pulled back.

Afghans flee ahead of major anti-Taliban offensive

AFP

02/07/2010

By Nasrat Shoib

KANDAHAR - Thousands of people are leaving their homes on the Marjah plain in

southern Afghanistan ahead of a massive military operation to clear Taliban militants from their last stronghold.

A huge force of US Marines leading NATO and Afghan soldiers is expected to launch the operation -- which commanders say will be the largest assault against the militants since the war began -- within days.

"The government of Afghanistan will reclaim Marjah as one of its own," said the British commander of the operation, General Nick Carter.

The assault is known as Operation Mushtarak -- Dari for "together", as Afghan troops will also play a pivotal role -- and has been flagged by military officials for months to either repel or draw in the enemy.

Taliban leaders say they are massing fighters around Marjah, in the centre of Helmand province, in preparation for a bloody battle.

"We are in control and ready to fight," said purported Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi, speaking by telephone from an undisclosed location.

The area is said to be the last bastion of control for the militants, whose insurgency has nevertheless been spreading since their regime was overthrown in 2001.

Mushtarak echoes assaults last year -- the British Operation Panther's Claw and the Marines' Operation Dagger -- seen as successfully eradicating militants who had controlled other poppy-growing regions in Helmand valley.

Preparatory operations around Marjah, south of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, have been going on for weeks, with leaflets dropped on the area from NATO helicopters warning residents of the assault to come.

Habibullah, 48, said he and his family left Marjah for Lashkar Gah two months ago to escape the violence.

"There are a lot of Taliban there. They are violent towards us, accusing us of spying for the foreign forces, demanding food all the time," he told AFP.

"There are still people living there and the Taliban are still in control, but there has been a lot of fighting, with gunfire and bombings, and lots of soldiers have been coming in to fight the Taliban and then leave," he said.

The battle to come is expected to be hard and bloody. The Taliban have evolved their tactics to a devastating degree, retreating from the battlefield and using IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, and suicide bomb attacks.

According to the Marines' Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, Marjah will present "the

largest IED threat NATO has ever faced".

IEDs are crudely made bombs, often detonated by remote control. Their strike rate is highly accurate and military intelligence officers say they are now claiming up to 90 percent of foreign troops' deaths and casualties.

Of the 57 foreign troops killed in Afghanistan so far this year, the vast majority have fallen to IEDs.

Operation Mushtarak comes after US President Barack Obama announced in December his plan for a troop surge to take the fight to the militants to clear the way for desperately needed governance and development.

The US and NATO are deploying an extra 40,000 troops, on top of the 113,000 already in Afghanistan, as part of the surge, with most heading to the southern battleground.

The Marjah assault is the spearhead of a new counter-insurgency strategy, brainchild of US General Stanley McChrystal, who commands foreign forces in Afghanistan, aimed at winning over ordinary Afghans to support the government.

He told a global security conference in Istanbul last week the situation in Afghanistan is serious but no longer deteriorating because "we have made significant progress... and we'll make new progress in 2010".

President Hamid Karzai is eager to bring on board Taliban foot soldiers, who largely fight for cash rather than loyalty to the Islamists, by offering them money and jobs to put down arms and rejoin mainstream society.

Marjah is at the heart of one of the world's biggest poppy growing areas. Illegal drug exports from Afghanistan are believed to be worth close to three billion dollars a year, helping fund the insurgency.

French army Major General Jacques Lechevalier said clearing the Taliban from the area would also add momentum to the fight against drugs and corruption.

"It's not just the jihadists and the Taliban, but also drugs and corruption that makes the bed of Islamism," he said.

US hopes to route the Taliban in new front on the Afghan War

The Associated Press

02/07/2010

KABUL - A new and possibly decisive chapter of the Afghan war is unfolding. The U.S. is preparing a major attack on the Taliban, the militants are being squeezed in their Pakistani sanctuaries, and the Afghan government is trying to draw them into peace talks.

While "not prepared to say we've turned a corner," the top U.S. commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, told reporters at a NATO meeting Thursday that he is more optimistic than last summer and now believes the situation is no longer deteriorating.

Much could still go wrong. Even if all the cards fall in NATO's favor, the conflict will likely persist for years.

But the U.S. and its partners now have a better shot at blunting the growth of the Taliban, the austere Islamic movement that rebounded four years ago after being driven from power in the 2001 U.S.-led invasion after it refused to sever links to al-Qaida.

If NATO recaptures the momentum, it could encourage the militants in time to seek a political settlement, which U.S. officials believe is the only way to end the conflict.

For now, attention is focused on what will be the first big test of U.S. President Barack Obama's surge - an assault by thousands of U.S. Marines and soldiers on Marjah, a southern Afghan city of 80,000 people and the hub of Taliban logistics. Aid teams are supposed to follow the troops to re-establish public services and government control in hopes of winning public support.

It will be the first major combat operation since Obama last December ordered 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, gambling on turning the tide of war. Other NATO countries added 7,000 more.

The Taliban, mindful that Obama also pledged to begin withdrawing U.S. forces in mid-2011, claim to be undaunted by the surge.

"The number of Taliban fighters is increasing day by day, not only in the south but in the north of Afghanistan as well," says Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi. "It doesn't matter if the Americans increase the number of soldiers, the Taliban will continue to pursue jihad," he told The Associated Press.

Insurgent forces have grown steadily in Afghanistan - from fewer than 400 in 2004 to nearly 30,000, by NATO estimate.

But they are already feeling pressure. Village elders and former Taliban fighters tell the

AP that many militants are returning from Pakistan because of stepped-up U.S. missile strikes there - one of which is believed to have killed the commander of the Pakistan Taliban - and Pakistan's offensive last year against Taliban in South Waziristan near the Afghan border.

At least some of the returning fighters have expressed interest in government offers of reconciliation. And those who fight on may be easier to handle in Afghanistan, corralled against NATO firepower, rather than in Pakistan, where foreign troops are banned from ground combat operations and the main weapon is missiles fired from pilotless drones.

For years, it has been hard to see any glimmer of hope amid rising casualties, roadside bombs and suicide attacks in a chaotic country with a centuries-old tradition of banishing foreign armies.

Last year, according to AP's count, at least 499 U.S. and NATO service members died in Afghanistan, almost as many as in the previous two years combined, and U.S. officials warn of more bloodshed to come.

There's still widespread skepticism that President Hamid Karzai, re-elected last year in a ballot marred by massive fraud on his behalf, will fulfill his promises to eliminate corruption, improve public services and thus blunt the Taliban's appeal.

Taliban shadow governments now operate in nearly all the 34 provinces. Taliban courts mete out Islamic justice and settle village property disputes often faster - and many Afghans say more fairly - than the government's own judiciary.

Last month, Taliban suicide fighters stormed the center of Kabul, paralyzing the capital for hours and sending government officials fleeing to bunkers before the attackers were all killed.

Mullah Mahmood, a village elder and former Taliban commander in Ghazni province, said his district has seen an influx of militants returning from Pakistan. They patrol on motorbikes in groups of 10 to 15, run Islamic courts and require families to contribute one man to their ranks, he told the AP.

"The pressure from the Pakistani army and drones is causing people to come here," he said. "This year they have new Japanese motorcycles, weapons and bullets. Villagers are providing food."

However, the Taliban have had little success in recruiting outside the Pashtun community, the largest ethnic group with about 40 percent of the population. Although disenchantment with the Karzai government extends nationwide, so far the Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks have shown little enthusiasm for the Taliban, which massacred many of them in the 1990s.

Richard Barrett, chief of the U.N.'s al-Qaida and Taliban monitoring team, says the

movement may be approaching the limits of its expansion, but there are signs it is becoming more cohesive. It is developing a command structure that extends from the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, to commanders in the field.

Such cohesion may make it harder to woo low-level Taliban fighters with promises of jobs and housing as envisaged by Karzai at a conference in London last month where he appealed for international funding.

Those who quit the battlefield and disavow al-Qaida must feel protected and receive an "immediate package of support," said Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, Karzai's point man on reconciliation. "That will give a positive signal to the rest that it's safe to come back."

Previous attempts at reconciliation faltered, in part for lack of funding. The U.N. says only about 170 ex-militants left the insurgency last year under local peace plans.

"We've done a good job bringing them in," said Sana Gul Kochai, the head of the reconciliation program for the eastern province of Nangarhar, which borders Pakistan. "But of course they become disappointed and demoralized when they don't get land or jobs."

Qari Fazel Rahman Farouqi, who fled Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and led a cell attacking NATO supply convoys in Pakistan, said he was willing to take a chance on reconciliation. The bearded commander reported to regional reconciliation authorities in Jalalabad with 18 of his men last weekend.

If he gets what was promised - especially immunity from prosecution - he believes hundreds of his comrades may follow.

Karzai also hopes to draw the Taliban into peace talks, but U.S. officials are skeptical because the insurgents are sure they are winning the war - a certainty the U.S. military hopes to change in the upcoming offensive.

Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations and an adviser to the U.S. military on Afghanistan, says one of the risks of robust peace overtures is that the Taliban will take them as a sign of desperation.

"One of the things the other side is trying to find out is how committed are we to succeeding," Biddle said.

Karzai puts faith in King Abdullah

2010-02-08

By Suleman shah Durrani

By: Gulfnews .com

Afghan president wants Saudi Arabia to spur reconciliation with non-violent Taliban elements

Afghanistan: President Hamid Karzai yesterday emphasised the role of Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz in reconciliation efforts with elements of the Taliban not involved in terrorism.

Karzai told the Munich Security Conference that he sees no meaningful reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan without King Abdullah's involvement.

"Afghans believe deeply and truly in Islam and King Abdullah, who as the custodian of the two holy mosques, can create means of reconciliation as he enjoys the respect of the Afghan citizens."

Karzai called on Afghanistan's neighbours to play a constructive role in ensuring the security and integration of the nation.

Neighbours' role

"China, India and Turkey could be quite helpful in achieving security and integration in Afghanistan... Pakistan should work, especially after the rise of terrorism on Pakistani soil, with the Afghanistan government to eliminate radical groups."

Improving the situation "means enabling Afghanistan to deliver services to the people and removing any parallel activity to that of the Afghan government", Karzai said. Nato-led reconstruction teams, non-governmental organisations, international aid groups and bodies such as the United Nations "must be a support to the Afghan government, not a rival to it", Karzai said, repeating the phrase four times to hammer home the point.

Karzai hoped that Afghanistan will have 300,000 to 400,000 capable police and security personnel by 2012. But he added that fighting international terrorism and Al Qaida should remain a global issue.

An Afghani woman, who was attending the conference and spoke on condition of anonymity, said a red line should be drawn on the concessions given to the Taliban as part of the reconciliation process.

She feared such an effort could erase all the achievements realised in the last eight years, especially those related to the liberation of Afghani women.

US envoy Richard Holbrooke said Washington is not in "direct contact" with the Taliban as part of re-integration efforts.

"The press, since London, has been kind of obsessed with the idea that there are all sorts of secret talks going on with the Taliban. So I want to state very clearly that our nation is not involved in any direct contact with the Taliban," he said.

Washington and its allies agreed in London to support Karzai's efforts to persuade insurgents not ideologically committed to the Taliban or Al Qaida to abandon weapons and take up jobs.

Clinton lauds Karzai cabinet

Lalit K Jha - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:51
Pajhwok

WASHINGTON (PAN): US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has praised President Hamid Karzai and several members of his cabinet, saying he has really stepped up in his second term.

"I spent a lot of time with President Karzai, most recently about a 90-minute, one-on-one conversation in London. I think he has really stepped up since his second inaugural address," she said.

She told the CNN in an interview Karzai laid out a road map, which he was trying to follow. "There are areas of very positive cooperation. He may not have a full cabinet, but the cabinet members he has are people who many of us view as honest and effective, productive.

"We work with them on a daily basis, the defence minister or the finance minister, (are) people who are really producing results for Afghanistan," observed Clinton, who argued one had to be realistic about the current situation and the achievements in the war-torn country.

"I always remind myself that what five or six years into a new nation that has no history of democracy, let's be realistic about the kind of support that this new government and the president needs," she added.

The secretary went on to remark: "So I think we have to put this into a more balanced perspective. It's neither as bad or as good, just like most of life and most of the situations that I deal with around the world, and I think we have developed a much stronger understanding and partnership in the last year going forward."

Referring to the London conference, she said the strategy that the United States and more than 44 countries were pursuing in Afghanistan required they had a good partner in President Karzai and his government.

Responding to a question regarding al-Qaeda and the Taliban insurgents, Clinton claimed the US had succeeded in degrading their capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"We know that. As the president said the other night, we have killed and captured a significant number of al-Qaeda's top leadership, as well as people in the Taliban organisations in Afghanistan and Pakistan who cooperate with them," she said.

Karzai wants Afghanistan security handover to begin this year

CNN

02/08/2010

Afghanistan is prepared to begin taking over security from international forces in some parts of the war-torn nation by the end of the year, President Hamid Karzai said Sunday.

By the end of his five-year term in 2014, Karzai said, "conditions permitting ... Afghan forces will have full responsibility for security throughout the country, with international forces continuing to serve in the capacity of providing backup and assistance."

Speaking at the Security Conference in Munich, Germany, Karzai said he planned to build up the army and the national police to some 300,000 by 2012.

He also pledged to tackle corruption, calling it a key focus of his second term in office. "We are currently reviewing the structure and capacities of the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption and will make it into a stronger, more responsive organization to lead our fight against corruption," he said.

"In reflecting about the war in Afghanistan today, we see tremendous success in many spheres but overshadowed by failure in one major field: that of defeating terrorism and safeguarding the security of Afghanistan, the region and the world at large," Karzai said. "... The public in Afghanistan as well as in many of your countries are rightfully asking where this effort has led to. They would like to see progress in the war and get a sense of when will, ultimately, the Afghan people themselves take charge of their own security.

"Of course, let it be clear to all that we Afghans wish to see the day sooner rather than later when we are able to defend our borders, [our] villages and towns, on our own, and when young men and women from other countries do not have to shed blood on our soil

for our security."

He described the conflict in his country as "a war of necessity."

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen also spoke at the conference, saying the organization remains committed to its mission in Afghanistan, but "Afghanistan is a sovereign country. It has to stand on its own feet, and defend itself.

"So where and when conditions allow, we will start to transfer lead security responsibility to the Afghans. And while I don't know when the process will be complete, I know I think it should start this year."

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday, said she believed Karzai "has really stepped up since his second inaugural address. He laid out a road map there. He is trying to follow that road map." But, she noted, the world is "five or six years into a new nation that has no history of democracy."

Karzai said he welcomes a new approach by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, top commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, that emphasizes the need to protect Afghan citizens. "Regrettably, local populations have suffered fairly often as a result of the way the war has been carried out. ... To reverse the negative impact of this, we must make the protection of the lives and property of our people our top priority."

Afghanistan is also working with NATO and coalition partners on the regulation of private security contractors in the country, he said. In addition, Karzai plans to set up a National Council for Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration which will set up a conference aimed at peace.

"We recognize that, without support from our neighbors, particularly Pakistan, the reconciliation and reintegration program will not bear fruit," he said.

Clinton said the international community should be realistic about the support Karzai needs, but understand that he may not always be in complete agreement with other nations.

"He has asked for help, most recently at the London conference," she said. "But he also has his own ideas, as do the Afghan people. So in any relationship with any country you're not always going to get 100 percent agreement.

"But you work with the leaders, and you work with the people," she told CNN's Candy Crowley. "We're not yet turning the corner, but we are, you know, sort of inching our way forward to being able to do so. So I think on balance we are in this with people and countries who are committed to the same outcome."

September's parliamentary elections will be "a huge milestone," Karzai said. "We look forward to free and fair parliamentary elections and expect the Independent Election

Commission to work closely with the United Nations and the civil society to ensure the integrity of the elections and prevent irregularities and misconduct."

Karzai emerged victorious from August presidential elections that were marred by widespread fraud. Two months after the vote, a U.N.-backed panel of election monitors threw out nearly a third of his votes, citing fraud. Left short of a majority, Karzai agreed to a runoff with challenger Abdullah Abdullah, but Abdullah withdrew just before the runoff vote.

Karzai considers conscription to bolster ranks of Afghan army

The Associated Press

02/08/2010

By David Rising

Munich - Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Sunday he is looking at instituting conscription to build an army big enough to provide security without international help.

Mr. Karzai told a conference of the world's top defence officials in Munich that he wants to build and train an army and police force of 300,000 by 2012 that will be able to provide security for Afghanistan by 2015 without international help.

Within five years, "Afghanistan should be able to provide security for its people so we are no longer a burden on the shoulders of the international community," he said.

Last week, however, Afghanistan's defence minister told reporters the army had no shortage of recruits and that there was no need to force people to serve. Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak said the government could not implement conscription "in the current Afghan situation" but left open whether it could be instituted in the future.

Last month, Afghanistan's international partners agreed to expand the Afghan National Army from the current figure of about 97,000 to 171,600 by the end of next year. The Afghan National Police will be boosted from about 94,000 today to 134,000.

The Afghans had been lobbying for expanding the security force to 240,000 soldiers and 160,000 police within five years but the plan was set for the time being because of the expense, lack of training camps and problems training and equipping such a large force.

Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, complained last month that NATO had sent only 37 per cent of the trainers it needed to teach initial eight-week courses for Afghan recruits.

During the conference, Mr. Karzai indicated that international troops would still be needed beyond his five-year target, saying that the “war on terrorism ... is an issue separate from this security arrangement in Afghanistan.”

He suggested that Afghanistan's volunteer system may not be able to provide the manpower necessary to meet his goals, and that an army of citizen soldiers could have other advantages.

“For the past many years I've been visited by Afghan community leaders who are advising me to go back to some form of conscription for the Afghan army so the young boys of the Afghanistan countryside can ... come to training centres, get acquainted with the rest of the country, get familiarized with other young men around the country and learn something and go back home,” he said.

“This will be philosophically one of our pursuits as we move ahead into the future in consultation with the Afghan people.”

Afghanistan's influential elders

Al Jazeera
02/08/2010

Afghanistan's influential tribal elders are key to the government's plan to bring Taliban leaders into the mainstream political process.

But, alienated from the government, many elders are refusing to have anything to do with the either the officials or the Taliban.

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr reports from Kandahar, where tribal leaders exercise a great deal of influence.

Afghan President demands judicial independence

Xinhua

02/08/2010

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Monday his country wanted to regain complete judicial independence as soon as possible.

To reduce civilian casualties completely, international military forces need to stop operations in Afghan villages, Karzai said at the Munich Security Conference, adding "we believe the war against terrorists is not in Afghan villages and homes."

"Ending military operations in Afghan villages is what Afghan people are seeking as a priority. That means Afghanistan regains judicial independence completely and rather very very soon.

"Afghan must be able to, as a sovereign government to justice its people, to explain the reason why people are arrested. The arrested people must not be arrested by international forces. The suspects must be taken by Afghan forces through the Afghan judicial system and through the laws of Afghanistan." Karzai said.

Karzai also asked the international community to play roles of "supporters" instead of "rivals" for Afghan government and "remove any parallel activities toward Afghanistan."

"Any activity that is conducted in the matter of functions of government by our international friends as parallel to our government is reducing the capacity of Afghanistan," he said.

The 46th Munich Security Conference (MSC) entered its third and last day Sunday. About 300 high-level representatives discussed a range of tough topics, including "resource security and shifting global power", "the future of European and global security", "arms control and the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty)", "NATO's new strategy and mission" and "the Afghanistan."

The Munich Security Conference was founded as the Wehrkunde Conference by the German publisher Ewald von Kleist in 1962.

Pakistan's military sets Afghan terms

Asia Times

02/08/2010

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

Pakistan has rejected US proposals for the balkanization of Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD - With the United States striving hard to establish dialogue with the Taliban, Asia Times Online sources privy to the Pakistan military establishment reveal that the army has clearly spelled out that Washington must make sure any Indian involvement does not go beyond development work in Afghanistan and that Delhi plays no part in any overall strategy concerning Afghanistan.

The United States has said that it wants to reach out to second- and third-tier Taliban and, in doing so, exert pressure on the top Taliban leaders to seek reconciliation. Instead, Pakistan has emphasized that it is necessary to talk to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his appointed representatives.

At the same time, Pakistan has rejected US proposals for the balkanization of Afghanistan, by which it was proposed to appoint an autonomous controlling authority for southeastern and southwestern Afghanistan - the Pashtun-majority areas.

The Pakistani military has also given assurances that US officials will be granted visas, but, unlike previously, they will not be allowed visas on arrival. Further, for the first time, Pakistan has clearly refused to mount operations against the Sirajuddin Haqqani network, as well as that of his ally, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, as they are not hostile towards Pakistan.

At this important juncture of the American-led war in Afghanistan, Washington desperately needs Pakistan's support, as it did after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US to stage the invasion of Afghanistan.

Pakistan's demands were relayed in recent encounters with US officials by, among others, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee, General Tariq Majid; the chief of army staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani; and the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha. The US officials included visiting Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan. Majid also set out Pakistan's position at a recent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting in Brussels.

A straight-forward encounter

In the years following the invasion on Afghanistan in October 2001, Pakistan was frequently accused of duplicity in the US-led "war on terror", even though it provided extensive logistical support. This included bases for the US Air Force to carry out strikes in landlocked Afghanistan, transit routes for NATO supplies (now flowing freely again),

collaboration with US intelligence agencies to arrest top al-Qaeda members, and military operations in the Pakistani tribal areas against pro-Taliban militants.

Yet the Americans still believed that Pakistan's support was half-hearted and that it tacitly supported the Taliban. One reason for this belief was Pakistan's opposition in principle from the beginning to the war on the Taliban. Former president Pervez Musharraf consistently urged the Americans to engage the Taliban in a political process.

In the early days of the conflict, the Americans were not interested in any form of reconciliation with the Taliban as the regime had been toppled in a matter of months and its leaders were holed up in the mountains straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan: Washington had no reason to talk to such losers.

Nine years on, the situation has changed dramatically. The American war machine is under siege and huge swathes of Afghanistan are either under direct Taliban control or heavily influenced by the militants.

The US and its allies are still game for a fight, though. In a matter of days, thousands of coalition and Afghan troops are expected to try to take back Marjah in Helmand province in one of the biggest offensives of the war. It will be the first major operation since US President Barack Obama announced last year that 30,000 additional troops would be sent to Afghanistan. (Pakistan has made its opposition to this surge clear to the US.)

However, it is widely acknowledged that the big push is aimed primarily at softening up the Taliban, rather than defeating them in the field, and that talks remain the only viable path to peace.

Just as the US has over the years changed its thinking on Afghanistan, given the realities on the ground, it has revised its opinion on Pakistan.

About two years ago, the administration of George W Bush became convinced that a coalition government comprising secular and liberal political parties would handle the "war on terror" more effectively than Pakistan's security apparatus, such as that ruled over by Musharraf, a general.

However, although such a secular government emerged after Musharraf stepped down in August 2008, it has not lived up to expectations. It has not won credibility among the masses due to economic mismanagement, the mishandling of a judicial crisis and the failure to adopt a straightforward policy against militancy.

By the end of 2009, the coalition government of President Asif Ali Zardari was riven with political in-fighting and there were large ethnic riots in the port city of Karachi, mainly between two pro-American political parties.

It was evident that political players were in no position to handle the sensitive issues relating to fighting the "war on terror", and in a short time all decision-making

concerning security issues passed on to the military. Although militants have not been conclusively defeated in Pakistan, the military has waged several big operations in the tribal areas.

From the US perspective, more important is the rapport that has been established between US and Pakistan military leaders; even US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated on a visit to Pakistan that the White House favored dealing directly with the military establishment on issues concerning the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Kiani has explained to the US that while the Pakistani army - and Kiani himself - are essentially strategically India-centric, they will work in partnership with the Americans to help the US win the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees the next phase of this as the eradication of terrorism and militancy from the region and the incorporation of the majority Pashtun population of Afghanistan, which supports Taliban, fully into the political process.

A friendship of two armies

Kiani is scheduled to retire in November, while ISI chief Pasha is due to leave office in March. Zardari's government is preparing to promote officers with whom it could work, that is, who would listen the government.

The president of the National Defense University, Lieutenant General Muhammad Yousuf, and the Corps Commander Gujranwala, Lieutenant General Nadeem Taj, are the most-discussed candidates in President House for the position of chief of army staff.

Zardari has also indicated his intention to revive the position of national security advisor to be filled by a retired four-star general to control the ISI.

The government is making all efforts to take Washington into its trust, but according to insiders it is having little success. On the other hand, the military establishment is heavily engaged in day-to-day business with the Americans to tackle the military and political issues involved in finding a solution to the Afghan insurgency. If Pakistan's political government tries to bypass the military, it might face serious embarrassment.

Washington apparently supports the idea of extending Pasha's term for another year - Kiani would take that decision, whether or not Zardari approved. As for Kiani, he has been heard to say that his position "is not an issue at the moment".

Pakistan has once again emerged as vitally important to the US in dealing with Afghanistan, from securing NATO's supply lines to cutting off the supplies of the Taliban and getting them to the negotiating table. Washington is apparently ready to sacrifice its political allies in Pakistan and work directly with the military to achieve these goals.

US, EU ignoring India on Af-Pak to appease Islamabad, says expert

Economic Times

02/10/2010

NEW DELHI - The US and Europe are ignoring India on Afghanistan to appease Pakistan, according to an article in the Foreign Policy magazine. Warning against keeping the only stable, secular democracy in the region out of the Afghan strategy, Kapil Komireddi in an article titled, Indian Motion, published in Foreign Policy wrote that the US has been wary of openly embracing India as a partner in Afghanistan due to Pakistan.

The article referred to General Stanley McChrystal assessment of the war in Afghanistan and his conclusion that a larger role for India in Afghanistan would ``exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan and India. Taking this assessment as central to the US approach, Mr Komireddi said: ``What this means is that India, the only stable secular democracy in the region, is being actively prevented from helping in Afghanistan in order to appease the Pakistani regime, lest it re-enact the carnage that was visited upon Mumbai in 2008 and the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009.

He also said that this raises questions about the US objective in Afghanistan about whether it would wanted to oust the Taliban or secure the country for Pakistan. ``To New Delhi, the answer looks increasingly like the latter, the article said.

Indias initial opposition to the engagement with the Taliban was also noted in the article. Calling India the only ``voice of dissent at the London conference on the issue of engaging the Taliban, the article said, ``as representatives from more than 60 countries convened at the historic Lancaster House, New Delhis representative to the summit, external affairs minister S M Krishna, emphasised to his British counterpart that it would be a monumental folly, at this juncture, to make a distinction between a good Taliban and a bad Taliban or to legitimise the former through reaching out, it said. Mr Komireddi concluded that for India the Taliban was originally an extension of Pakistans intelligence agency as it has been used by Pakistan to launch attacks against India. He further said the Taliban is not a remnant of the Cold War but a creation of Pakistan. ``It was during the 1990s that the Taliban actively backed by Pakistan seized control of Kabul. Since then, New Delhi has witnessed Afghanistan become a launching pad for anti-India terrorism, according to the article.

With the West deciding to go down the path of least resistance, New Delhi has had little

choice but to support the Afghan governments bid to reach out to the `good Taliban. But unease continues over the West strategy. India has also poured in money into the reconstruction of Afghanistan and the current direction has put question marks over these large investments.

Referring to Indias role in Afghanistan, the article said that India, due to the popularity of Indian cinema and TV shows, also enjoys a soft-power edge over every other country currently engaged there with a recent opinion poll endorsing Indias role in Afghanistan. Yet in the endless debates focusing on Afghanistan, Indias role in the region had usually been ignored by United States and Europe, often deliberately, as New Delhi was quick to point out, in order to appease Pakistan, Mr Komireddi argued.

Washington was keenly aware of the benefits that New Delhi brings to Afghanistan. But so far it has been wary of openly embracing India as a partner, he said.

Iran against reconciliation package in Afghanistan

Times of India

02/10/2010

By

NEW DELHI - Iran has come out strongly against a reconciliation package for the Taliban in Afghanistan. "We don't believe in good or bad Taliban," Iranian envoy Seyed Mehdi Nabizadeh said.

Saying that Iran did not want extremists to run the country, Nabizadeh stressed that the neighbouring countries "were duty bound to provide peace and stability in Afghanistan".

"From 2001, foreign forces have been in Afghanistan, with three aims: stop growing narcotics, fight terror and establish security in the region. As you know, none of these have been realised," he said.

Nabizadeh also weighed in on India-Pakistan relations, saying they could facilitate if asked but they thought bilateral negotiations were best suited. "We have always welcomed direct negotiations between India and Pakistan. We feel direct negotiations will succeed much faster," Nabizadeh said. "Iran, being a friend of India and Pakistan, can play a role in facilitating the negotiations if there is any need," the envoy added.

He also said that Iran continued to receive refined petroleum from Reliance even though

there was a strong possibility that countries supplying refined petroleum to Iran might face US sanctions. "From our point of view, Reliance stopping gasoline exports to Iran is not correct," he said.

On Afghanistan, Nabizadeh said the Moscow and Istanbul conferences had been useful but Iran did not go to the London conference. "Regional countries and neighbouring countries can play a more constructive role in Afghanistan," he said.

Pakistan Is Said to Pursue Role in Afghan Talks

The New York Times

02/10/2010

By Jane Perez

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has told the United States it wants a central role in resolving the Afghan war and has offered to mediate with Taliban factions who use its territory and have long served as its allies, American and Pakistani officials said.

The offer, aimed at preserving Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan once the Americans leave, could both help and hurt American interests as Washington debates reconciling with the Taliban.

Pakistan's army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, made clear Pakistan's willingness to mediate at a meeting late last month at NATO headquarters with top American military officials, a senior American military official familiar with the meeting said.

It is a departure from Pakistan's previous reluctance to approach the Taliban. The meeting included the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen; the head of Central Command, Gen. David H. Petraeus; and the commander of American and allied troops in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the official said.

The Pakistanis want to be part of discussions that could involve reconciliation, the official said.

Pakistan's desire to work with the United States in an Afghanistan endgame is likely to be discussed when the national security adviser, Gen. James L. Jones, visits Islamabad, this week. So far, the United States has been more eager to push Pakistan to fight Taliban than to negotiate with them, and has not endorsed Pakistan's new approach.

The Pakistani offer makes clear that any stable solution to the war will have to take into

account Afghanistans neighbors, in a region where Pakistan, India, China, Iran and others all jostle for power.

Pakistani officials familiar with General Kayanis thinking said that even as the United States adds troops to Afghanistan, he has determined that the Americans are looking for a fast exit. The impression, they said, was reinforced by President Obamas scant mention of the war in his State of the Union address.

What the Pakistanis can offer is their influence over the Taliban network of Jalaluddin and Siraj Haqqani, whose forces American commanders say are the most lethal battling American and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan.

From their stronghold in Pakistans tribal area of North Waziristan, the Haqqanis exert sway over large parts of southern Afghanistan and have staged major terrorist attacks in Kabul, American officials say.

They are close allies of Al Qaeda. But they also have long ties to Pakistans military and intelligence agencies that have protected them inside Pakistani territory.

In return for trying to rein in the Haqqanis, Pakistan will be looking for a friendly Afghanistan and for ways to stem the growing Indian presence there, Pakistani and American officials said.

In briefings last week with reporters at his army headquarters, the usually reticent General Kayani repeated his offer at NATO to play a constructive role, while making it clear Pakistan was seeking broad influence in southern Afghanistan. The Haqqani network would be one of Pakistans strongest levers to do that.

American officials said Washington was still debating the contours of any negotiated solution. But a baseline for Pakistan, they said, would be for it to engineer a separation between the Haqqani network and the Qaeda leadership.

For the moment, the United States has been looking instead for military help from Pakistan to tamp down Taliban and Qaeda strength in southern Afghanistan, where the Haqqanis command an estimated 4,000 fighters, American military officials say.

The Americans have been pushing General Kayani to launch an offensive against the Haqqanis base in North Waziristan.

At the Jan. 26 NATO meeting with General Kayani, American military commanders reviewed the list of hardware MI-17 helicopters, ammunition for Cobra attack helicopters, body armor, armored vehicles that has been put on a fast track to the Pakistani military as an inducement to take on the Haqqanis.

But General Kayani, who pleased the Americans with an operation against the Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan last fall, was unmoved. There is no need at this point to start

a steamroller operation in North Waziristan, he told reporters last week.

Last month he took General McChrystal on a helicopter tour over the mountains of the Swat Valley, where Pakistani paratroopers landed last summer to flush out Taliban insurgents.

The message was that the Pakistani Army still regarded India as its primary enemy and was stretched too thin to open a new front.

The reluctance to take on the Haqqanis preserves them as both a prize to be delivered at the negotiating table and a potential asset for Pakistan in postwar Afghanistan, said Syed Rifaat Hussain, professor of international relations at Islamabad University, who is close to the Pakistani Army.

Haqqani is the guy we are banking on to regain lost influence in Afghanistan, Mr. Hussain said. When Pakistan says we are well positioned to help, that means the Haqqanis.

One strand of thinking within the Obama administration calls for allowing the Pakistanis to keep the Haqqanis as part of Pakistans sphere of influence in southern Afghanistan, but only if Pakistan forces the Haqqanis to break with Al Qaeda and to push militants out of its areas, an American official said.

That would be a tall order for Pakistan, Mr. Hussain said. The question is, how much influence do we have over Haqqani? he said. We have influence but not controlling influence.

Since Qaeda leaders escaped Afghanistan in 2001, they have used Pakistans tribal areas to cement their ties to the Haqqanis and other militants, including the Pakistani Taliban.

A chilling example came on Dec. 30 when, according to American officials, the Haqqanis helped Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban stage a suicide attack at a C.I.A. base in southern Afghanistan, killing seven Americans working for the agency.

Since that attack, the Americans have escalated drone strikes in North Waziristan, with the help of intelligence provided by Pakistan, a demonstration that Pakistans ability to shield the Haqqanis extends only so far.

Pakistani efforts to persuade the Haqqanis to break with Al Qaeda have not made much headway, according to Pakistani intelligence and military officials, who declined to be named because they were not authorized to talk about the issue.

According to a Pakistani military official, the Pakistanis would first have to resolve where Qaeda fighters would go and whether they might be given safe passage to Yemen or another location.

As the Pakistani military works out the details of its negotiating stance on Afghanistan, Washington is taking notice, said Daniel Markey, senior fellow for South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The United States side is pretty worried about seeing a deal emerge that suits everyone other than us, he said.

Afghan government in tentative talks with insurgent leader

McClatchy Newspapers

02/11/2010

By Saeed Shah

KABUL - Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of Afghanistan's most brutal Islamist warlords, is holding tentative peace talks with the government of Afghanistan that could cause a split in the Taliban-led insurgency, Afghan politicians in Kabul said Wednesday.

The terms that Hekmatyar has outlined are softer than those proposed by the Taliban, who've demanded that U.S. and other foreign troops must leave Afghanistan before peace talks can begin. Hekmatyar would allow international forces to remain in the country for 18 months.

The government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, with the tacit backing of the international community, is feeling its way toward some dialogue with insurgent groups in an attempt to end the violence in Afghanistan.

Hekmatyar, 59, a veteran jihadist who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s with U.S. and Pakistani support, now heads the smallest of the three main insurgent groups. The other two, the Taliban and the Haqqani network, are associated with al Qaeda.

A deal with Hekmatyar would be controversial, especially with women's groups and human rights activists, who fear that it would jeopardize the hard-won freedoms enshrined in Afghanistan's 2004 constitution.

Hekmatyar's proposal, quietly circulated to the government and selected politicians late last year, would install a "neutral" interim government in Kabul for two years, said Afghan political leaders who've seen the plan but didn't want to be named for fear of their own safety.

During the last four months of the interim government's tenure, a loya jirga, a traditional "grand assembly" of tribal elders and other influential groups, would be convened to draft a new constitution, and then elections would be held. Hekmatyar's group in turn would lay down its arms.

Hekmatyar's deputy, Qutbuddin Hilal, was in Kabul last month, where he was thought to have held talks at the presidential palace, the Afghan politicians said. Hilal is based in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, where many leaders of the militant wing of Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami live.

Hekmatyar's son, Feroz, told McClatchy by phone from an undisclosed location that the group wants a settlement, but said that "Hezb-i-Islami has not held any serious talks with anyone."

"Hezb-i-Islami is not against peace in Afghanistan. We are not against Karzai and peace talks We are not seeking any position," Feroz Hekmatyar said. "We want foreigners to leave, to go out of Afghanistan."

Feroz Hekmatyar said he took part in a conference last month in the Maldives, a secret event that brought together Hezb-e-Islami with Taliban figures and several members of parliament and that participants later described in detail to McClatchy.

"Hezb-e-Islami doesn't have any relationship with al Qaida," he added. "Hezb-i-Islami has some political disagreements with the Taliban."

A wing of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party is already participating in Afghan politics, with more than two-dozen members of parliament and two ministerial positions in Karzai's cabinet, though the parliamentary party claims it's independent of Hekmatyar.

"He (Hekmatyar) is ready for reconciliation," said Khalid Farooqi, a senior member of parliament for Hezb-i-Islami. "There are talks between him and the government, but I don't know the result."

Hekmatyar is on a United Nations blacklist of terrorists, and that would make negotiations with him difficult. According to the U.S. State Department, he had links with Osama bin Laden and gave the al Qaida leader shelter in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s.

"The government must talk to Hekmatyar and the Taliban at the same time," said Bakhtar Aminzay, a senator and the president of the Afghanistan National Peace Jirga, a non-government group that promotes political reconciliation. "If you make a deal with Hekmatyar and not the Taliban, the problem could get worse."

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was one of the main "mujahedeen" commanders in the U.S.-backed resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

With the support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, he then threw his group into the Afghan civil war that followed in the early 1990s, briefly becoming prime minister.

Hekmatyar ordered the shelling of Kabul during that period, killing thousands of civilians. He was ousted when the Taliban came to power and fled to exile in Iran in 1997, and later to Pakistan.

More recently, his group re-emerged as an armed faction inside Afghanistan, with a significant presence in the northeast. They claimed responsibility for a 2008 assassination attempt against Karzai.

Many think that he never had much support in Afghanistan and was propped up for decades by Pakistan's ISI. Some say he'd have to live in exile under any settlement.

"Even Hekmatyar's party (inside parliament) will not welcome his return to politics. He is in real trouble. He is losing his influence over Hezb-i-Islami," said Haroun Mir, deputy director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies, an independent research organization in Kabul. "He's desperate, worried that he'll be left out of any negotiations."

Hekmatyar's Pakistani benefactors, who are keen to play a major role in deciding the fate of Afghanistan, may be pushing him into talks.

"He (Hekmatyar) has a weak hand to play and it may be made even weaker if the Pakistanis are putting pressure on him and his people at his base in Shamshatoo (Afghan refugee camp), near Peshawar," said a U.S. official in Washington, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. "Perhaps they're offering him up as evidence of their ability to deliver on the insurgents."

Charlie Wilson, backer of 80s Afghan warlords, dies

AFP

02/11/2010

By

WASHINGTON – The former US lawmaker and hero of the film "Charlie Wilson's War," who championed covert CIA support for Afghans fighting Soviet troops in the 1980s, died at age 76, hospital officials said.

Fulsome tributes poured in for Charlie Wilson, who despite a playboy image became an influential player in the Cold War, funneling billions of dollars in weapons to the Afghan mujahideen through a secret CIA program.

His exploits became the subject of the 2007 movie adaptation of a book chronicling his efforts, starring Tom Hanks as Wilson and Julia Roberts as the Houston socialite Joanne Herring who inspired him to help the Afghans.

"Charlie Wilson led a life that was oversized even by Hollywood's standards," said a statement from Texas Governor Rick Perry.

Wilson, dubbed by Texas newspapers as "Goodtime Charlie" because of his hard-partying, scandal-prone ways, succumbed to a heart attack at 12:16 pm (1816 GMT) on Wednesday, said Memorial Health System of East Texas spokeswoman Yana Ogletree.

As the head of the House of Representatives Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Wilson quietly oversaw vast funding increases for the CIA's campaign against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, with Pakistan playing a prominent role.

But arming the Afghan fighters -- seen as a triumph in Washington after the Soviets withdrew -- turned out to have unintended consequences that have since haunted the United States.

Some of the Afghan warlords that Wilson championed and who received millions from the CIA are now viewed as dangerous Islamist extremists with ties to Al-Qaeda, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

"As the world now knows, his efforts and exploits helped repel an invader, liberate a people, and bring the Cold War to a close," said Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who worked with Wilson during his years at the CIA.

"After the Soviets left, Charlie kept fighting for the Afghan people and warned against abandoning that traumatized country to its fate -- a warning we should have heeded then, and should remember today," Gates said in a statement.

Even after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Wilson never expressed regret about arming the Afghan warriors.

"We were fighting the evil empire. It would have been like not supplying the Soviets against Hitler in World War II," he told Time magazine in 2007.

"Anyway, who the hell had ever heard of the Taliban then?"

The Central Intelligence Agency broke with tradition and eventually gave Wilson the Honored Colleague Award for his efforts in Afghanistan, the first civilian to receive the

award.

"It is the rare congressman who by dint of personality, persistence and country smarts did something that literally altered history on the global stage," said Dan Rather, the former CBS television journalist.

Wilson's scheme may never have succeeded without help from his trusted partner, rogue CIA officer Gus Avrakotos -- played by Philip Seymour Hoffman in the film -- a blue-collar son of Greek immigrants who resented his Ivy League educated leaders at the agency.

CBS producer George Crile described the unlikely duo in his book that inspired the Hollywood hit, with the fitting subtitle, "The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times."

Wilson was known to recruit beautiful women to work in his Washington office, who were nicknamed "Charlie's Angels" after the television show, and he often brought along his latest glamorous girlfriend on trips to Pakistan and the Middle East.

The book recounts Wilson gulping down Scotch as he endures a harrowing Justice Department investigation into allegations he had snorted cocaine in Las Vegas.

Prosecutors never filed charges, as one key witness could only recall Wilson partaking of cocaine in the Cayman Islands -- outside the reach of US authorities.

Asked years later in an ABC television interview if the allegations were true, Wilson joked: "Nobody knows the answer to that and I ain't telling."

Chilly weather kills 23 insurgents in N Afghanistan

Xinhua

02/11/2010

By

The continued snowfall and chilly weather in Afghanistan besides inflicting casualties on innocent civilians also claimed the lives of nearly two dozen anti- government militants in north Afghanistan, a private television channel reported Thursday.

"The freezing and unfriendly weather has claimed the lives of 23 insurgents in Baghlan province north of Afghanistan," Tolo broadcast in its news bulletin.

Police recovered the bodies of the militants from Baghlan-e- Markazi district the other day, the television further said.

Baghlan, a relatively peaceful province until early last year has been the scene of increasing militancy over the past several months.

Both Taliban insurgents and militants loyal to the former Prime Minister Gulbudin Hekmatyar and leader of his own outlawed faction Islamic party the Hizb-e-Islami are active in parts of Baghlan province.

Snowfall, avalanches and continued freezing weather have claimed the lives of around 200 people across the war-ravaged country over the past four days.

Taliban defenses near Afghanistan town

The Associated Press

02/11/2010

By Alfred de Montesquiou and Christopher Torchia

NEAR MARJAH - U.S. Marines fired smoke rounds Wednesday and armored vehicles maneuvered close to Taliban positions to test insurgent defenses ahead of an anticipated attack on the biggest militant-controlled town in southern Afghanistan.

A NATO spokesman in Brussels called on Taliban militants holding Marjah to surrender. But a Taliban spokesman boasted that the militants are prepared to sacrifice their lives to defend the town against the biggest NATO-Afghan offensive of the eight-year war.

The date for the main attack by thousands of Marines and Afghan soldiers has not been announced for security reasons. However, preparations have accelerated in recent days, and it appears the assault will come soon.

U.S. mortar crews fired two dozen smoke rounds Wednesday at Taliban positions on the outskirts of the farming community, a center of the opium poppy trade about 380 miles southwest of Kabul in Helmand province. Marine armored vehicles also drove closer to Taliban positions. Both moves are designed to lure the militants into shooting back and revealing their positions. The Marines drew small arms fire but suffered no casualties.

"Deception is pretty important because it allows us to test the enemy's resistance," said

Lt. Col. Brian Christmas, the commander of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Regiment.
"There's a strategy to all this show of muscle."

The U.S. goal is to quickly retake control of Marjah to enable the Afghan government to re-establish a presence. Plans call for civilian workers to move quickly to restore electricity, clean water and other public services in hopes of weaning the inhabitants away from the Taliban.

Civilians could be seen fleeing their mud brick farming compounds on the outskirts of Marjah as soon as the American and Afghan forces appeared, though vast numbers do not seem to be leaving. The moves did not draw much of a response from the fighters, who appeared to be waiting behind defensive lines for the Marines to come closer to the town.

To the north, a joint U.S.-Afghan force, led by the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade, pushed into the Badula Qulp region of Helmand province to restrict Taliban movement in support the Marjah offensive.

"It's a little slower than I had hoped," said Lt. Col. Burton Shields, commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment.

Shields said the joint force was facing "harassing attacks" by groups of seven to nine insurgents.

"They're trying to buy time to move their leaders out of the area," he said.

Conscription idea seen as a non-starter

Pajhwok

02/11/2010

By Abdul Qadeer Siddiqui

KABUL - Some political and military analysts believe that forcing the ordinary people into active service in the current situation could be counter-productive, because this may prompt many to swell Taliban ranks.

Addressing the annual Munich Security Conference on Sunday, President Hamid Karzai said he was considering instituting conscription to build an army big enough to provide security without international help.

Article 55 of the Afghan Constitution states defence of the country is a joint responsibility of citizens and the government. Conditions for military service are

regulated by law. But Media head of Administrative Affairs Secretariat, Abdul Ghaffar Faizi Zadran, said there was no specific law governing conscription.

Professor of Law at Kabul University Dr Wadeer Sapi called the programme important but said it was unlikely to be implemented under the current circumstances. He cited strengthening the rule of law, a stable security environment, wider government writ and people's willingness as preconditions for conscription.

Sapi believed inexact population figures were another hurdle for military service. He urged the government to win hearts and minds of the people and instill a sense of patriotism and national unity into the masses before implementing such a programme.

"Given the presence of foreign troops in the country, creating such a sense among the people is impossible. If the government presses on with the plan, it would force the people either to join anti-government groups or leave the country," he remarked.

Political analyst Waheed Muzhda shared Sapi's view. Since countless Afghans were without national identity cards, how the government would call them up, he asked.

Former defence minister Shah Nawaz Tanai acknowledged conscription was in the best interests of Afghanistan but conditions were not ripe for it. He opined Afghans would demonstrate greater patriotism only if foreign forces left their country or at least a withdrawal timetable was announced.

Ordinary people also share the same view. A resident of Kabul, Haideryar said the government would help the insurgents recruit even more people if it went ahead with implementing the idea of conscription.

New Battles Test U.S. Strategy In Afghanistan

The Wall Street Journal

02/11/2010

By Yaroslav Trofimov

Focus on Safeguarding Civilian Lives Frustrates Troops in Taliban Territory

PASHMUL - When the first Taliban shots at the U.S. Army patrol cracked from behind the tree line, an Afghan villager who had just been talking to the soldiers crumpled into the mud.

An Army medic rushed to help the man, apparently a civilian caught in the crossfire. But

hours later, at the American base where the victim was taken for treatment, troops found in his pocket the polished dog tag of an American soldier killed three weeks earlier.

As fighting intensifies here in southern Afghanistan, the central tenet of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy to protect Afghan civilians faces a fundamental test: how to separate these civilians from the insurgents in places where much of the population backs the Taliban cause.

Across southern Afghanistan, including the Marjah district where coalition forces are massing for a large offensive, the line between peaceful villager and enemy fighter is often blurred.

American troops have dubbed Pashmul, a cluster of villages sprawling across the fertile belt of grape and poppy fields west of Kandahar city, "the heart of darkness."

Capt. Duke Reim, commander of the American unit responsible for Pashmul, estimates that about 95% of the locals are Taliban or aid the militants. District Gov. Niyaz Mohammad Serhadi agrees. "People here are on the side of the insurgency and have no trust in the government," he says. "Insurgents are in their villages 24 hours."

Since assuming command of coalition troops last summer, U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal curtailed airstrikes, limited house searches, and put the onus on winning the population's trust. Forgoing some attacks on the Taliban to spare Afghan civilians, the counterinsurgency theory goes, would eventually convince the local population to side with the U.S.-led coalition and Afghan authorities. In the meantime, however, new restrictions on American firepower can also exact a steep toll in American lives and give the Taliban a tactical advantage.

Among front-line troops, many of them used to more liberal rules of engagement in Iraq, frustration is boiling over. "It's like fighting with two hands behind your back," says Sgt. First Class Samuel Frantz, a platoon sergeant in Capt. Reim's unit, the Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment. "We're so worried about not hurting the population's feelings that we're not doing our jobs."

Some of the Afghan war's biggest and bloodiest battles were fought around Pashmul in 2006, as the small Canadian contingent responsible for Kandahar province shot its way into the village, incurring steep casualties, just to pull out later. Abandoned by most of its residents, this once prosperous area has been reduced to a landscape of crumbling ruins amid booby-trapped fields where the bomb craters turn into small lakes after rains.

American forces started pouring in here last year to reinforce the Canadians. Charlie Company two months ago established a permanent outpost in Pashmul, aiming to disrupt the flow of explosives and militants between Kandahar city and nearby Helmand province, which includes Marjah.

Facing the outpost is an abandoned compound from which the soldiers often take fire.

When Charlie fought in Iraq, such a compound would have been long obliterated. Here, the soldiers are still waiting for permission to destroy Afghan property.

Whenever Charlie soldiers leave the outpost, they face a daunting terrain of chest-high mud walls that prop up grapevines, turning the fields into a labyrinth of slippery trenches. The Taliban bury improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, along the pathways so the soldiers jump across walls to take the most unpredictable path when they patrol.

Helicopters are indispensable in hunting down the squads that plant IEDs the cause of the company's four fatalities and of most of its 14 serious injuries on this deployment. But, after Kiowa choppers fired rockets at two people spotted digging near road culverts at the end of last year, an angry delegation of Pashmul area elders descended on the battalion headquarters, demanding an end to overflights.

"Villagers were just livid with me," says the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Reik Andersen. "Because so much lethality was going on, they said that the kids are crying, the women are scared" whenever choppers appear in the sky.

Attempting to win local support, Col. Andersen says he promised to the elders that the helicopters would stay away unless called in for a specific incident. He also ordered that villagers spotted digging near culverts be scared away with smoke rather than killed.

"Could that guy be emplacing an IED? He could be. Is he? Unlikely," Col. Andersen says. "Killing 10 civilians to get one Taliban that mentality is gone. We want to be darn sure that we're killing the right people."

Mr. Serhadi, the district governor, says the delegation of elders had gone to see Col. Andersen on the orders of the insurgents.

IED activity has continued unabated in the area since then. Two villagers died in recent weeks after stepping on buried home-made bombs near the Pashmul outpost, and an American contractor lost a leg.

Between patrols, soldiers openly speak of being betrayed. "It doesn't matter if we get killed we're here to die," says Lt. Mark Morrison, 24 years old, the leader of the second platoon. "Our lives are not valuable enough to protect."

As Lt. Morrison's platoon gathered for a patrol, his soldiers traded gallows humor about losing limbs in coming hours. "Look at it this way if you get prosthetic legs, you get to be taller," one told a shorter comrade-in-arms.

On a recent patrol, the troops came upon a crater from an earlier IED. Lt. Morrison ordered his men to knock down the upper part of a mud wall fringing the path, so that anyone burying explosives there could be seen from the outpost.

Soon afterward, an angry field owner, Ghulam Farooq, confronted the Americans. "Why

are you destroying the wall? If there is no wall, the sheep and the goats will come into my field," he said.

"I'd rather cut down a few trees and break a few walls so that the bad guys stop coming here and placing the IEDs," Lt. Morrison answered.

Hearing the translation, Mr. Farooq broke out in sarcastic laughter. "What's so funny?" Lt. Morrison demanded. The villager snuffed out his laughter, but didn't respond.

Moments later, explosions rang out in the distance. The lieutenant's radio operator, Pfc. Justin Jun, shuddered. "Why does everything have to blow up in that country?" he asked, and vaulted himself over yet another mud wall.

Marjah offensive: Afghanistan civilians aren't taking the hint

McClatchy Newspapers

02/11/2010

By Saeed Shah

US forces are poised to move into the southern Afghanistan town of Marjah, and have warned civilians to leave the area. But only a few hundred Afghan families have responded.

Kabul - As US-led coalition troops prepare for a long-awaited offensive against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, few civilians have managed to escape the town at the center of the operation, raising the risk of civilian casualties that could undermine the Obama administration's military strategy for the country.

The US-led force said Tuesday that fewer than 200 families — around 1,200 people — had left the town of Marjah and the surrounding area, which have a population of about 80,000. By Wednesday, the Associated Press reported another 100 families had left.

"Commanders in the area are reporting no significant increase in persons moving out of Nad-e Ali district in the last month," the US-led International Security Assistance Force said in a statement. "Despite reports of large numbers of civilians fleeing the area, the facts on the ground do not support these assertions."

Thousands of US, British and Afghan soldiers are poised to push into the area, with preliminary operations reported to have begun late Tuesday. Afghan police will accompany the soldiers in an effort to establish law and order quickly.

The presence of a large number of civilians could make the operation much trickier and provide a test of the new coalition military doctrine of protecting the population. A large media contingent from around the world will accompany the troops, recording their progress.

An estimated 2,000 Taliban fighters are dug in and are believed to have planted roadside bombs and booby-trapped buildings. Residents said the insurgents had dug trenches in a traffic circle and mined the roads out of town. It may be too late for those who haven't escaped by now.

"If (NATO forces) don't avoid large scale civilian casualties, given the rhetoric about protecting the population, then no matter how many Taliban are routed, the Marjah mission should be considered a failure," said Candace Rondeaux, an Afghanistan-based analyst at the International Crisis Group, an independent research and campaigning organization.

Although international forces counted relatively few evacuees, local people told McClatchy that more civilians had evacuated, though still only a fraction of the population. Leaflets dropped over the town had warned townspeople for days of the impending offensive.

"The message to the people of the area is, of course, keep your heads down, stay inside when the operation is going ahead," Mark Sedwill, the civilian head of NATO in Afghanistan, told reporters in Kabul.

Mohammad Anwar, the head of the provincial council for Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital near Marjah, told McClatchy by phone that the council had registered 244 families from Marjah, 60 of them in a newly established camp. He estimated that another 100 families had gone to the nearby district of Nawa, and more had trekked to the towns of Garmsir and Gereshk.

"They're still coming; every day they're coming," Anwar said. "They come by tractor, Toyota station wagon, some with blankets and other possessions, some with just their children."

Marjah is the last town in the central Helmand river valley under insurgent control, and it houses a large number of heroin production labs, which the Taliban tolerate — and tax.

"I don't know what NATO is talking about, 50 families came out (of Marjah) just today," tribal leader Juma Gul said by phone from Lashkar Gah. "There are just poor people left there, those who don't have money to come to Lashkar Gah."

In a separate development, more evidence emerged in neighboring Pakistan of the death of the leader of that country's Taliban movement, Hakimullah Mehsud. Unnamed Taliban commanders told reporters that Mehsud, who apparently had been injured in a U.S.

missile strike in Pakistan's tribal belt in mid-January, had died on his way for medical treatment. According to some accounts, he'd been taken close to the central Pakistani city of Multan, on his way for treatment in the southern port of Karachi, when he died.

The Pakistani Taliban continued to deny Mehsud's death, but there are signs that a power struggle has developed to succeed Mehsud, with a new contender, Noor Jamal, alias Toofan, emerging to challenge several more established Pakistani Taliban chiefs.

Afghan interior minister calls on Taliban to give up militancy

Xinhua

02/11/2010

By

Ahead of launching a massive military operation against Taliban in Marja district of southern Helmand province, Afghan Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar Thursday called on Taliban militants to give up militancy and join the peace process.

Addressing a press conference after holding meeting with elders from Marja and Nad Ali districts Thursday morning in Helmand's provincial capital Lashkar Gah, Atmar said he wants Taliban fighters to renounce insurgency and join the peace process launched by the government.

Flanked by Deputy to Defense Ministry General Mohammad Akram, the Afghan interior minister said, "I am calling on Taliban in Marja to renounce militancy, join peace process and play their role in rebuilding the country."

He also said that the purpose of the operation is to pave the way for reconstruction and bringing lasting peace and stability in Marja district and surrounding regions.

Thousands of Afghan and the NATO-led troops including U.S. Marines are poised to launch the ever-biggest offensive in Marja, a hotbed of Taliban and drug producing center in south Afghanistan.

Sherzai opposes cash payments to tribes

Pajhwok

02/11/2010

By Abdul Moeed Hashmi

JALALABAD - Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Sherzai has alleged direct assistance to tribal chieftains from foreign troops is promoting warlordism in the country.

Talking to journalists after a workshop here on Tuesday, Sherzai said the arrests and subsequent release of suspects by foreign forces, without consulting the government, amounted to a violation of Afghanistan's laws.

He added the international troops arrested a person in Khogyani district a few days ago. The detainee was then handed over to the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which freed him on the recommendation of a tribal malik.

However, the governor revealed, the troops re-arrested the man following his release. "I want to lodge a complaint with the US embassy about this," said the governor, who urged foreign forces not to assist tribes and local shuras (councils) without taking the government into confidence.

The governor's statement came days after foreign troops provided cash assistance to tribal elders in six districts of Nangarhar. The forces also pledged one million dollars in reconstruction assistance.

Asked about the effect of giving cash to Taliban as part of a reconciliation drive, the governor replied: "I am against offering cash to them. Taliban will not accept the money offered as bribes; it will not help bring peace."

Sherzai believed the Taliban ready to join the national mainstream should be helped with better living conditions and other facilities. He demanded of the government to assign a key role to tribal elders and religious leaders at the proposed peace jirga.

About the workshop, he said it had been organised to ensure good governance and solve problems of traders. He added the traders wanted to invest and construct buildings, but the bureaucracy was creating trouble for them.

Trader Dr. Mukhlis Ahmad told Pajhwok Afghan News such workshops did not help solve their problems in the past. He accused central and provincial authorities of failing to resolve a single problem of traders over the past eight years.

Afghan security forces showing signs of professionalism

San Francisco Examiner

02/11/2010

By Jim Kouri

Afghan and coalition forces captured two suspected enemy commanders and seized caches of weapons and drugs in operations in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command reported.

An Afghan-international force captured a Haqqani terrorist network subcommander responsible for coordinating attacks on Afghan and coalition forces during a combined operation last night in the Sabari district of Afghanistan's Khost province.

The captured subcommander also is accused of arranging delivery of weapons to other Haqqani network operatives. The combined force also detained a pair of other suspected insurgents.

In the Wali Mohammad Shaheed district of Ghazni province yesterday, a combined force captured a Taliban commander accused of leading rocket attacks against Afghan and coalition forces and being involved with operational planning and the movement of weapons. Another suspected insurgent also was captured.

International Security Assistance Force service members on a routine patrol in Helmand province on Wednesday seized 800 pounds of marijuana, 600 pounds of marijuana seeds and 200 pounds of opium seeds. They detained two suspects and turned them over to Afghan authorities. The confiscated drugs were destroyed.

In the Nad-e Ali district of Helmand province yesterday, an International Security Assistance Force patrol discovered five mortar shells, a missile, a radio, binoculars and numerous bomb-making components. A combined Afghan-international patrol in the same district discovered a 108 mm illumination bomb, two rockets and two 40 mm bombs.

Meanwhile in Iraq, Iraqi police and U.S. advisors arrested 11 suspected al-Qaeda in Iraq members -- including the suspected commander and two deputies of their cell -- in a rural area northwest of Baghdad yesterday.

The cell is believed to be responsible for maintaining weapons caches and carrying out deadly attacks against civilians and security forces. During a search, the security team found a shotgun, numerous assault rifles, packaging material used to transport explosives, a small rocket and terrorist propaganda.

Preliminary questioning and evidence collected at the scene led Iraqi police to identify

and arrest all five cell members wanted on their arrest warrant, including the suspected commander and deputies, as well as six suspected criminal accomplices.

Afghans plea for quick, careful attack on Marjah

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

KANDAHAR – Tribal elders in southern Afghanistan pleaded Friday for NATO forces to wage their imminent offensive on the Taliban stronghold of Marjah quickly and carefully to protect civilians in and around the town.

The group of 34 elders said in a letter to provincial officials that their people are frightened and worried they won't be watched after, according to Abdul Hai Agha, an elder from Marjah.

"We said in this letter that if you are doing this operation in Marjah, do it quickly," Agha told The Associated Press by phone from the nearby provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. They also urged the troops to do their best to avoid civilian casualties during the assault and have food and shelter ready in nearby towns for refugees.

U.S. and Afghan forces have ringed Marjah, sealing off escape routes. On Thursday, Taliban defenders repeatedly fired rockets and mortars at units poised in foxholes along the edge of the town, apparently trying to lure NATO forces into skirmishes before the big attack.

The offensive in Helmand province — the largest in the nine-year Afghan war — has been telegraphed for weeks. Military officials have said they hope advertising the assault would give civilians more time to get to safety but many of the elders say they're now stuck in a terrifying limbo — unsure how soon the attack will start but certain it will be devastating when it does.

NATO forces have estimated 125,000 people live in the fighting zone. Civilian deaths during military operation are a hot-button issue in Afghanistan, and U.S. commanders have issued strict orders to limit the use of force when civilians are at risk.

Provincial spokesman Daoud Ahmadi said the governor's office had received the letter and that many of the requested measures were in place.

"We have arranged space for 7,000 families" in nearby towns, along with food and items like blankets and dishes, Ahmadi said. He said about 450 families — an estimated 2,700 people — have already sought refuge in Lashkar Gah, about 20 miles (30 kilometers) northeast of Marjah. Many of them took up with relatives but more than 100 were being sheltered by the government, he said.

On Friday, the road between Marjah and Lashkar Gah was clogged with cars and trucks filled with people fleeing ahead of the assault, according to AP Television News footage. Many said they had to leave quickly and secretly to avoid recrimination from Taliban

commanders.

"We were not allowed to come here. We haven't brought any of our belongings; we just tried to get ourselves out," said an elderly woman in a black headscarf who was on a minibus with three of her sons. Bibi Gul said she had three more sons she had to leave behind.

Others said they had to wait to leave when Taliban commanders weren't watching.

Police searched the vehicles for any signs of militants, in one case prodding bales of cotton with a metal rod in search of hidden weapons.

The plea from elders came a day after Afghanistan's interior minister met with about 300 tribal leaders in Lashkar Gah to explain the goals of the operation and ask for their support.

It was unclear whether the government's dialogue with elders had delayed the start of the offensive.

During the meeting, Helmand's governor urged the elders to use any connections they have with Taliban fighters in and around Marjah to ask them to lay down their weapons and come over to the government side.

Gov. Gulab Mangal asked the elders to "use any avenue you have, direct or indirect, to tell the Taliban who don't want to fight that they can join with us," according to the chief of Helmand's provincial council, Mohammad Anwar Khan.

On their side, the elders begged for limited use of air strikes because of the potential for civilian deaths, Khan said.

It was unclear whether the governor's plea was likely to lead to action. Another one of the elders at the meeting, Mohammad Karim Khan, said he would not dare to start going up to Taliban in his area and telling them to give up their guns to the government.

"We can't talk to the Taliban. We are farmers and poor people and we are not involved in these things like the politicians are," said Khan, who is not related to the provincial council chief.

But one of the main drafters of the letter to government officials said he and some others had been reaching out to local Taliban commanders.

"We have talked to some of the Taliban over the phone and we have told them: 'This is your country. Don't create problems for your fellow Afghans and don't go on a suicide mission,'" said Abdul Rehman Jan, an elder who lives in Lashkar Gah.

However, Jan said they don't expect to be able to bring anyone in because most of the

Afghan Taliban have already fled the area. Militant commanders from the Middle East or Pakistan have stayed on "and they want to fight," Jan said.

In the east, meanwhile, villagers accused a joint Afghan-NATO force of killing civilians during an overnight raid in Paktia province. NATO said it killed several insurgents on the compound and troops found the bodies of two men and two bound-and-gagged women when they searched it.

Afghan officials in Paktia said they are investigating the deaths of five people in a home near the provincial capital of Gardez.

Police Chief Gen. Azizudin Wardak said the five — two men and three women — were killed Thursday night during a party. One man worked for the police and another worked for the attorney general's office, he said.

"Who killed them? We still don't know," he said.

Also in Paktia province, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on a U.S. military base Thursday that injured five Americans. The base is 400 miles (640 kilometers) northeast of Marjah.

US and Afghan troops ring Taliban stronghold

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

NEAR MARJAH, – U.S. and Afghan forces ringed the Taliban stronghold of Marjah on Thursday, sealing off escape routes and setting the stage for what is being described as the biggest offensive of the nine-year war.

Taliban defenders repeatedly fired rockets and mortars at units poised in foxholes along the edge of the town, apparently trying to lure NATO forces into skirmishes before the big attack.

"They're trying to draw us in," said Capt. Joshua Winfrey, 30, of Tulsa, Okla., commander of Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines.

Up to 1,000 militants are believed holed up in Marjah, a key Taliban logistics base and center of the lucrative opium poppy trade. But the biggest threats are likely to be the land

mines and bombs hidden in the roads and fields of the farming community, 380 miles (610 kilometers) southwest of Kabul.

The precise date for the attack has been kept secret. U.S. officials have signaled for weeks they planned to seize Marjah, a town of about 80,000 people in Helmand province and the biggest community in southern Afghanistan under Taliban control.

NATO officials say the goal is to seize the town quickly and re-establish Afghan government authority, bringing public services in hopes of winning support of the townspeople once the Taliban are gone. Hundreds of Afghan soldiers were to join U.S. Marines in the attack to emphasize the Afghan role in the operation.

A Taliban spokesman dismissed the significance of Marjah, saying the NATO operation was "more propaganda than military necessity."

Nevertheless, the spokesman, Mohammed Yusuf, said in a dialogue on the Taliban Web site that the insurgents would strike the attackers with explosives and hit-and-run tactics, according to a summary by the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors militant Internet traffic.

In preparation for the offensive, a U.S.-Afghan force led by the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade moved south from Lashkar Gah and linked up Thursday with Marines on the northern edge of Marjah, closing off a main Taliban escape route. Marines and Army soldiers fired colored smoke grenades to show each other that they were friendly forces.

U.S. and Afghan forces have now finished their deployment along the main road in and out of Marjah, leaving the Taliban no way out except across bleak, open desert — where they could easily be spotted.

The Army's advance was slowed as U.S. and Afghan soldiers cleared the thicket of mines and bombs hidden in canals and along the roads and fought off harassment attacks along the way by small bands of insurgents. Two U.S. attack helicopters fired Hellfire missiles at a compound near Marjah from where insurgents had been firing at the advancing Americans.

Marines along the edge of the town exchanged fire with insurgents. There were no reports of casualties.

"I am not surprised at all that this is taking place," said the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Brian Christmas. "We are touching their trigger-line," referring to the outer rim of the Taliban defenses.

A far greater obstacle lies in the hundreds, if not thousands, of mines, makeshift bombs and booby traps which the Taliban are believed to have planted around Marjah.

"This may be the largest IED threat and largest minefield that NATO has ever faced,"

said Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commander of Marines in southern Afghanistan.

A British soldier was killed in a bombing Thursday in Helmand province, the Ministry of Defense announced in London. It was unclear whether the soldier was part of the Marjah operation.

In eastern Afghanistan, the spokesman for Paktia province, Roullah Samoun, said five Americans were wounded when a suicide attacker wearing a border police uniform blew himself up at a U.S. base near the Pakistan border. A U.S. statement said "several" U.S. service members were injured in an explosion at a joint U.S.-Afghan outpost in Paktia, but gave no further details.

To combat the mines around Marjah, Marines planned to use their new 72-ton Assault Breacher Vehicles, which use metal blows to scoop up hidden bombs or fire rockets to detonate them at a safe distance.

Once the main attack begins, U.S. commanders are eager to avoid civilian casualties, hoping instead to win over support of the Pashtun townspeople, who are from the same ethnic group as the majority of the Taliban. American officers have been instructing troops to hold their fire unless they are sure they are shooting at insurgents and not innocent villagers.

On Thursday, Afghanistan's interior minister, Hanif Atmar, met with a group of tribal elders explaining the goals of the operation and asking for their support.

"This operation is designed to open the way for those Afghans who want to join the peace process and to use the military power against those foreign terrorists who are hiding here," Atmar told the elders during a meeting in Lashkar Gah, the Helmand provincial capital about 20 miles northeast of Marjah.

The elders told Atmar that their support depended on how the operation was carried out and whether a large number of civilians were killed or injured in the fighting.

One elder, Mohebullah Torpatkai, said that if the operation improved the lives of civilians, "we the people of Marjah will fully support it."

As the Marines waited for battle, they received their first mail delivery since arriving in the Marjah area.

Some Marines burned their letters after reading them, either because they didn't want to carry any extra weight or have the letters fall into the wrong hands if they lost them in the fighting.

Others held on to them.

"I'm not burning any of my pictures or letters," said Cpl. Christian Martir, 23, from

Northridge, Calif., as he stared at photos from his girlfriend. "She also sent a little letter. I'm keeping all of it."

Blackwater 'billed US for prostitutes'

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

Two former Blackwater Worldwide employees say the security company repeatedly billed the US government for excessive or inappropriate expenses, including a prostitute for workers in Afghanistan and strippers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In a federal lawsuit filed in Virginia, Brad and Melan Davis say Blackwater officials also deceived the government by double-billing for travel costs and creating false invoices.

They say the US government "has been damaged in the amount of many millions of dollars in funds".

Brad Davis also claims he witnessed acts of excessive force by company workers in Iraq.

A federal law enforcement official told The Associated Press that federal authorities in Virginia were investigating whether Blackwater had overbilled for its State Department work.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak publicly.

Blackwater or its workers have also faced federal probes for shootings in Iraq and Afghanistan and accusations of arms smuggling.

An audit released last year found that the State Department could have been able to recover \$55 million from Blackwater because the company didn't provide the personnel necessary to fulfill its contract during the months examined in 2006 and 2007.

A spokesman for Blackwater, which has since changed its name to Xe, did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

The company is based in Moyock, North Carolina.

The latest lawsuit was filed in 2008 in the eastern district of Virginia and recently

unsealed after the Justice Department declined to join the case.

It provides more specific allegations by the Davises, a married couple.

Melan Davis, who said she handled some record-keeping and billing roles at Blackwater, said in a signed court statement that she found that a prostitute in Afghanistan had been placed on Blackwater's payroll under the "Morale Welfare Recreation" category.

Davis, who was fired from the company and is challenging her dismissal, said she also helped with record-keeping for Blackwater's response in Louisiana to Hurricane Katrina.

Among other charges of excessive billing there, Davis said two workers paid a vendor for "cleaning services" but the vendor would instead provide strippers.

Brad Davis says in the court filing he witnessed three instances in 2005 in which company workers used excessive force in Iraq.

He said the contractors involved in the shootings used unjustified force to "kill or seriously injure innocent Iraqi civilians", but that the company did not stop to see whether the targets of the shootings were alive or injured.

Warlord's offer complicates Afghan peace

United Press International

02/12/2010

By

KABUL - A peace initiative offered by Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could create tensions in the government's plans to court insurgents, lawmakers said.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said in January he would convene a loya jirga to examine ways to bring moderate insurgents into the political fray. U.S. military planners credited a similar counterinsurgency plan in Iraq with bringing the country back from the brink of civil war.

The Taliban, however, said they would not discuss any reconciliation effort while foreign troops were in Afghanistan.

Hekmatyar, the rebel leader of Hizb-i-Islami, offered his own initiative that called for

international forces to leave within 18 months in order to talk, The Christian Science Monitor reports.

In addition, Hekmatyar calls for an interim government to take control of the government in Kabul while tribal elders discuss drafting a new constitution for Afghanistan. Hekmatyar would then disarm, the report said.

Bakhtar Aminzay, an Afghan senator, told the newspaper that Hekmatyar's announcement could complicate reconciliation efforts.

"The government must talk to Hekmatyar and the Taliban at the same time," he said. "If you make a deal with Hekmatyar and not the Taliban, the problem could get worse."

Hekmatyar, who served briefly as the Afghan prime minister in the 1990s, is on a U.N. list of terrorists. The U.S. State Department, meanwhile, links him to al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

NATO says night raid killed insurgents in Afghanistan; family says 5 innocents died

The Associated Press

02/12/2010

By

KABUL — A joint Afghan-NATO force killed several insurgents during a raid on a compound where troops found three dead women, NATO said Friday. Family members accused U.S. soldiers of killing five innocent civilians.

Afghan officials in Paktia province confirmed Friday that they are investigating the deaths of five people in a home near the provincial capital of Gardez.

Police Chief Gen. Azizudin Wardak said two men and three women were killed Thursday night during a party. One of the men worked for the police and another worked for the attorney general's office, he said.

"Who killed them? We still don't know," he said, adding the investigation is under way.

Civilian deaths during military operations are a sensitive issue in Afghanistan, and U.S. commanders have issued strict orders to limit the use of force when civilians are at risk. President Hamid Karzai has also called on NATO to stop night raids into private homes

because they offend Afghan culture and help turn people away from the government and its allies.

In a statement, NATO forces said the raid took place Thursday night in the Gardez district after the joint force received reports of militant activity at a compound near the village of Khatabeh.

"Several insurgents engaged the joint force in a fire fight and were killed," the statement said, without saying how many had died. Then "a large number of men, women, and children" exited the compound and were detained by the joint force, it said.

The statement said joint forces then conducted a thorough search of the compound and made what it called a "gruesome discovery" - the hidden bodies of three women who had been bound, gagged and killed.

Eight men have been detained for questioning, NATO forces said, adding that a joint forensic investigation will be conducted.

However, relatives of the dead accused American forces of being responsible for the deaths of all five people when contacted by The Associated Press by phone.

A man who identified himself as Hamidullah said he had been in the home as some 20 people gathered to celebrate the birth of a son when a group of men he described as "U.S. special forces" surrounded the compound.

Saying he witnessed one man's death, Hamidullah said, "Daoud was coming out of the house to ask what was going on. And then they shot him."

Then they killed a second man, Hamidullah said. The rest of the group were forced out into the yard, made to kneel and had their hands bound behind their back, he said, breaking off crying without giving any further details.

A deputy provincial council member in Gardez, Shahyesta Jan Ahadi, said news of the operation has inflamed the local community that blames Americans.

"Last night, the Americans conducted an operation in a house and killed five innocent people, including three women. The people are so angry," he said.

Ahadi said the operation had not included any Afghan forces, saying "The government didn't know about this."

"We strongly condemn this," he said.

Afghan Immunity Law Stirs Up Anger

Truthdig

02/12/2010

By

Eliciting a cry from international and domestic human rights organizations, the Afghanistan government has passed a controversial law giving immunity from prosecution to Taliban fighters—no matter their deeds—who lay down their weapons.

The move, which some see as reconciliation, is being called by others a sign of disrespect to the victims and families of victims of Taliban violence, a bid for a quick peace deal with insurgents that violates the rights of injured parties. —JCL

The Guardian:

Taliban fighters who have maimed and murdered but who lay down their weapons will be given immunity from prosecution according to a law that came into force without announcement in the weeks running up to last month's London conference on Afghanistan.

The sudden implementation of the controversial law, which had been shelved for almost two years since it was passed by a slim parliamentary majority in 2007, has raised fears that the Afghan government is ignoring the rights of Taliban victims for the sake of President Hamid Karzai's push for a quick peace deal with insurgents.

The reconciliation and general amnesty law also gives immunity from prosecution to all of the country's warlords, the former factional leaders, many of whom are hated for the atrocities they committed during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s.

Afghan power plant hit by new allegations of impropriety

McClatchy Newspapers

02/12/2010

By Marisa Taylor

WASHINGTON -- A \$300 million power plant project in Afghanistan that's paid for by American taxpayers and plagued by delays and cost overruns is now under scrutiny

because of allegations that a security contract was awarded improperly.

U.S. officials are looking into whether the power plant's security manager, who had a role in awarding the subcontract, had a conflict of interest because he once worked for the winning bidder, London-based Blue Hackle.

Two earlier U.S. government inquiries concluded that unnecessary construction delays led to \$40 million in cost overruns by the plant's two contractors, U.S.-based Black & Veatch and Louis Berger.

A separate government audit recently found that the U.S. has spent more than \$732 million to improve Afghanistan's electrical grid since 2002, but delays and rising costs have plagued many of the projects, including the plant, in part because of poor oversight by Washington.

The conflict-of-interest allegations against the security official are outlined in a complaint filed with Black & Veatch by Hart, a Cyprus company that previously had provided security for the construction site.

It's unclear whether federal investigators have decided to launch a full-blown investigation. The inspector general's office the U.S. Agency for International Development, which can launch either an audit or a criminal inquiry, declined to comment.

In the complaint obtained by McClatchy Newspapers, Hart contends that Ian Cameron, corporate security manager for Black & Veatch, was involved in selecting his former employer, Blue Hackle, in violation of bidding regulations.

Hart had provided security for the site until December after winning a \$5.7 million contract in 2008. When the contract was re-bid in July, Hart competed against Blue Hackle and 10 other companies.

Cameron denied that he took part in the decision to select Blue Hackle, telling McClatchy, "I don't award contracts." He declined to elaborate and directed questions to Black & Veatch corporate headquarters in Overland Park, Kan.

Documents show that Cameron was a member of the committee that reviewed the new bids. He also played an active role in the pre-bid meeting, where companies hear about a contract's requirements before bidding. He presented information about the bid and gave competing companies a guided tour of the site. The documents, however, don't reveal whether Cameron had any say in the final decision.

Hart had a substantial financial edge over its competitors because the company had trained and equipped the existing security guards.

Hart officials accuse Cameron of giving their confidential pricing information to Blue

Hackle, an allegation that Cameron wouldn't comment on. Hart didn't have direct proof of its allegations, but claimed to have circumstantial evidence.

In an e-mail obtained by McClatchy, Cameron is shown to have received the pricing information from Hart. Hart said that Cameron asked for it, which the company contends is suspicious and demonstrates that Cameron was in a position to pass the information to his former employer.

Black & Veatch officials told the companies that if they didn't have a representative present at the pre-bid meeting, they might not be allowed to compete, but Blue Hackle didn't attend.

Its absence from the meeting "raises an important question: How did Blue Hackle obtain the information necessary to present a winning bid, and did it do so through secret and unlawful communications with a LBG/B&V employee?" Hart said in its complaint.

Documents show that Cameron maintained contact with his former employers.

In a March 2009 letter, he lobbied the Afghan government on Blue Hackle's behalf, asking the Defense Ministry to allow Blue Hackle employees to use a government firing range to train its employees. In the letter, Cameron described Blue Hackle as a Black & Veatch subcontractor, although the company wasn't hired to provide security for the plant until 10 months later.

A Black & Veatch spokesman said USAID is still investigating the allegations.

"We informed USAID as soon as we were made aware of the issue and have cooperated with USAID's inquiry," said George Minter, a spokesman for Black & Veatch.

Minter said that USAID directed his company to hire Blue Hackle and not to launch an investigation. The directive could signal that the investigation has stalled.

Investigators first interviewed witnesses at least five months ago. The award of the almost \$4 million bid initially was put on hold, but Blue Hackle then took over in January. The company will be paid \$2.4 million for five months.

In response to questions, USAID officials said in a statement that they take allegations seriously but "decided that there was no basis to continue to withhold consent to subcontract with Blue Hackle resulting in a substantial savings."

"USAID relies upon the prime contractor to ensure that the (subcontractor) supports the goals of the program."

Robert Peasgood, a Blue Hackle director in London who handles media inquiries, didn't respond to repeated requests for comment. Officials with Hart also declined to comment.

No matter what the outcome, the controversy is likely to fuel concerns that USAID isn't keeping close enough tabs on projects in Afghanistan. The plant is part of a \$1.4 billion contract awarded by USAID to Black & Veatch and Louis Berger to build many of the energy projects that now are under way in Afghanistan.

Rajiv Shah, the administrator of USAID, who took the helm on Dec. 31, vowed during his confirmation hearing to review the way USAID handles contracting because of the criticism.

USAID officials also said they've made improvements in their oversight of the plant since hearing the criticism.

In the past year, several other security officials have come under scrutiny in Afghanistan.

Scott "Max" Anthony Walker, who worked for Louis Berger and Black and Veatch as a security coordinator until he was fired in June, recently pleaded guilty in connection with charges that he solicited at least \$250,000 in kickbacks in exchange for steering a contract.

In a separate case, former Louis Berger security subcontractor Delmar Dwayne Spier and his wife, Barbara, pleaded guilty in September to federal conspiracy and fraud charges related to their scheme to inflate expenses claimed by his company, United States Protection and Investigations. Prosecutors estimate the couple brought in at least \$3 million from the scheme.

In yet another incident, guards from ArmorGroup North America, a private security company that had a \$189 million contract to protect the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, were shown in photos partying drunk and nude.

The Project on Government Oversight, a U.S. government watchdog group, accused supervisors of bringing prostitutes to the guards' quarters and hazing employees by threatening them and urinating on them. Despite the problems, the State Department extended the company's contract for another year through most of 2010.

Don't Let Pakistan Repeat Past Mistakes In Afghanistan

RFE/RL

02/13/2010

By M. D. Nalapat

The recently concluded London Conference on Afghanistan is the latest in a series of meetings that have sought to craft strategies for a country that has been torn by conflict since the Soviet Union invaded it in 1979. Back then, worried that Moscow would expand its footprint in the Pashtun heartland and pose a direct threat to the unity of Pakistan, the generals in Islamabad began a covert program of funding, training, and equipping Afghans willing to take on the Soviet Army.

At that time, the overwhelming majority of Pashtuns were moderate, uninfected by the viruses of religious exclusivism and intolerance that they were subsequently exposed to. The problem for Pakistan was that many of the moderate Pashtuns were ethnic nationalists, who sought a unified Pashtun state that would cover both sides of the 1893 Durand Line, the boundary that was arbitrarily drawn by the British empire to mark out its sphere of influence from that of the amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan. The Afghan territory ceded by the amir was to have been returned 100 years later, a condition that was obviously unacceptable to Pakistan.

No Afghan government has ratified the Durand Line, and only a few have recognized it as a valid (albeit temporary) border. In 1949, the then king of Afghanistan explicitly declared that the line was illegal and that the territories ceded in 1893 ought to be reintegrated into his country. Since then, Pashtun nationalists have regarded Pakistan as a country in illegal occupation of as much as 40 percent of Pashtun territory. They see Pakistan as a country dominated by Punjabis, where the Pashtuns -- together with Sindhis, Baluch, and other non-Punjabi groups -- have second-class status. Therefore, they seek the return of the lost lands of the Pashtun to Afghanistan.

Given the strong backing that Pakistan has historically enjoyed from the West, this demand has received almost zero traction within the international community. However, the dream of a unified Pashtun homeland has continued to simmer in Afghan minds, raising concern in Pakistan about a possible rise in the sentiment for unification in the populations of Dera, Bahawalpur, Ghazi, and the FATA, which were under Afghan rule for 12 centuries before the imposition of the Durand Line.

Left A Vacuum

The military strategists who masterminded the USSR's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan ignored Pashtun nationalist sentiment and believed the delusion that the people of Afghanistan would accept Soviet-style communism. They began rounding up the nationalists -- most of whom were Pashtun -- and exiling or even executing them for their opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan by an alien power.

In this way, they removed from office (and some even from life) those who could have ensured the emergence of the country as a moderate state. The Soviets trampled on Pashtunkwali, on the syncretic and Sufi traditions of this great people, and in the process left a vacuum that in just a few years was filled by religious supremacists trained in Pakistan and funded by Saudi Arabia.

It became clear to the Afghans from the very first weeks of the Soviet occupation that Moscow's mission was colonial: to subjugate the Afghans and force them to accept slave status under an ideology they loathed. Such insensitivity to the history and culture of the Afghan people ensured that there developed a powerful Afghan nationalist resistance to the Soviet occupation, spearheaded by the Pashtuns. Sadly, because this group was unwilling to renounce the dream of unifying the Pashtun lands across both sides of the 1893 Durand Line, they were anathema to Pakistan, the country to which the United States outsourced the 1979-88 Afghan war

U.S. policymakers relied on intelligence agents, diplomats, and experts who in the past had worked closely with the Pakistan Army (the only organized military force in the world whose official motto is "Jihad"). These individuals bought into Rawalpindi's line that Afghan nationalists needed to be sidelined and the focus needed to be on the religious extremists who were being trained in their thousands in Pakistan. Indeed, political patriots soon found themselves unwelcome in Pakistan, and nearly 700,000 migrated to India.

Thus far, no one has bothered about just why the India-based Pashtuns remained moderate and nonviolent, while so many of those who moved to Pakistan became religious fundamentalists eager to inflict violence on those who disagreed with their world view. The passing over of Pashtun nationalists in favor of the carefully nurtured Pashtun religious fanatics was to have immense future consequences for international security, blowback that saw its most vicious expression on September 11, 2001.

The military in Pakistan -- aware of the consequences if Pashtuns were to return to their own traditions rather than adopt the alien ideology peddled by international Wahabbism - - are unwilling to move decisively against the religious extremists who today threaten to embroil the Pakistani state in a civil war that would pit the moderate majority against the small -- but deadly -- number of Pakistanis who saw Taliban Afghanistan as a role model for their own country to follow.

In the manner of a gambler unwilling to quit the gaming table even after horrendous losses, the Pakistan Army is still looking toward religious fanatics to create enough mayhem in Kashmir and in the rest of India to persuade the authorities in Delhi to surrender the Kashmir Valley to religious rule. The reality is that the Indian state is strong enough to keep at bay any such effort, aware that the loss of Kashmir would create religious polarization in India that would threaten the safety of the country's 163 million Muslims.

Nightmare Scenario

Each day that the Pakistan Army refuses to make common cause with India in battling the Taliban brings closer that dismal time when civil society in Pakistan may collapse, leading to the nightmare scenario of a nuclear state gone rogue.

Yes, there is a role for some elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan. And this is their return to the glorious traditions of Pashtunkwali. With all its shortcomings, the administration of President Hamid Karzai is slowly taking back the Pashtun historical inheritance of moderation and syncreticism from the Kharijites that constitute the Taliban. As a country that shares its history with Afghanistan, and as the home of an Afghan exile community that today numbers over 1 million, India has a vital stake in ensuring that the Taliban go down to defeat in Afghanistan and that -- as Taliban -- they be denied any role in a country, the majority of whose people seeks to join the international mainstream.

Afghanistan needs more schools that can teach the English language, more hospitals that can cater to the many who are in poor health, and audio-visual outlets that show in vivid detail the country's horrible immediate past and a vision of its possible future. Only with this can Afghans in Afghanistan become productive, responsible international citizens, just as the many Afghans now settled in democracies such as the United States, the U.K., and India.

Until the mind-set of a Taliban changes, he will represent not an opportunity, but a threat. And the only way his mind-set can be changed is to make him irrelevant in a country that in its core culture is the opposite of his barbarism. A country that wants its women educated and its minorities protected. A country that seeks prosperity not through opium but through information technologies. There is no reason for the military in Pakistan to feel threatened either by Pashtun nationalists or their friends in India. The Durand Line is as much a fact of history as India's McMahon Line with China, and both will endure.

Six decades of lost opportunities have shown that the only rational way forward is to quarantine the religious fanatics and take back only those who have freed themselves of the toxic ideology of the religious supremacists. Any plan that returns oxygen to the Taliban would be as much of a tragedy as the 1979 decision to rely on Pashtun religious fanatics rather than Pashtun nationalists to battle the Soviets was. To err is human, but to repeat that mistake would be criminal.

US, Afghan troops sweep into Taliban stronghold

The Associated Press

02/13/2010

By

MARJAH – Thousands of U.S. Marines and Afghan soldiers stormed the Taliban stronghold of Marjah by air and ground Saturday, meeting only scattered resistance but facing a daunting thicket of bombs and booby traps that slowed the allied advance through the town.

The massive offensive was aimed at establishing Afghan government authority over the biggest southern town under militant control and breaking the Taliban grip over a wide area of their southern heartland.

Maj. Gen. Nick Carter, NATO commander of forces in southern Afghanistan, said Afghan and coalition troops, aided by 60 helicopters, made a "successful insertion" into Marjah in southern Helmand province. He said the operation was going "without a hitch."

Thousands of British, U.S. and Canadian troops also swept into Taliban areas to the north of Marjah, seeking to clear a wide swath of villages that had been under Taliban control for several years.

No coalition casualties had been reported more than 12 hours after the initial airborne assault, but NATO said three U.S. soldiers were killed Saturday in a bombing elsewhere in southern Afghanistan.

At least 20 insurgents were reported killed in the Helmand operation, said Gen. Sher Mohammad Zazai, the commander of Afghan forces in the region. Troops have recovered Kalashnikov rifles, heavy machine guns and grenades from 11 insurgents captured so far.

The few civilians who ventured out to talk to the Marines said teams of Taliban fighters were falling back deeper into the town, perhaps to try to regroup and mount harassment attacks to prevent the government from rushing in aid and public services — a key step in the operation.

The long-awaited assault on Marjah is the biggest offensive since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and is a major test of a new NATO strategy focused on protecting civilians. The attack is also the first major combat operation since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 U.S. reinforcements here in December to try to turn the tide of the war.

President Hamid Karzai called on Afghan and international troops "to exercise absolute

caution to avoid harming civilians," including avoiding airstrikes in areas where civilians are at risk. In a statement, he also called on insurgent fighters to renounce violence and reintegrate into civilian life.

A Taliban spokesman insisted the insurgents were still resisting the allied assault and that the town remained under their control.

"The Taliban are there and they are fighting. All of Marjah is still under Taliban control," Qari Yousef Ahmadi told The Associated Press by phone. He declined to say how many Taliban fighters remained in the town but dismissed NATO accounts as "propaganda."

Lt. Col. Brian Christmas, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, said U.S. troops faced sustained gunbattles in four areas of the town, including the western suburb of Sistani where India Company faced "some intense fighting." To the east, Kilo Company was inserted by helicopter but was then "significantly engaged" as the Marines fanned out from the landing zone.

But the greatest threat came from the extensive network of mines, homemade bombs and booby traps that ground forces encountered as soon as they crossed a major canal into the town's northern entrance.

Insurgents appeared to have withdrawn from their frontline positions but left boobytraps and explosives in their abandoned positions and in the network of canals built by the Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. Marines safely set off numerous bombs, as the sound of strong detonations reverberated through the dusty streets.

"It's just got to be a very slow and deliberate process," said Capt. Joshua Winfrey of Stillwater, Okla., a Marine company commander.

The bridge over the canal into Marjah from the north was so rigged with explosives that Marines erected temporary bridges to cross into the town.

Lance Corp. Ivan Meza, 19, was the first to walk across one of the flimsy bridges.

"I did get an adrenaline rush, and that bridge is wobbly," said Meza, a Marine combat engineer from Pismo Beach, California, who is with the 1st Platoon, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines.

Several civilians hesitantly crept out of their compounds as the Marines slowly worked through a suspected mine field. The Marines entered compounds first to make sure they were clear of bombs, then called in their Afghan counterparts to interview civilians inside.

Shopkeeper Abdul Kader, 44, said seven or eight Taliban fighters, who had been holding the position where the Marines crossed over, had fled in the middle of the night. He said he was angry at the insurgents for having planted bombs and mines all around his

neighborhood.

"They left with their motorcycles and their guns. They went deeper into town," he said as Marines and Afghan troops searched a poppy field next to his house. "We can't even walk out of our own houses."

Saturday's ground assault followed many hours after an initial wave of helicopters carrying hundreds of U.S. Marines and Afghan troops swooped into town under the cover of darkness before dawn. Cobra helicopters fired Hellfire missiles at tunnels, bunkers and other defensive positions.

Marine commanders had said they expected between 400 to 1,000 insurgents — including more than 100 foreign fighters — to be holed up in Marjah. The town of 80,000 people, about 360 miles (610 kilometers) southwest of Kabul, is the linchpin of the militants' logistical and opium-smuggling network.

The offensive, code-named "Moshtarak," or "Together," was described as the biggest joint operation of the Afghan war, with 15,000 troops involved, including some 7,500 troops fighting in Marjah. The government says Afghan soldiers make up at least half of the offensive's force.

Once Marjah is secured, NATO hopes to rush in aid and restore public services in a bid to win support among the estimated 125,000 people who live in the town and surrounding villages. The Afghans' ability to restore those services is crucial to the success of the operation and to prevent the Taliban from returning.

Carter said coalition forces hope to install an Afghan government presence within the next few days and will work to find and neutralize improvised explosive devices — homemade bombs — left by the militants.

Tribal elders have pleaded for NATO to finish the operation quickly and spare civilians — an appeal that offers some hope the townspeople will cooperate with Afghan and international forces once the Taliban are gone.

Still, the town's residents have displayed few signs of rushing to welcome the attack force.

"The elders are telling people to stay behind the front doors and keep them bolted," Carter said. "Once people feel more secure and they realize there is government present on the ground, they will come out and tell us where the IEDs are."

Bombs, booby-traps slow US advance in Afghan town

The Associated Press

02/14/2010

By

MARJAH – Bombs and booby-traps slowed the advance of thousands of U.S. Marines and Afghan soldiers moving through the Taliban-controlled town of Marjah — NATO's most ambitious effort yet to break the militants' grip over their southern heartland.

NATO said Saturday it hoped to secure the area in days, set up a local government and rush in development aid in a first test of the new U.S. strategy for turning the tide of the eight-year war. The offensive is the largest since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The Taliban appeared to have scattered in the face of overwhelming force, possibly waiting to regroup and stage attacks later to foil the alliance's plan to stabilize the area and expand Afghan government control in the volatile south.

NATO said two of its soldiers were killed in the first day of the operation — one American and one Briton, according to military officials in their countries. Afghan authorities said at least 20 insurgents were killed.

More than 30 transport helicopters ferried troops into the heart of Marjah before dawn Saturday, while British, Afghan and U.S. troops fanned out across the Nad Ali district to the north of the mud-brick town, long a stronghold of the Taliban.

Maj. Gen. Gordon Messenger told reporters in London that British forces "have successfully secured the area militarily" with only sporadic resistance from Taliban forces. A Taliban spokesman insisted their forces still controlled the town.

President Barack Obama was keeping a close watch on combat operations, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said.

The president will get an update from his national security adviser, Gen. Jim Jones, later Saturday. Vietor said Defense Secretary Robert Gates will also have the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, brief Obama on Sunday morning.

In Marjah, Marines and Afghan troops faced little armed resistance. But their advance through the town was impeded by countless land mines, homemade bombs and booby-traps littering the area.

Throughout the day, Marine ordnance teams blew up bombs where they were found, setting off huge explosions that reverberated through the dusty streets.

The bridge over the canal into Marjah from the north was rigged with so many explosives that Marines erected temporary bridges to cross into the town.

"It's just got to be a very slow and deliberate process," said Capt. Joshua Winfrey of Stillwater, Okla., a Marine company commander.

Lt. Col. Brian Christmas, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, said U.S. troops fought gunbattles in at least four areas of the town and faced "some intense fighting."

To the east, the battalion's Kilo Company was inserted into the town by helicopter without meeting resistance but was then "significantly engaged" as the Marines fanned out from the landing zone, Christmas said.

Marine commanders had said they expected between 400 and 1,000 insurgents — including more than 100 foreign fighters — to be holed up in Marjah, a town of 80,000 people that is the linchpin of the militants' logistical and opium-smuggling network in the south.

Saturday's ground assault followed several hours after the first wave of helicopters flew troops over the mine fields into the center of town before dawn. Helicopter gunships fired missiles at Taliban tunnels and bunkers while flares illuminated the night sky so pilots could see their landing zones.

The offensive, code-named "Moshtarak," or "Together," was described as the biggest joint operation of the Afghan war, with 15,000 troops involved, including some 7,500 in Marjah itself. The government says Afghan soldiers make up at least half of the offensive's force.

Once Marjah is secured, NATO hopes to quickly deliver aid and provide public services in a bid to win support among the estimated 125,000 people who live in the town and surrounding villages. The Afghans' ability to restore those services is crucial to the success of the operation and in preventing the Taliban from returning.

Marja 50 Years Ago: Model Villages and American Money

The New York Times
02/13/2010

By Stephen Farrel

Marja, an area of Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province, is the focus of an imminent NATO military operation. Tribal elders are being assured that government and NATO forces will rid the area of Taliban fighters, and that they will be consulted on the appointment of local officials and development project proposals.

The older ones may recall that Marja and the surrounding region was the product of an earlier Afghan-American river and social engineering project half a century ago. The area was settled with hundreds of new families in the late 1950s and early 1960s to be "model villages" under a vast scheme to rejuvenate the entire Helmand River Valley — using an American company that helped build the Hoover Dam.

A dispatch from The New York Times dated February 29, 1960

"MISTAKES BESET AFGHAN PROJECT
Helmand Valley Work, Which U.S. is Aiding, Lags Badly – Fund Lack a Factor"

and

"still more money will be needed. The likely provider is the United States"

and

"Modern American agricultural machinery has been rusting in idleness for years. It was important to grow wheat for workers of the American company that did most of the valley's construction."

On the "brighter" side:

"Model villages in the Marja area are blossoming with settlers, schools, mosques and vast areas of green fields."

and

"An increasing number of promising young Afghans are being sent abroad for the technical training that will help them to carry on fruitfully when their American advisers leave."

Here is the article in full, printed on March 13, 1960

MISTAKES BESET AFGHAN PROJECT

**Helmand Valley Work, Which
U. S. Is Aiding, Lags Badly
—Fund Lack a Factor**

Special to The New York Times.

LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan, Feb. 29—There is hope in the upper Helmand Valley, but also frustration and a tinge of despair.

This is the 400,000-acre area in which, just after World War II, Afghanistan staked many of her hopes for economic growth. She envisioned the conversion of a rocky desert into fertile fields of wheat, cotton, corn and rice. She saw her 2,000,000 nomadic tribesmen becoming prosperous homesteaders.

To realize this, \$100,000,000 has been spent so far. The United States Export-Import Bank has lent \$39,500,000 of this and \$10,000,000 has come from the International Cooperation Administration. Most of the rest has been provided by Afghanistan, a country of 9,000,000 people in which the annual per capita income is only \$40.

The Helmand Valley is changing gradually, but Afghanistan's hopes are far from realized. The country is feeling the heavy burden of paying off its loans, but still more money will be needed. The likely provider is the United States, which has been linked with the project from the start.

Called Comedy of Errors

Critics have described the Helmand project as a comedy of errors. The visitor sees or hears of many of the sore points.

Although two earth-filled dams have been built and 600 miles of irrigation canals dug, only 170,000 acres have a firm water supply.



The New York Times March 13, 1960

A LAGGARD PROJECT:
Work in the Helmand Valley (cross), in Afghanistan, is far behind schedule.

that the land around it was uncultivable.

Modern American agriculture machinery has been rusting in idleness for years. It was imported to grow wheat for workers of the American company that did most of the valley's construction. It cannot be used by homesteaders because their holdings are too small.

Many farmers, unprepared for their new irrigation facilities, flooded their fields.

Brighter Side Viewed

On the brighter side, there is hope that Nad-i-ali can be rehabilitated. Workers are being paid the equivalent of 50 cents a day to dig drainage ditches by hand.

Model villages in the Marja area are blossoming with settlers, schools, mosques and vast areas of green fields. The bitter lesson of Nad-i-ali has clearly been learned.

Extensive agricultural research is being conducted at Marja by Afghan experts with United States technical aid.

A model town with the only pure water supply in Afghanistan has been built at Lashkar Gah, the headquarters of

A far more detailed account of the Helmand River Valley project in the 1950s and 1960s is provided in Louis Dupree's encyclopedic book "Afghanistan," published in 1973 by Princeton University Press.

Marja, he wrote, was settled in 1957 during an ambitious project by the Helmand Valley Authority to rejuvenate the Helmand River using the combined efforts of the Afghan government and an engineering company based in San Francisco. A pilot project had been started three years earlier in Nad-i-Ali, 10 miles from Lashkar Gah, he wrote, going on to say:

One such later scheme was Marja.

Social Headlines

Hundreds stranded on key highways

Pajhwok Reporters - Feb 8, 2010 - 20:15

KABUL (PAN): The non-stop snowfalls have blocked several key highways in different parts of the country, leaving hundreds of residents and travelers stranded, officials said on Monday.

In southeastern Paktia province, the Logar-Gardez Highway remained blocked for five hours at the Teri Kandaw area due to heavy snowfall on Monday.

Passengers said the highway blocked after a big snowslide event at 2:30 pm.

Acting Paktika Governor, Abdul Rahman Mangal, criticised the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) for failing to clear the highway of snow.

Meanwhile, the Gardez-Khost Highway was closed in the morning at Sato Kandaw area when a truck overturned on the highway due to slippery condition of the road following snowfall.

The Salang bypass which links Kabul with northern Afghanistan was reopened after several hours. The blockade occurred after more than a dozen incidents of avalanches took place.

Officials have asked the drivers and passengers to keep the required equipments with them while traveling on the bypass.

Latif Khan, deputy chief of Traffic department in northern Baghlan province said four men and two children were wounded in a traffic accident in the Doshi district in north Salang bypass.

He said the wounded were transferred to the Pul-i-Khumri Hospital, with one man and a child in a critical condition.

In central Kapisa province, roads in Kohband and Ala Sai were closed due to the snowfall.

Dr. Ghairat, head of development council of Ala Sai district, said the Sakin bypass had been blocked for the last two days due to heavy snowfall.

Noor Aqa Hoshmand, district chief of Kohband, said the snow blocked the roads in Malangkhel, Kotali and Haidarkhel areas.

In central Parwan province, around 60 passengers in traveling in 12 vans have been stranded at the Shebar bypass, thanks to heavy snowing on Monday. The stranded people have demanded of the government to come to their rescue.

Talking to Pajhwok Afghan News over the telephone, Muhammadullah, one of the stranded passengers, said the passengers were worried about their fate due to incessant snowfalls since early this week.

Another passenger, Muhammad Mubeen, who is going to Bamyán along with family members, said there had also been a number of women and children among the stranded passengers. "The children may die of cold at the bypass tonight," he feared.

But spokesman for Bamyán governor, Abdul Rahman Ahmadi, said workers of a private

company had been engaged on clearing the road and a police party dispatched to rescue the trapped travelers.

He said they were in contract with the official team in order to rescue the people as soon as possible.

About 100 centimetres of snow was recorded on the bypass and 40 centimetres in the capital.

The bypass remained blocked for the last two days.

Insecurity forces closure of 172 schools in Kandahar

Bashir Ahmad Naadem - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:05

Pajhwok

KANDAHAR (PAN): Tens of thousand of students have been deprived of their right of education in the insurgency-plagued southern province of Kandahar, mainly because of widespread insecurity, an official said on Monday.

Acting education director, Haji Najibullah Ahmadi, said this at a press conference, also attended by Governor Toryalay Waisa. He said 172 schools having 200,000 students had been closed due to security concerns. There are a total of 403 schools in the province.

A large gathering -- Education Council took place at the governor's house before the news conference. Attended by local and international officials, including Canadian diplomat Ben Roswell and UNICEF and US representatives, the gathering discussed ways of reopening the schools.

Ahmadi said most of the schools had been closed in Dand, Daman, Zherai, Panjwayee, Arghandab and Spin Boldak districts. He added there were no schools at all in vulnerable districts such as Ghorak, Mya Nasheen and Shorabak.

The participants also conferred on the educational plan for the forthcoming year, according to the director, who said the UNICEF and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) had promised to build 25 new schools in the province -- 12 in Kandahar City, three in Zherai, two in Dand, four in Panjwayee and as many in Daman.

Governor Toryalay Waisa claimed American and Canadian officials pledged to improve the education sector of the province. They would continue to provide assistance in the fields of health, agriculture and security, he said.

Calling the closure a catastrophe, he argued the restoration of security and reopening of the closed schools was the responsibility of all people. He said they would pursue the goal together with tribal elders, national and international agencies.

But closure of schools is not the only problem students in Kandahar are facing. Lack of competent teachers and availability of books are other challenges education officials have to grapple with.

Responding to these concerns, Ahmadi said they had officially asked the Education Ministry many times about the problem of books, but to no avail. The whole southern zone is face with lack of books, an issue Ahmadi promised to resolve in the near future.

Hundreds of Pakistani families move to Kunar

Khan Wali Salarzai - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:50

Pajhwok

ASADABAD (PAN): Up to 426 families have migrated from Pakistan's Bajaur tribal region to Shegal district of eastern Kunar province, an official said on Monday.

Deputy Governor Noor Mohammad Khan told Pajhwok Afghan News the families shifted to the district over the past one week due to military operations in Bajaur Agency.

The World Food Programme (WFP) distributed foods to the refugees faced with shelter problems, the deputy said. "We are trying to get tents and other necessary items for them from international organisations."

One of the refugees, Bakhtyar, said he was living with his relatives in the district. He thanked provincial officials for providing them aid but demanded of the government to specify a location for their camp.

Last year, 800 families moved from the agency to Dangam, Shegal, Sarkani and Marawara districts of the province.

Snowfall claims six lives in Nangarhar

Abdul Moeed Hashimi - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:33

Pajhwok

JALALABAD (PAN): The continued snowfall in different parts of eastern Nangarhar province has left at least six people dead and dozens of head of livestock perished from exposure to the cold, officials say.

Besides, the fatalities and cattle losses in the Sherzad and Hesarak districts, the snowfall also resulted in blocking different roads in Nasero and Aab Zangani valleys, said

Dr. Muhammad Naeem Walar, head of the development council of Hesarak district.

He said in several other parts of the district, including Jokan, Shinwari, Tomani, Domandi and Mansoor Chini, 50 centimetres of snow was measured.

According to Walar, the snow damaged dozens of houses and killed a number of animals.

Two children had been killed in Domandi, Onein Aab Zangani and another two in Mansoor Chini area due to the snowfall that began two days ago. An elderly man was died in Jokan villages due to severe cold.

Walar asked Nangarhar Governor, Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) and Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) to send health workers, food and clothes for people of the district.

Malem Mashuq, district chief of Hesarak, said 20 houses had been flattened or collapsed and 160 animals killed due to heavy snow.

He said he had no information about the human losses as they were unable to establish contact with the residents of the area.

Shukrullah Ihsas, ANDMA regional spokesman in Nangarhar, said 13 houses were collapsed in Tangi area of Sherzad district.

Haji Sayed Rahman, district chief of Sherzad, said that 22 household animals had been killed and 13 houses destroyed in Tangi village.

He said the continued snowfall has reached 70 centimeters high during the last two days.

Last year, heavy snowfall killed four people, destroyed 33 houses and perished 90 animals.

This year the snowfall took many lives in Bamyan, Herat and Farah provinces.

20 librarians receive training

Frozan - Feb 8, 2010 - 18:26

Pajhwok

KABUL (PAN): Twenty librarians, who were trained in books-keeping skills, received graduation certificates in Kabul on Monday.

The 15-day training course was conducted by the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan (ASA) in collaboration with the Iranian embassy.

ASA official Nasrullah Soodmand said that the 20 librarians were from Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Ghazni and Samangan provinces.

Though the training was short, yet it was very important, he said, adding the ASA desperately needed reconstruction and that it should be fully equipped.

Masoma Jafari, the sole trainer for the course, claimed the participants had learnt important preliminary skills of maintaining libraries. They were taught about moral

responsibilities of a librarian, introduction to library and maintenance and arrangements of books to keep them safe, she said.

At the graduation ceremony, a cultural attach at the Iranian embassy, Nasir Jahan Shahi, promised more assistance to boost the education sector of the war-torn country.

He devoted much of his speech to the 31st anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. He said the revolution sent a strong message to Afghanistan: construct yourself your country and do not rely on others. He said Iran would continue to help Afghanistan.

Afghan avalanches kill 165, rescue underway

AFP

02/10/2010

By Shah Marai

SALANG — Rescuers recovered the bodies of 165 people killed by a series of avalanches on a treacherous Afghan mountain pass in one of the country's worst such disasters, an official said on Wednesday.

A heavy blizzard struck the busy road connecting the capital Kabul to the north of the country on Monday, triggering avalanches that buried people in vehicles on the strategic pass and wounded dozens of travellers.

"According to the latest information from the area, 165 of our countrymen have been killed and 135 have been injured," Suraya Dalil, acting public health minister, told reporters.

She said it was one of the biggest natural disaster tragedies that Afghanistan has suffered in recent years.

Large parts of the north of Afghanistan have been relatively sheltered from the eight-year Taliban insurgency that 113,000 NATO and US forces are in the country trying to quell.

An AFP photographer on the scene said massive avalanches had pushed vehicles from the road into the deep valley below, with at least nine passenger cars and two large buses lying upside down on the valley floor.

Afghan soldiers, police and local villagers were digging through the snow in search of bodies, using shovel and hand-made tools, the photographer said.

The rescue and recovery effort was backed up by heavy digging machinery and

bulldozers, he said, and more soldiers were arriving by helicopter.

General Ahmad Zia Yaftali, chief doctor in the Afghan army had earlier Wednesday put the overall death toll at 68, after bodies were counted from two sites on the pass that had been buried by snow.

An unknown number of bodies were recovered from a third location along the pass, he had said, adding that snowfall was hampering the risky operation.

At least 14 rescued survivors had been trapped in a bus, said Abdul Basir Salangi, governor of Parwan province, where the disaster took place.

"It is a miracle these people survived buried under the snow for 37 hours," he said, adding that snow had entered the bus through broken windows.

The defence ministry said Tuesday that 1,500 people stranded by the avalanches had been rescued.

Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar fended off questions about why the road was open in the first place, insisting the situation appeared manageable until the storm struck abruptly.

"All of a sudden, a storm hit the area which resulted in a number of avalanches hitting the main highway and closing the road for up to 3.5 kilometres (two miles)," Atmar told a news conference.

Such deadly avalanches are rare in Afghanistan during winter, but are more frequent in the spring when heavy snows melt.

Northern Afghanistan has been spared the worst of the eight-year Taliban insurgency raging in the south and east of the country.

Afghanistan avalanche: vital pass remains closed as rescue continues

The Christian Science Monitor

02/11/2010

By Ben Arnoldy

Some 3,000 people have been rescued since an Afghanistan avalanche shut down a key pass linking Kabul to the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. The storied pass, which includes a series of tunnels and snow roofs, was built with Soviet help in the 1960s.

A vital link between two of Afghanistan's largest cities remains closed following avalanches Monday that ranked among the country's worst natural disasters.

At least 167 people died when a series of avalanches cascaded down the slopes of the famed Salang Pass, a high-altitude road connecting the capital with the thriving northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

While plows have cleared the road, the pass remains closed to regular traffic to prioritize emergency vehicles. Some 3,000 people have been rescued so far from the pass.

Much of the road actually has avalanche protection either in the form of a stretch of 1.6 miles of tunnels or snow roofs, but there are open, high-elevation areas as well.

The Soviets helped build the pass in the 1960s and subsequently lost many soldiers there to the forces of mujahideen commander Ahmad Shah Masood. In the late 1990s, his retreating armies blocked the tunnel to stymie Taliban infiltration into his northern redoubt. Soon after the Taliban ouster, international donors rehabilitated the tunnel. The resurgent Taliban have now isolated Kabul from most cities of significance, with the exception of Jalalabad to the east, and Mazar-e Sharif via the Salang Pass.

I drove through the pass this summer -- or rather, my Afghan driver did, honking enthusiastically and narrowly dodging oncoming trucks in the long, dark tunnels. Civilization faded down to a few isolated mud-wall castles as we approached the 11,000-foot pass from Kabul. Engine trouble, combined with Afghanistan's ubiquitous dust and the thin air, sent us creeping along the road at no more than 10 miles an hour.

Once through the tunnels, however, we hurtled rapidly down into the heart of Baghlan Province. The moonscape instantly changed to a lush green, thanks to rivers flowing down this side of the Hindu Kush mountains. Baghlan was once among the safest provinces in Afghanistan, but over the past year a spike in violence there has worried officials about the lengthening arm of the insurgency.

It's been a particularly deadly eight days of avalanches across southern Central Asia. Last week, an avalanche killed eight people, including three foreigners, in Iran. Then, an avalanche near a popular ski resort in Kashmir killed 17 Indian soldiers. Subsequent avalanches in the heavily militarized state on Tuesday and Thursday killed another four soldiers.

Economic Headlines

Food packages distributed to more than 600 families

Pajhwok Report - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:55

KABUL (PAN): More than 600 families from the Jalrez district of Maidan Wardak province have received food packages funded by the Italian government and distributed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

The food packages were distributed throughout December and January, with an average of seven members per family, over 4,000 vulnerable people directly benefiting from the assistance.

Each family was given a food package containing 100 kilos of wheat flour, 50 kilos of rice, and 18 litres of cooking oil. The families come from the seven villages of Zawalat, Jalrez, Sangalakh, Takana, Sayakhak, Salmanfars and Kotiashro.

The food distribution is part of community development efforts of the Italian government and UNOPS in connection with the rehabilitation of the highway from Maidan Shahr to Bamyan, the UN said in a statement.

The food distribution, implemented directly by the district development assembly, is aimed at ensuring the poorest and most vulnerable households in the district received the much-needed food assistance. At the same time, the role of the district development assembly in providing social services through a transparent and participatory process is closely monitored.

Road blockade halts coal transportation

Ahmad Barat - Feb 8, 2010 - 11:29

Pajhwok

AIBAK (PAN): Heavy snowfall has blocked the Aibak-Dara-i-Sauf Highway, halting the transportation of coal from two mines in northern Samangan province, an official said on Monday.

Dara-i-Sauf Bala district chief, Ahmad Ali Husaini, told Pajhwok Afghan News the snowfall that began Sunday evening left a large number of truckers stranded at the Ghulam Ali Khan and Dahna-i-Naw bypasses.

He added there were about 35 centimetres of snow having lashed the district centre and 70 centimetres in the area where the coal mines were located. The shifting of coal from Dahna-i-Tur and Shab-i-Pashak mines has been stopped as a result.

Niamatullah, driver of a Kamaz truck, said he carried a truckload of coal, but was unable to go back to the mine due to the road blockade. Around 14 other drivers were also waiting for reopening of the highway in the provincial capital.

Some passengers travelling to the neighbouring district were also stranded in the Dara-i-Sauf Bala district. Public Works Director Eng. Zia Humayun said work on clearing roads of snow commenced this morning.

He said although Sinafar Company workers had launched their work to clear the roads, its reopening was not possible before the weekend. Around 400 tonnes of coal is daily extracted from the two mines.

Deputy head of Coal Enterprises Eng. Ali Madad said the government received an amount of 10,000 to 12,000 US dollars on a daily basis in revenue from the mines. "If the highway is not cleared, this revenue would fall," he warned.

Last year, a three-week blockade of the highway inflicted losses amounting to 400,000 dollars on the government, officials said. They added six months revenue of the coal mines this year was about 102 million afghanis, against the 170 million afghanis last year.

Coal from the Dara-i-Sauf mines is supplied to various provinces of Afghanistan and is also exported to neighbouring Pakistan.

Sowing delay to affect wheat yield

Ahmad Javed Javed - Feb 8, 2010 - 16:22

Pajhwok

MAHMUD RAQI (PAN): Farmers in central Kapisa province say they sowed the wheat crop pretty late due to a delay in supply of improved seeds and fertilizers, fearing a drastic fall in the yield.

Community Development Council (CDC) head Mohammad Malang told Pajhwok Afghan News Mahmud Raqi that the International Relief and Development (IRD) had promised four months ago the organisation would distribute improved seeds and chemical fertilizers.

But the farmers did not receive the supplies in time, he complained. Almost 88 councils of the area had prepared lists of farmers for subsidised materials, but NGO officials said the distribution of improved seeds was the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL).

For its part, the ministry distributed fertilizers to 70 percent of the farmers. Malang said growers waited for sometime, but later they cultivated their fields. "The farmers did not sow the crop in time, so it is very weak and we don't expect much yield this year."

He added the supplies were made available by the Agriculture Department two days back, long after the sowing time was over. About 72 councils received fertilizers and improved seeds while 16 are still awaiting the aid.

"I urge relief organisations not to increase the problems of people if they cannot solve them," Malang remarked. Each farmer was given 50 kilograms of Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP) and 100 kilos of nitrogen fertilizer and 50 kilos of improved wheat seeds.

A dweller of Deh Yabi area, Shama Aqa, said he left one acre of his land uncultivated as he did not receive improved seed and fertilizer. "The people who create problems for us should be punished," he demanded.

A member of another council in Kohistanat district, Haji Sher Padshah, said they had cultivated their farms before getting the aid. He added the supplies they received against 1,800 afghanis were available in the market for 3,200 afghanis. He added the growers could use the fertilizers and seed for the next season.

Acting Director of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock Department Haji Abdul Samad said the ministry concerned handed over the fertilizers and seeds to IRD for distribution in 22 provinces. He acknowledged the department was responsible for distribution.

A representative of the Darakhshan Company, Dr. Mehdi, said they had reached a contract with the IRD for distributing the assistance. He added the Agriculture Ministry did not provide them supplies in time.

But the IRD project manager avoided commenting on the matter when approached by this scribe. He said they were not authorised to speak to the media.

Italy pledges 25m euros aid in first half of 2010

Zubair Babakarkhel - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:19

Pajhwok

KABUL (PAN): The Italian government will spend 25 million euros on promoting health, agriculture, reconstruction and some other sectors of Afghanistan during the first six months of the current year.

Italian Ambassador to Afghanistan Claudio Glaentzer told a news conference on Tuesday work in health, agriculture and reconstruction sectors would bring about a positive change to the lives of Afghans.

The envoy said a major chunk of the aid would be spent through the Afghan government's budget. "We always supported the spending of amounts for the reconstruction projects through the Afghan government."

New project proposals are currently being formulated in the health, agriculture and rural development sectors. He suggested continued support for central and local governance, rule of law, institutional reform and humanitarian aid.

As much as 80 per cent of the Italian assistance in 2008-09 was spent through the Karzai administration, he recalled, saying some aid-giving countries did not like the aid to be used by the government because they feared corruption.

The envoy believed efforts must be redoubled to eliminate corruption to pave the way for spending of funds through the Afghan government.

He revealed UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and the Italian embassy would soon sign an agreement for the Education Radio and Television (ERTV). The agreement is in line with the ministry's National Strategic Plan for Education, which includes the use of distance learning to support teacher training.

At the end of 2009, an amount of one million euros has been committed to UNDP for the National Institutional Building Programme in order to support the "Civilian Increase" and strengthen capacity building in the Afghan Public Administration and Ministries, both at central and provincial levels.

Glaentzer hoped ERTV project would help the people of far-flung areas receive education. The Italian aid strategy for Afghanistan, the ambassador said, was based on the guiding principles of support to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and funding of national priorities included in it.

The total amount of aid committed by Italy since 2001 had reached 473 million euros, he said. Much of the assistance has been focused on Herat, Farah, Badghis, Kabul, Bamyan and Baghlan.

"In the infrastructure/transport sector, we are committed to build the national highway road connecting Kabul and Bamyan, which represents the eastern portion of the East-West Corridor. It is a 136-km project (for an investment of 105 million euros) implemented by the Ministry of Public Works and the Italian Cooperation."

A new letter of agreement of four million euros has been signed with World Bank for the Recurrent Cost Window of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) to help finance salaries and wages of non-uniformed civil servants.

EU pledges agri aid to Samangan

Muhammad Barat - Feb 9, 2010 - 19:19

Pajhwok

AIBAK (PAN): The European Union would spend through the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) one million euros on agricultural projects in the northern province of Samangan, an official said on Tuesday.

At a meeting with Samangan Governor Ghulam Sakhi in Aibak, GTZ representative Klaus said the funds would be used on providing farmers with fertilisers, seeds, water, digging of wells and conducting seminars for growers.

The schemes will be implemented in Dara-i-Sauf Bala and Payeen districts. He promised around 34,500 residents would be provided food items and agricultural yield of 2,500 families would increase as a result of the projects.

Lohmann sought cooperation from the Governor's House and Agriculture Department in effective implementation of the projects. The acting governor welcomed the development plans and hoped they would benefit 90 percent of the residents.

Rafiullah, a farmer from the Topkanda village of Dara-i-Sauf Payeen said the dwellers -- currently fetching water from far-off places -- badly needed piped water. He complained no reconstruction plans had been executed in the area over the last eight years.

Road blockades send fuel prices high in Ghor

Hassan Hakimi - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:31

Pajhwok

CHAGHCHIRAN (PAN): Fuel prices in northern Ghor province surged to an unaffordable level for its dwellers following an unprecedented snowfall blocked key roads, residents and officials said on Tuesday.

Deputy Ghor governor Kiramuddin Razazada told Pajhwok Afghan News four people have so far been killed and one injured in separate incidents of avalanches triggered by heavy snowfalls which led to the closure of several roads leading to provincial capital, Chaghchiran.

He admitted the provincial government and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) have failed to help the trapped people by reopening the roads. He warned of catastrophic consequences if the government and international organisations did not respond to the affected people.

Ghulam Nabi, 45, who came to provincial capital from Char Sada district six days ago, told Pajhwok: "I am worried about my family. I dont know when the roads will open."

The snowfall has led to increased fuel prices. A local, Mohammad Noor, said there was a shortage of fuel in Ghor. "Seven kilos of firewood rose to 120 afghanis, a kilo of gas to 80afs and one litre of diesel to 60 afghanis," he informed.

Ghor is a mountainous province and witness excessive snowfall every winter.

Last year, 19 people were killed as a result of heavy snowfalls and avalanches. The current snowfall started three days back and is still ongoing.

68 schemes executed in Khost

Saboor Mangal - Feb 9, 2010 - 18:28

Pajhwok

KHOST CITY (PAN): Sixty-eight uplift schemes have been executed under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) in southeastern Khost province, an official said on Tuesday.

Rural Rehabilitation and Development Director, Engineer Omar Aryan, told Pajhwok Afghan News an estimated population of 11,988 families living in Zazi Maidan, Tani, Musakhel and Gurbaz districts and Matun and Lakano areas would benefit from the projects. He said the schemes cost 36 millions afghanis and took three months to complete.

The projects included construction of small bridges, community centres, flour mills, gravelling of roads, water supply schemes, digging wells, cleaning canals and conducting tailoring courses for women, he added.

According to Aryan, since the establishment of NSP in the province, 1052 reconstruction schemes had so far been inaugurated at the cost of 129 millions afghanis and work on 169 others is underway.

Afghanistan to Seek Fresh Iron Ore Bids After Company Protests

Bloomberg

02/10/2010

By Eltaf Najafizada and James Rupert

The Afghan government said it will soon seek new bids to mine one of the world's richest iron ore deposits after abandoning a tender damaged by company complaints and withdrawals.

The government has formally decided to restart bidding for the 1.8 billion-ton Hajigak deposit after Tuwairqi Steel Mills Ltd., a Pakistani unit of Saudi Arabia's Al-Tuwairqi Group, alone accepted invitations to visit the site, Deputy Mines Minister Abdul Qudus Hamidi said. The government had in July approved seven companies to compete for the mine.

Hamidi and Finance Ministry spokesman Aziz Shams said the government is concerned about complaints over the transparency of the initial bidding. "We have a number of protest letters, including from companies that were bidding" to mine Hajigak and the copper ore deposit at Ainak, which was awarded to a Chinese firm in 2007, Shams said in

a phone interview.

The administration of President Hamid Karzai, which faces international pressure to tackle official corruption, will aim to improve transparency in its bid process, Hamidi said in a phone interview. "We have set no date for inviting more bids, but it will be in the near future," Hamidi said.

Hajigak drew interest last year from Chinese and Indian companies eager to secure resources for their economies, among the world's fastest-growing. China has wrestled with the main global iron ore suppliers -- Brazil's Vale SA, London-based Rio Tinto Plc and Australia's BHP Billiton Ltd. -- in an effort to circumvent rising prices.

Taliban Threat

While the government generally controls the Hajigak area, in the Hindu Kush mountains 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of the capital Kabul, Taliban insurgents have shown an ability to strike in such regions and the war has hampered the government's effort to attract foreign investment.

Authorities will restart bidding in part because "we don't want to create any opportunity for companies to complain about the Hajigak process," Shams said. He declined to describe the complaints or to name the companies that made them.

Former Mines Minister Mohammad Ibrahim Adelhas denied reports by the Washington Post and Associated Press that he took a bribe of at least \$20 million to award the Ainak license to the Metallurgical Corp. of China Ltd., or MCC. Adel was replaced as minister last month.

Karzai's government may hope that new bids will help persuade the Obama administration and other backers that it's confronting corruption, a key demand made at a London meeting last month by more than 60 governments assisting Afghanistan.

The World Bank is "unaware of any complaints by companies of lack of transparency of the tenders," said Craig Andrews, the principal mining specialist at the lender, which has provided key advisers for the Hajigak project and the Mines Ministry.

China, India Withdraw

The agency advised the government to seek new bids in part to reconsider its "fully integrated" plan to turn the iron ore into finished steel, Andrews said in an e-mail message.

Of 14 companies that began bidding on Hajigak last year, seven were invited to submit final proposals by Feb. 15. MCC and India's JSW Steel Ltd. withdrew, officials at those companies said on Feb. 2.

The government disqualified Sesa Goa Ltd., an Indian unit of Vedanta Resources Plc, for declining to sign a required confidentiality agreement about the deposit, Hamidi said at the time. Vedanta Group's India corporate communications chief, Pavan Kaushik, failed to return phone calls for comment.

Other finalists in the initial bidding process were India's Essar Minerals Ltd., Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd. and Ispat Industries Ltd., according the Mines Ministry.

What Afghanistan needs: job creation

The Christian Science Monitor

02/11/2010

By Graciana del Castillo

New York – President Obama is leading two surges this year. One is for Afghanistan, where US troops are trying to secure the war-torn country. The other, in the form of business tax credits and government spending, is for the beleaguered US economy.

What do Afghanistan and the US economy have in common? Both need job creation to succeed.

While Democrats and Republicans debate the best ways to create job opportunities in the United States, the debate over how to stabilize Afghanistan has focused on military and security issues, to the neglect of economic ones.

Military operations unaccompanied by the reintegration of former insurgents and other armed groups have failed in the past – in Afghanistan and elsewhere. A shift in US strategy to focus on job creation and effective reintegration could keep Afghanistan from sliding into what it was before 9/11: an Al Qaeda sanctuary.

Despite its potentially large human and financial cost – estimated at about \$30 billion – a surge on its own is not going to improve the region's security. In fact, it may well fuel further extremism.

Get the Taliban to quit

The best chance for US forces to start coming back home in the summer of 2011 as planned is if they can persuade a significant number of Taliban and other armed militants to abandon the insurgency.

Doing so requires a two-pronged strategy.

First, we must severely curtail the drug trade that finances these armed groups. Attractive alternative employment incentives could entice farmers away from producing poppies into producing legal crops or engaging in light manufacturing and services. With the price of opium plummeting, this seems like an ideal time to adopt a policy to compensate farmers for the switch. A combination of credit, subsidies, and trade preferences should be put in place for this purpose.

Second, we must identify and finance a number of venues through which Taliban and other groups can reintegrate into society and engage in productive activities once they give up their arms.

Such reintegration is not impossible. El Salvador has done it. So have several African countries. In Afghanistan, former combatants could be given the option to join the national security forces, run for political office, work for any number of legitimate businesses, or set up their own microenterprises.

Finding new jobs for former militants and poppy farmers will be difficult enough, but Afghanistan has another major employment challenge on the horizon: creating jobs for the millions of young people who are about to enter the labor force.

Afghanistan's population is one of the youngest in the world. Nearly half of Afghans are younger than 15 years old. Thanks to efforts by private citizens, nongovernmental organizations, and the international community, many of these children and teens — including girls — are being educated. When they graduate, they will struggle to enter a labor market in which there is roughly 40 percent unemployment. The alternative may be to join the insurgency or leave the country. Both options will make rebuilding Afghanistan that much harder.

Automatic development?

In a White House briefing just before Mr. Obama's announcement of the military surge, Michèle Flournoy, undersecretary of Defense for policy, mentioned that Afghan leaders wanted the US to help them "build security" in the country since once security was achieved, "the rest will follow."

Actually, the rest will not follow. Security is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for job creation. Good security did not lead to job creation in Afghanistan in the mid-1970s. Nor has it led to job creation in New York today. When confronting a crisis, policymakers must often adopt extraordinary measures. To help get 15 million jobless Americans working again, Obama is pushing for an aggressive jobs bill, despite a dismal deficit.

Unemployment in Afghanistan is far worse — and the response should be far more

aggressive. Yet so far funding has been misdirected. Of \$40 billion in US-provided assistance to the country since the start of the war, roughly half supported local security forces, while the other half bolstered general economic and social programs. Investment and job creation must attract a growing share of funding going forward. While \$20 billion in general support for these programs may sound like a lot, it pales next to the \$210 billion spent by the Department of Defense on the Afghan war so far.

Reconstruction zones

Aid and private investment should go hand in hand. With Afghans holding an estimated \$16 billion abroad and lots of money under the mattress, investment opportunities should be created at home both for Afghans and for foreign investors. These opportunities could include the creation of "reconstruction zones" for assembling, processing, and exporting products made by low-skilled workers under preferential trade arrangements, public-private infrastructure development projects, and start-ups.

A larger investment in job creation as part of an effective rebuilding strategy could reduce the enormous cost of financing military operations in Afghanistan. This would not only have a welcome fiscal impact on the US budget, but more important, it would allow American troops to come home sooner.

