

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

Afghanistan This Week

Report Number: 125

Week 19-25 June 2010

June, 26, 2010

Mohammad Amin

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Political Headlines Summary

'Alarming' rise in Afghan insurgency: UN

KABUL (PAN): The Taliban led-insurgency has increased at an "alarming" rate over the past year, the United Nations said in a report on Saturday, putting it odds with the US which has lauded the country's progress in security.

Accountability Week launched in Khost

KHOST CITY (PAN): The first-ever 'Accountability Week,' involving open meetings of department heads as part of a strategy to fight administrative corruption, was launched in the southeastern province of Khost on Saturday.

Japan's aid not based on political interest: Karzai

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai on Saturday praised Japanese government for its generous contribution towards Afghanistan, saying Japan has no political motives behind helping his war-torn country.

Obama Administration Keeping Blackwater Armed and Dangerous in Afghanistan

Blackwater is up for sale and its shadowy owner, Erik Prince, is rumored to be planning to move to the United Arab Emirates as his top deputies face indictment for a range of alleged crimes, yet the company remains a central part of President Obama's Afghanistan war. Now, Blackwater's role is expanding.

Investigators probing US money flow to insurgents

WASHINGTON — Criminal investigators are examining allegations that Afghan security firms have been extorting as much as \$4 million a week from contractors paid with U.S. tax dollars and then funneling the spoils to warlords and the Taliban.

Commission on cards to enter talks with Taliban: Weesa

KANDAHAR (PAN): Kandahar's governor, Tooryalai Weesa, on Monday said a commission was being formed to negotiate with the Taliban and resolve key issues in the southern province such as allegations of land seizures.

Another anti-corruption body to establish soon

KABUL (PAN): The six-members of a new anti-corruption committee are expected to be named in the coming week so that the body can start work before the Kabul Conference next month, a top official has said.

Karzai wants Taliban names removed from blacklist

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai on Tuesday asked a visiting United Nations Security Council (UNSC)'s delegation to remove the names of some Taliban, who are not linked to al-Qaeda, from a terror blacklist.

Geo-Strategic Headlines Summary

Released U.S. report on Afghan minerals a bid to keep allied nations intact

KABUL - The released report by the United States on Afghanistan's untapped natural resources appears to be an attempt to get intact the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan.

Afghan FM off to Pakistan

KABUL (PAN): Afghan foreign minister, Dr Zalmay Rasol, on Thursday left for Pakistani capital, Islamabad, for a two-day official visit to hold talks with Pakistani officials on various topics, including the core issue of terrorism.

Afghanistan, Pakistan vow joint fight on terror

ISLAMABAD (PAN): Afghanistan and Pakistan, describing terrorism and extremism common enemy, on Thursday agreed to increase their cooperation in fighting the two menaces.

Pakistan Is Said to Pursue Foothold in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan is exploiting the troubled United States military effort in Afghanistan to drive home a political settlement with Afghanistan that would give Pakistan important influence there but is likely to undermine United States interests, Pakistani and American officials said.

Social Headlines Summary

Lack of cancer specialists forces Afghans to seek treatment abroad

KABUL (PAN): Hundreds of people die needlessly in Afghanistan because of a lack of cancer specialists and diagnostic centres, doctors say.

Over 70,000 Afghan refugees return home this year

KABUL (PAN): Over 70,000 Afghans have voluntarily returned from Pakistan this year, with two and a half months of the peak repatriation period still to run, said the UN agency for refugees on Sunday.

Afghan drug use increasing: UN

KABUL (PAN): More than one million Afghans are addicted to drugs, with many using narcotics to blunt the effects of poverty and hardship brought on by three decades of war, the UN said on Monday.

Thalassemia patients struggle for treatment in Afghanistan

KABUL (PAN): Aqsa Hotak is 10 years old and the number one student at Muhammad Faqir Firozi High School in Kabul. She also suffers from thalassemia, an inherited blood disorder, along with more than 1,000 children in Afghanistan.

Women want privacy to shop for clothes

KABUL (PAN): Many people in Kabul are critical of the way in which women's clothes are sold from hand carts on the side of the road, saying they should be sold in shops and by female shop assistants.

Political Headlines

'Alarming' rise in Afghan insurgency: UN

Pajhwok Report - Jun 19, 2010 - 10:19

KABUL (PAN): The Taliban led-insurgency has increased at an "alarming" rate over the past year, the United Nations said in a report on Saturday, putting it odds with the US which has lauded the country's progress in security.

The 17-page report issued by the United Nations Security Council said the situation in Afghanistan has "not improved" with the Taliban unrelenting in their attacks on Afghan and foreign troops.

"Overall, the number of security incidents increased significantly, compared to previous years and contrary to seasonal trends," the report noted.

"The rise in incidents involving improvised explosive devices constitutes an alarming trend, with the first four months of 2010 recording a 94 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2009."

A suicide bombing occurs every second day in the country, half of which take place in the southern Afghanistan, the UN added. It also said the Taliban have doubled the number of their "complex suicide attacks" this year, referring to group suicide attacks on government buildings and military installations.

NATO forces have launched an operation in southern Kandahar province, the Taliban's spiritual stronghold, to drive the militants from their birthplace. The so called politically-led operation has faced a major backlash with the insurgents stepping up their attacks

"Insurgents followed up their threats against the civilian population with, on average, seven assassinations every week," the report said.

Two weeks earlier, the Taliban executed a seven-year-old boy for allegedly spying for foreign troops in Helmand province, neighbouring Kandahar.

The report has also expressed concerns over child rights violations, saying over 420 incidents of grave violations were documented and verified by the Afghan government.

Attacks on schools increased steadily across the country, with peaks in the relatively stable north and north-eastern regions of the country, the UN said.

"Seventy-two per cent of the incidents were caused by anti-government elements and included intimidation of pupils and teachers; placement of improvised explosive devices in schools; abductions, beatings and killing of school staff; and arson and other violent targeted attacks on schools.

The UN also criticised the Afghan government for recruiting children into the Afghan security forces and local defence initiatives.

Accountability Week launched in Khost

Maiwand Fida - Jun 19, 2010 - 20:31

KHOST CITY (PAN): The first-ever 'Accountability Week,' involving open meetings of department heads as part of a strategy to fight administrative corruption, was launched in the southeastern province of Khost on Saturday.

During the week, administrative heads will present their progress reports before the people and government and will answer to the questions from the officials concerned encompassing

the previous three months.

Governor Abdul Jabbar Naeemi informed participants of the meeting about his government's future plans. He hoped the accountability process would help improve the performance of government departments.

The heads of governmental departments would inform media and people about their plans on a weekly basis to ensure transparency in their works, he said.

The accountability week was being held on the demand of tribal elders, religious scholars and residents of different districts of the province, the governor said.

Heads of six government departments, including economic, education, communications and information technology, public welfare and rural development, participated in the meeting and presented their reports to the governor.

Head of the Shaikh Zaid University Dr. Gul Hassan Walezai informed the meeting about the progress achieved by his department in the past few months. He said the issue of lack of professional staff at the university would be overcome soon.

Education Director Aziz Ahmad Hashmi told the meeting a total of 226 higher secondary schools, besides eight private schools, were operational in the province.

His department was facing problems regarding the distribution of books and other teaching materials for students, he complained.

Japan's aid not based on political interest: Karzai

Khalil Fitri - Jun 19, 2010 - 12:17

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai on Saturday praised Japanese government for its generous contribution towards Afghanistan, saying Japan has no political motives behind helping his war-torn country.

Karzai, who is on a four-day visit to Japan until Sunday, on Friday launched a sales pitch for his country's rich mineral resources and invited the biggest donor country after the US to invest in Afghan mines.

Delivering a speech at the Doshisha University in Kyoto, Karzai said after passing through 30 years of consecutive war, Afghanistan made huge progress over the past nine years since the extremist regime of the Taliban was ousted in a US-led invasion of the country in 2001 after the 9/11 incident.

Japan last year pledged up to five billion dollars in aid by 2013 to rebuild the impoverished country, where US-led and then multinational forces have been battling Taliban insurgents. Karzai thanked Japan for the \$6.5 billion assistance, hoping the aid would effectively be used for rural rehabilitation, improving health facilities, capacity development and other areas.

Emphasizing the need for peace, the Afghan leader said his countrymen wanted peace and stability in their country. "That is why my government is doing its best to bring peace and stability by entering a dialogue with opposition forces," he said.

He said the recently convened June 2-4 traditional jirga was a step towards reaching that goal. In response to a question from a student regarding widespread corruption in his administration, Karzai said: "Afghanistan remained in troubles after the Taliban regime was toppled. And still we lack capacity and good management."

However, the president accused private security companies of promoting corruption in his country.

"Afghanistan is determined and will make every effort to reduce and ultimately eliminate the scourge of corruption," he vowed.

Karzai also denied that religion was a source of war in Afghanistan, saying it was the interest of states that led to wars.

In his remarks, the dean of Doshisha University said more Afghan students would be absorbed at the 140-year-old university, where currently five Afghan students are learning.

Obama Administration Keeping Blackwater Armed and Dangerous in Afghanistan

The Nation

06/20/2010

By Jeremy Scahill

Blackwater is up for sale and its shadowy owner, Erik Prince, is rumored to be planning to move to the United Arab Emirates as his top deputies face indictment for a range of alleged crimes, yet the company remains a central part of President Obama's Afghanistan war. Now, Blackwater's role is expanding.

On Friday, the US State Department awarded Blackwater another "diplomatic security" contract to protect US officials in Afghanistan. CBS News reports that the \$120 million deal is for "protective services" at the US consulates in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. Blackwater has another security contract in Afghanistan worth \$200 million and trains Afghan forces. The company also works for the CIA and the US military and provides bodyguards for US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry as well as US lawmakers and other officials who visit the country. The company has four forward operating bases in Afghanistan and Prince has boasted that Blackwater's counter-narcotics forces have called in NATO airstrikes.

The new security contract was awarded to one of Blackwater's alter egos, the United States Training Center, despite the indictments of five senior company officials on bribery, weapons and conspiracy charges. Its operatives in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been indicted for killing innocent civilians. The Senate Armed Services Committee has called on the Justice Department to investigate Blackwater's use of a shell company, Paravant, to win training contracts in Afghanistan. Despite these and numerous other scandals, the State Department once again awarded the company a lucrative contract.

"Under federal acquisition regulations, the prosecution of the specific Blackwater individuals does not preclude the company or its successive companies and subsidiaries from bidding on contracts," a State Department spokesperson told CBS. "On the basis of full and open competition, the department performed a full technical evaluation of all proposals and determined the US Training Center has the best ability and qualifications to meet the contract requirements."

Representative Jan Schakowsky, who chairs the Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, immediately blasted the State Department's awarding of the contract to Blackwater. "This is a company whose cowboy-like behavior has not only resulted in civilian deaths; it has also jeopardized our mission and the safety of U.S. troops and diplomatic personnel worldwide. Instead of punishing Blackwater for its extensive history of serious abuses the State Department is rewarding the company with up to \$120 million in taxpayer funds," Schakowsky said. "I strongly believe that the former Blackwater should not be receiving further U.S. contracts, and I have repeatedly urged the U.S. government to no longer do business with this company. Though the name Blackwater has become synonymous with the worst of contractor abuses, the bigger problem is our dangerous reliance on such companies for the business of waging war."

Earlier this year, Schakowsky and Senator Bernie Sanders reintroduced the Stop Outsourcing Security Act, which would phase out the use of private security contractors by the government. Ironically, Hillary Clinton was a co-sponsor of the legislation when she was a senator and running for president. Now, as Secretary of State, she is the US official in charge of most Blackwater contracts. Blackwater is also bidding on a contract potentially worth up to \$1 billion to train the Afghan National Police.

Investigators probing US money flow to insurgents

The Associated Press
06/21/2010

WASHINGTON — Criminal investigators are examining allegations that Afghan security firms have been extorting as much as \$4 million a week from contractors paid with U.S. tax dollars and then funneling the spoils to warlords and the Taliban.

If the allegations are true, the U.S. would be unintentionally financing the enemy and undermining international efforts to stabilize the country.

The payments reportedly end up in insurgent hands through a \$2.1 billion Pentagon contract to transport food, water, fuel and ammunition to American troops stationed at bases across Afghanistan. To ensure safe passage through dangerous areas, the trucking companies make payments to local security firms with ties to the Taliban or warlords who control the roads. If the payments aren't made, the convoys will be attacked, according to a U.S. military document detailing the allegations being examined by investigators.

The document says the companies hired under the Afghan Host Nation Trucking contract may be paying between \$2 million and \$4 million a week to insurgent groups.

Chris Grey, a spokesman for the Army Criminal Investigation Command at Fort Belvoir, Va., confirmed Monday that the inquiry is under way. But he said he would not provide details in order "to protect the integrity of the ongoing case."

One of the security firms under scrutiny is Watan Risk Management, one of the largest security providers in Afghanistan. Watan representatives allegedly negotiate or dictate the price for security in a given area, according to the document, and also issue warnings to trucking companies that are late in paying or refuse to do so.

A woman who answered the telephone at Watan's office in Kabul said the company would have no comment and hung up.

A congressional subcommittee chaired by Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass., has also been investigating the extortion allegations and is holding a hearing Tuesday on its findings.

In a statement previewing the hearing, Tierney said the trucking contract is a critical component of the effort to keep more than 200 U.S. military combat outposts throughout the country stocked. Supplies are typically shipped through Pakistan to Bagram Airfield, the U.S.

military's main hub in Afghanistan, and then on to the outlying bases.

Bribes and kickbacks are often part of the business environment in Afghanistan.

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in December, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton acknowledged the long, rugged supply lines to landlocked Afghanistan through Pakistan's port city of Karachi offer numerous opportunities for fraud and corruption that pad the Taliban's accounts.

Commission on cards to enter talks with Taliban: Weesa

Bashir Ahmad Naadim - Jun 21, 2010 - 12:27

KANDAHAR (PAN): Kandahar's governor, Tooryalai Weesa, on Monday said a commission was being formed to negotiate with the Taliban and resolve key issues in the southern province such as allegations of land seizures.

The governor was speaking at a conference attended by foreign dignitaries, including the US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who flew into Kabul on Sunday night, as well as Afghan officials and tribal elders from the province.

Weesa said the conference was called to discuss security, governance and reconstruction in his province, where a massive Afghan-led operation called Hamkari is ongoing. It comes amid concerns that NATO was planning to lead a military operation in the province to drive out the Taliban, which many locals feared would lead to heavy civilian casualties.

In recent weeks, NATO has scaled back its plan for the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban, saying instead of a military operation, they want to focus on building infrastructure and good governance as a way to woo residents away from supporting the insurgents.

Weesa said the proposed commission, to be led by him, would open talks with opposition groups, discuss ways to retake government land from its illegal occupants and build infrastructure for the provision of electricity to Kandahar dwellers.

He said also hinted at military action in areas under Taliban control as part of the Hamkari plan.

"We have a lot of problems for which we dire need support from the central government," the governor said.

Weesa said President Hamid Karzai had stressed the need for strengthening government institutions in the province. During his second visit to Kandahar, about three weeks ago, Karzai presented a 10-point plan for making Hamkari a success.

Under the Hamkari plan, provincial departments present their problems to the National Security Council, with Ghulam Jilani Popal, the head of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, playing the role of coordinator between the council and the provincial departments. Ministries would meet the demands and requirements of Kandahar departments on a priority basis, said Weesa.

He said the Hamkari plan would help accelerate the process of improving structures of provincial departments, forming teams and councils representing all tribes.

Popal said every district where the government was in control will see its departments improved in line with the Hamkari plan, and subsequently life for the people will improve.

The major problems he said was finding competent district officials.

In a show of international support for the new focus, US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, NATO's senior civilian representative in Afghanistan, Mark Sedwill, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, the British ambassador, William Patey, and a Canadian embassy official all attended Monday's conference.

Among Afghan officials attending were the Defence Minister Gen. Abdur Rahim Wardak, Rural Rehabilitation and Development Minister Jariullah Mansoori, the IDLG head Popal, head of Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Services Commission, Dr. Ahmad Mashahid and deputy ministers of various ministries.

The defence minister promised Kandahar residents that the Afghan soldiers would maintain security in areas cleared of militants during the operation. He explained that militants retook control of areas after troops left due to a lack of strength.

About peace talks with the Taliban, the minister said there were members among the rebels who were patriotic and loved their country, but who were forced to continue fighting due to other reasons. He said he hoped those members would return to a normal life soon.

The defence minister also said that there were not enough Kandahar residents joining the security forces. He said thousands of young Afghans from other parts of the country joined the security forces every year, but only two or three came from Kandahar.

Another anti-corruption body to establish soon

Rahmatullah Afghan - Jun 21, 2010 - 10:59

KABUL (PAN): The six-members of a new anti-corruption committee are expected to be named in the coming week so that the body can start work before the Kabul Conference next month, a top official has said.

Three of the members will be Afghans and the other three will be foreigners, said Muhammad Qaseem Ludin, who is the deputy head of the body implementing President Hamid Karzai's anti-corruption strategy.

The only criteria for joining the Independent Committee of Oversight and Evaluation of Corruption would be merit, he said.

The UN, EU and other international organisations and donor countries have been asked to nominate competent foreigners for the posts, he said.

Ludin said the committee would exercise more power than the High Office of Oversight and Anti-corruption, which is headed by Muhammad Yasin Osmani, viewed as Karzai's corruption czar.

Within its first three months of operation, the new committee will evaluate all expenditures of provinces, ministries, independent organisations and donor countries.

He said the committee would send its report to the president, parliament and donor countries.

Karzai ordered the establishment of the committee after he returned from the London conference in January 2010.

Waheed Muzhda, a political analyst, said he believed the committee could address some of the international community's concerns about corruption but it would not be able to prevent it completely.

He said in the past, such bodies were established but with no considerable results.

An economics professor at Kabul University, Masood, said the committee could to some extent monitor the expenditures of donor agencies and countries, but he was not optimistic the body would be able to attain all of its objectives.

Karzai wants Taliban names removed from blacklist

Pajhwok Report - Jun 22, 2010 - 10:32

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai on Tuesday asked a visiting United Nations Security Council (UNSC)'s delegation to remove the names of some Taliban, who are not linked to al-Qaeda, from a terror blacklist.

The 15-member delegation led by Turkish permanent representative, Ertuğrul Apakan, arrived in Kabul on Monday to demonstrate UN's continued support for the government and the people of Afghanistan.

The visit came after the June peace advisory jirga that had called for removing militant leaders from the list, advising the government to seek the removal of names, including those of Mullah Mohammad Omar and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Karzai met the delegates in Kabul and requested the removal of those Taliban, who are not linked to al-Qaeda terror network, from the UNSC black list, a statement from the Presidential Palace said.

The president also briefed the delegation on the outcome of the June 2-4 Peace Advisory Jirga, his government's efforts regarding reconciliation with Taliban, countering administrative corruption and the upcoming International Kabul Conference and the war against terror.

The delegates assured Karzai that the names would gradually be removed from the blacklist. "The only way to defeat Taliban is strengthening and equipping the Afghan security forces," Karzai told the meeting, insisting on training to police. The president also stressed the need for increased regional cooperation to bring a lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan.

"The Afghan government will take seriously steps to banish corruption in which the international community has also a share," Karzai said, adding a number of private security companies were involved in spreading corruption.

The delegation assured Karzai long-term support on the behalf the council in the areas of security and reconstruction.

Geo-Strategic Headlines

Released U.S. report on Afghan minerals a bid to keep allied nations intact

Xinhua
06/20/2010
By Abdul Haleem

KABUL - The released report by the United States on Afghanistan's untapped natural resources appears to be an attempt to get intact the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan.

"Since the public opinion in the U.S.-led allied nations are increasingly turning against the war in Afghanistan, the U.S., by releasing this report, wants to encourage its allies to continue supporting the war against terror," an eminent researcher and political analyst Wahid Mughda said in talks with Xinhua.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) in a report released recently counted the war-torn Afghanistan's mineral deposits worth over one trillion which can significantly help the country's shattered economy to revive if properly explored.

However, the Afghan analyst was of the view that the exploration of the natural underground resources and changing them into money is a difficult task at this stage as security is fragile and militancy continues.

Mughda also believes that the exploration and drilling of mines amid poor security would further create problems and encourage decentralization as dwellers of each area would claim ownership to the mines explored in their areas.

Another political observer Nasrullah Stanikzai said that the U. S. by releasing the report on Afghan minerals wants to encourage its allies to invest in Afghanistan.

He also was of the view that the report on mineral deposits has three messages.

"One of the messages is the indication of the U.S. survey over the past nine years, the second message is encouraging allied nations that Afghanistan is a suitable place for investment and the third message is to the Afghan people to support peace and benefit from the untapped treasure," Stanikzai, who is a professor at the Kabul University, told Xinhua.

Meantime, Afghan Minister for Mines Waheedullah Shahrani estimated that the value of mineral deposits in Afghanistan could be up to three trillion U.S. dollars.

In a press conference on Thursday he said, "More study and survey are needed to identify and explore the underground resources."

He also described security as a daunting challenge for exploration of the mines by saying, "Security remains a big challenge in the country especially in the south to explore minerals."

According to the official, the biggest deposits discovered so far are iron and copper, the

quantities of which are large enough to make post-Taliban Afghanistan a major world producer of minerals.

Shahrani, according to media reports, has said that the government is to seek bids from global mining groups to invest in the mining industry and extract Afghan minerals.

However, Afghanistan which is mired with over three decades of war does not have any mining industry or infrastructure to explore natural resources properly, so it will take decades for the country to exploit its untapped underground treasury appropriately.

Afghan FM off to Pakistan

Khwaja Basir Ahmad - Jun 24, 2010 - 18:56

KABUL (PAN): Afghan foreign minister, Dr Zalmay Rasol, on Thursday left for Pakistani capital, Islamabad, for a two-day official visit to hold talks with Pakistani officials on various topics, including the core issue of terrorism.

His visit comes about a week after the London School of Economics (LSE) released a report blaming Pakistani intelligence agency for cooperating with Afghan Taliban.

The minister would meet his Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani and other high ranking officials, the Afghan foreign ministry said a statement.

It added the two sides would talk about expanding bilateral ties, trade and fighting terrorism. Rasol will brief his Pakistani counterpart on the outcome of a Peace Advisory Jirga held in Kabul on June 2-4.

It is a second official tour by Rasol to Pakistan since he took office in January 2010.

Afghanistan, Pakistan vow joint fight on terror

Pakhtun Khan Shinwari - Jun 24, 2010 - 14:26

ISLAMABAD (PAN): Afghanistan and Pakistan, describing terrorism and extremism common enemy, on Thursday agreed to increase their cooperation in fighting the two menaces.

It is in the interest of both the countries to commit each other together for the fight against terrorism and extremism," Afghan foreign minister Zalamy Rasoul told a joint press conference with his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi in Islamabad.

Rasoul arrived here for a two-day official visit to discuss security situation, peace efforts and the outcome of the three-day peace jirga in Kabul and other issues, including the core issue of terrorism, with Pakistani officials, including President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani.

Rasoul said he was pleased that Pakistan was supporting the peace process in Afghanistan, calling Qureshi his brother, who agreed to the concept.

For his part, Qureshi said Pakistan hoped for a major increase in bilateral trade with Afghanistan. He called for early finalisation of a transit trade agreement between the two neighbouring countries.

"The early finalisation of Afghan Transit Trade Agreement is in our mutual interest, said Qureshi, who said that there could be a significant boost to bilateral trade during the next five years.

"Currently the bilateral trade is around 1.5 billion dollars, and with this new arrangement in place we can easily enhance our bilateral trade to five billion dollars by 2015," Qureshi said. The relevant ministers will be meeting in Pakistan shortly, he added.

Qureshi said that the both sides agreed during talks to increase high-level interaction and set up joint commissions on matters including education.

Pakistan also offered Afghanistan training for its soldiers, police and diplomats and proposed to set up a commission on border security, he added.

Pakistan Is Said to Pursue Foothold in Afghanistan

The New York Times

06/25/2010

By Jane Perlez, Eric Schmitt and Carlotta Gall

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan is exploiting the troubled United States military effort in Afghanistan to drive home a political settlement with Afghanistan that would give Pakistan important influence there but is likely to undermine United States interests, Pakistani and American officials said.

The dismissal of Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal will almost certainly embolden the Pakistanis in their plan as they detect increasing American uncertainty, Pakistani officials said. The Pakistani Army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, preferred General McChrystal to his successor, Gen. David H. Petraeus, whom he considers more of a politician than a military strategist, said people who had spoken recently with General Kayani.

Pakistan is presenting itself as the new viable partner for Afghanistan to President Hamid Karzai, who has soured on the Americans. Pakistani officials say they can deliver the network of Sirajuddin Haqqani, an ally of Al Qaeda who runs a major part of the insurgency in Afghanistan, into a power-sharing arrangement.

In addition, Afghan officials say, the Pakistanis are pushing various other proxies, with General Kayani personally offering to broker a deal with the Taliban leadership.

Washington has watched with some nervousness as General Kayani and Pakistan's spy chief, Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, shuttle between Islamabad and Kabul, telling Mr. Karzai that they agree with his assessment that the United States cannot win in Afghanistan, and that a postwar Afghanistan should incorporate the Haqqani network, a longtime Pakistani asset. In a sign of the shift in momentum, the two Pakistani officials were next scheduled to visit Kabul on Monday, according to Afghan TV.

Despite General McChrystal's 11 visits to General Kayani in Islamabad in the past year, the Pakistanis have not been altogether forthcoming on details of the conversations in the last two months, making the Pakistani moves even more worrisome for the United States, said an American official involved in the administration's Afghanistan and Pakistan deliberations.

“They know this creates a bigger breach between us and Karzai,” the American official said.

Though encouraged by Washington, the thaw heightens the risk that the United States will find itself cut out of what amounts to a separate peace between the Afghans and Pakistanis, and one that does not necessarily guarantee Washington’s prime objective in the war: denying Al Qaeda a haven.

It also provides another indication of how Pakistan, ostensibly an American ally, has worked many opposing sides in the war to safeguard its ultimate interest in having an Afghanistan that is pliable and free of the influence of its main strategic obsession, its more powerful neighbor, India.

The Haqqani network has long been Pakistan’s crucial anti-India asset and has remained virtually untouched by Pakistani forces in their redoubt inside Pakistan, in the tribal areas on the Afghan border, even as the Americans have pressed Pakistan for an offensive against it.

General Kayani has resisted the American pleas, saying his troops are too busy fighting the Pakistani Taliban in other parts of the tribal areas.

But there have long been suspicions among Afghan, American and other Western officials that the Pakistanis were holding the Haqqanis in reserve for just such a moment, as a lever to shape the outcome of the war in its favor.

On repeated occasions, Pakistan has used the Haqqani fighters to hit Indian targets inside Afghanistan, according to American intelligence officials. The Haqqanis have also hit American ones, a possible signal from the Pakistanis to the Americans that it is in their interest, too, to embrace a deal.

General Petraeus told Congress last week that Haqqani fighters were responsible for recent major attacks in Kabul and the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, adding that he had informed General Kayani.

Some officials in the Obama administration have not ruled out incorporating the Haqqani network in an Afghan settlement, though they stress that President Obama’s policy calls for Al Qaeda to be separated from the network. American officials are skeptical that that can be accomplished.

Richard C. Holbrooke, the Obama administration’s special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, said on a visit to Islamabad last weekend that it was “hard to imagine” the Haqqani network in an Afghan arrangement, but added, “Who knows?”

At a briefing this week at the headquarters of Pakistan’s premier spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistani analysts laid out a view of the war that dovetailed neatly with the doubts expressed by Mr. Karzai. They depicted a stark picture of an American military campaign in Afghanistan “that will not succeed.”

They said the Taliban were gaining strength. Despite the impending arrival of new American troops, they concluded the “security situation would become more dangerous,” resulting in an erosion of the American will to fight.

“That is the reason why Karzai is trying to negotiate now,” a senior analyst said.

General Pasha, the head of the intelligence agency, dashed to Kabul on the eve of Mr. Karzai’s visit to Washington in May, an American official said. Neither Mr. Karzai nor the Pakistanis mentioned to the Americans about incorporating the Haqqanis in a postwar Afghanistan, the official said.

Pakistan has already won what it sees as an important concession in Kabul, the resignations this month of the intelligence chief, Amrullah Saleh, and the interior minister, Hanif Atmar. The two officials, favored by Washington, were viewed by Pakistan as major obstacles to its vision of hard-core Taliban fighters’ being part of an Afghanistan settlement, though the circumstances of their resignations did not suggest any connection to Pakistan.

Coupled with their strategic interests, the Pakistanis say they have chosen this juncture to open talks with Mr. Karzai because, even before the controversy over General McChrystal, they sensed uncertainty — “a lack of fire in the belly,” said one Pakistani — within the Obama administration over the Afghan fight.

“The American timetable for getting out makes it easier for Pakistan to play a more visible role,” said Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, the spokesman for the Pakistani Army. He was referring to the July 2011 date set by Mr. Obama for the start of the withdrawal of some American combat troops.

The offer by Pakistan to make the Haqqanis part of the solution in Afghanistan has now been adopted as basic Pakistani policy, said Rifaat Hussain, a professor of international relations at Islamabad University, and a confidant of top military generals.

“The establishment thinks that without getting Haqqani on board, efforts to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan will be doomed,” Mr. Hussain said. “Haqqani has a large fighting force, and by co-opting him into a power-sharing arrangement a lot of bloodshed can be avoided.”

The recent trips by General Kayani and General Pasha to Kabul were an “effort to make this happen,” he said.

Afghan officials said General Kayani had offered to broker a deal with the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, and had sent envoys to Kabul from another insurgent leader and longtime Pakistani ally, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, with the offer of a 15-point peace plan in March.

As for the Haqqanis, whose fighters stretch across eastern Afghanistan all the way to Kabul, they are prepared to break with Al Qaeda, Pakistani intelligence and military officials said.

The Taliban, including the Haqqani group, are ready to “do a deal” over Al Qaeda, a senior Pakistani official close to the Pakistani Army said. The Haqqanis could tell Al Qaeda to move elsewhere because it had been given nine years of protection since 9/11, the official said.

But this official acknowledged that the Haqqanis and Al Qaeda were too “thick” with each other for a separation to happen. They had provided each other with fighters, money and other resources over a long period of time, he said.

Also, there appeared to be no idea where the Qaeda forces would go, and no answer to whether the Haqqanis would hand over Osama bin Laden and his second in command, Ayman al-Zawahri, the official said.

The Haqqanis may be playing their own game with their hosts, the Pakistanis, Mr. Hussain said.

“Many believe that Haqqanis’ willingness to cut its links with Al Qaeda is a tactical move which is aimed at thwarting the impending military action by the Pakistani Army in North Waziristan,” he said.

Social Headlines

Lack of cancer specialists forces Afghans to seek treatment abroad

Zarghona Salehi - Jun 20, 2010 - 17:04

KABUL (PAN): Hundreds of people die needlessly in Afghanistan because of a lack of cancer specialists and diagnostic centres, doctors say.

Afghanistan did have a cancer diagnostic centre at Ali Abad Hospital in Kabul, but that was destroyed during the civil war 30 years ago and has never reopened.

Doctors say that if the cancer is caught early enough some patients can be operated on and with treatment live another 10 years. But if the cancer is not detected and spreads, the patient has less chance of survival.

Due to a lack of cancer specialists in Afghanistan, those who can afford it travel overseas for treatment, but many more die, having never been properly diagnosed.

Noor Jan, 45, has suffered from stomach cancer for eight years. She was working as a teacher at Zarghona high school in Kabul when she started to get severe stomach pains. She made several trips to doctors at government and private hospitals, but none were able to agree on what the problem was, and at the same time, the pain got worse.

"One doctor diagnosed me with intestinal tuberculosis, while another said I had a stone in my gall bladder and a third said it was a kidney stone," she said.

When the illness started to get very bad, Jan went to India where she was diagnosed with stomach cancer.

Speaking from New Delhi, Jan said she had just been operated on and was feeling much better. She said she had paid about \$10,000 for the treatment, half of which was a loan.

For many people in Afghanistan though, paying to seek treatment overseas is not an option.

Amirudin, 29, resident of Saragi district in Kabul, has had blood cancer for the past year. He also said that the lack of specialised treatment centres in Afghanistan meant he had to pay a lot of money to travel abroad.

"I have gone to Pakistan for treatment three times, each time I spent 40,000 to 70,000 Pakistani rupees (\$470-\$820)."

However, now, Amirudin, the owner of a general store, said he had run out of money and was seeking medical care at Jamhoriat Hospital, in Kabul.

The illness makes him nauseas, unable to sleep and keeps him in constant pain. His pale, weak body was shaking as he complained about the lack of adequate care for cancer patients in Afghanistan.

Like Amirudin, most Afghans cannot afford to seek treatment overseas. And without specialised care, many die, according to doctors.

Rahmatullah, who lives in Kher Kana in Kabul, said his father had a pain in his kidney, and even though he was given different medication, it just got worse.

Finally, a doctor diagnosed his father as having urinary bladder cancer, but at that time, the disease had progressed so far, there were no treatments.

"We found out that our father had cancer when the disease was so bad that the possibilities for treatment were few and we couldn't afford to take him abroad. Ultimately he died."

Najeebullh, a resident of Shah Sahed district in Kabul, said his mother had complained about a pain in her digestive system for about seven months, during which time she was living off beverages. Nothing the doctors gave her made any difference, he said.

Eventually, doctors said his mother might have a tumour in her intestines, and suggested he take her out the country for treatment.

Speaking with tears in his eyes, Najeebul said he could not afford to take his mother to another country and that after seven months, she died.

He criticised the government for failing to set up even one medical and diagnostic centre for cancer patients, even though the international community had poured a lot of money into health care.

A number of doctors also said the lack of cancer diagnostic and other equipment reflected a big gap in health care services.

Dr. Ahmad Walid, doctor for internal medical inspect and blood, working in Jamhoriati Hospital Kabul, said because of this lack dozens of patients go to Pakistan, India and other countries for treatment.

The only treatment doctors in Afghanistan can give to cancer patients is a blood transfusion, he said.

With a recommendation letter, a patient can get such transfusion from the blood bank, he said. However, the only real treatment for blood cancer is a bone marrow operation, which cannot be carried out in Afghanistan.

In India, the operation costs about 1.6 million Indian rupees (\$35,000).

Dr Daud, a surgeon at the Wazeer Akbar Khan Hospital in Kabul, said diagnosing and treating cancer patients is not possible in Afghanistan. Doctors must send their biopsies out the country, he said.

Daud and other doctors have also called for a greater focus on establishing treatment and diagnostic centres and training cancer specialists.

Dr Abdullah Fahim, an adviser to the Ministry of Public Health, said they needed \$5 million to build centres with equipment and specialists needed to diagnose and treat cancer.

He said the international nuclear agency had promised to set up such a centre in Jamhoriati Hospital.

Fahim also said that a 200-bed cancer centre was being built with assistance from Pakistan, but that only half of it had been completed so far.

He said the ministry was still trying to open the centres, but they lacked doctors who were experts in cancer treatment. He said the service cannot start until they have 20 doctors trained to treat cancer, which could take another five years.

This year, five doctors were sent to Turkey to specialise in cancer treatment and another 15 will also be sent to Turkey and India to expand their experiences.

Mansoor Ahmad, an assistant at the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul said 2,000 visas are issued daily, among which 500 to 700 are for medical reasons.

He said that most patients going to Pakistan have either heart problems or cancer.

Fahim said he did not know the exact number of Afghans travelling overseas for medical treatment.

Over 70,000 Afghan refugees return home this year

Pajhwok Report - Jun 20, 2010 - 18:17

KABUL (PAN): Over 70,000 Afghans have voluntarily returned from Pakistan this year, with two and a half months of the peak repatriation period still to run, said the UN agency for refugees on Sunday.

This year's overall figure could reach over 130,000, more than double last year's annual total, the UNHCR said in a statement.

The pace of returns has increased markedly in recent weeks averaging 806 individuals per day during June, the statement said, adding since the resumption of large scale repatriation in March 2002, the May to August period has generally been the peak period for returning.

"Despite security constraints and challenging socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan, the voluntary repatriation of 70,000 Afghans demonstrates that many refugees are confident that there are opportunities available to return to their homeland," said Mengeshe Kebede, UNHCR's representative in Pakistan.

Over the past few months, refugees have cited economic factors, the difficult security situation in Pakistan and improvements in security and employment opportunities in Afghanistan as key reasons for returning, he added.

In Kabul, Abdul Rahim, the acting minister for refugees and repatriation, said it was important to remember there were still 2.7 million refugees registered with authorities in Iran and Pakistan.

"Continuing donor support for Afghanistans reconstruction and development programmes is needed to attract more refugees home in the future," he said.

The majority of Afghans, 33 percent, have returned to the east, including the provinces of Nangarhar and Laghman, while 32 percent returned to the centre, mainly to the provinces of Kabul, Logar and Parwan. Some 18 percent have returned to the northern and north-eastern regions, including Kunduz, Jawzjan, Balkh and Baghlan, provinces, 7 percent returned to the south-eastern region, mainly to the provinces of Paktia and Khost. Afghans destined for the southern, western and central highland regions constituted nine percent of the total returns to Afghanistan this year, the UNHCR said.

The majority of the 2.7 million registered Afghans in Pakistan and Iran have lived in exile for over two and a half decades.

More than half this population has been born in exile. As such, they face more complex reintegration challenges than their compatriots who left Afghanistan more recently and who repatriated in huge numbers between 2002 and 2006.

Since 2002, it is estimated that over five million Afghans have returned home, a figure that represents a 20 percent increase in Afghanistans estimated population of 25 million.

Commenting on the resulting reintegration challenges, UNHCR representative in Afghanistan, Ewen Macleod, said that there were challenges related to land, property, housing and employment. "But the determination of the returnees to overcome these obstacles is remarkable," he added.

Each Afghan returning with the UNHCR assistance receives a cash grant of about \$100, depending on the distance to their area of origin. The grant is given out to returning refugees at one of five UNHCR encashment centres in Afghanistan.

Now in its ninth year, UNHCR's voluntary return programme to Afghanistan is the largest

return operation around the world. Since it began in 2002, more than 3.6 million Afghans have returned from Pakistan and 865,000 from Iran, the statement said. The vast majority of Afghans who have been repatriated this year, 49,000, were living in the Pakistan province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, while just 10,000 were living in Balochistan. Around 2,600 were living in Sindh province and some 8,500 in the Punjab or in the capital Islamabad. Nearly 3,000 people returned from various parts of Iran in 2010.

Afghan drug use increasing: UN

Pajhwok Report - Jun 21, 2010 - 12:58

KABUL (PAN): More than one million Afghans are addicted to drugs, with many using narcotics to blunt the effects of poverty and hardship brought on by three decades of war, the UN said on Monday.

A recent survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Afghan government showed that about eight percent of the population, or one million people between the ages of 15 and 64, were addicted to drugs including opium, painkillers and tranquillisers. "Many Afghans are taking drugs as a kind of self-medication against the hardships of life. Significantly, many of them began taking drugs as migrants or refugees in camps in Iran and Pakistan," said the UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa.

"Yet, instead of easing pain, opiate use is causing even greater misery: it creates behavioural, social and health problems, crime, accidents and loss of productivity in the workplace.

Injecting drug use, as well as sex traded for drugs or money, spread HIV and other blood-borne diseases.

Compared to a similar survey five years ago, the number of regular opium users has jumped 53 percent, from 150,000 to 230,000 while the number of heroin users has increased from 50,000 to 120,000, a leap of 140 percent.

The report also found that more than 50 percent of drug users in the north and the south of the country give opium to their children, often as medication, a practice that risks "condemning the next generation of Afghans to a life of addiction, Costa said.

Limited access to treatment and rehabilitation centres has fuelled the addiction problem, he said. Only about 10 percent of those surveyed said that had any access to treatment, although 90 percent admitted they needed it.

Costa called on the international community to focus on rehabilitation of drug addicts as well as poppy eradication.

"Much has been said, and written about Afghanistan as a leading producer of drugs, causing health havoc in the world. It is time to recognise that the same tragedy is taking place in Afghanistan, that has now become a leading consumer of its own opium," Costa said in the statement.

Thalassemia patients struggle for treatment in Afghanistan

Zarghona Salehi - Jun 21, 2010 - 15:19

KABUL (PAN): Aqsa Hotak is 10 years old and the number one student at Muhammad Faqir Firozi High School in Kabul. She also suffers from thalassemia, an inherited blood disorder, along with more than 1,000 children in Afghanistan.

Hir best chance for survival is a bone-marrow transplant, but Afghanistan does not have the capacity or the expertise to carry out such an operation.

So like other thalassemia patients, Hotak must rely on blood transfusions, which need to take place once or twice a month.

"I am 10-years-old and 10 years are remaining. Thalassemia threatens my life every moment. I want to live like all everyone else and officials should pave the ground of treatment for me and others like me," she said.

Thalassemia is a blood disorder passed down through families in which the disease causes the production of an abnormal haemoglobin, or protein. This results in the destruction of red blood cells and anaemia, causing the need for monthly blood transfusions.

In Afghanistan, patients are not expected to live more than 20 years as after three decades or more of war the country does not have the expertise or the infrastructure to care for them.

The Ministry of Public Health said there are a limited number of beds for thalassemia patients at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health.

Officials at the ministry say they have been struggling to provide treatment for thalassemia patients. The ministry contacts countries where bone marrow and blood cell transplantation are possible, Dr. Abdullah Fahim, an adviser to the ministry, said.

The MoPH plans to establish centres at two hospitals which would match thalassemia patients with blood donors, he said.

Some officials and citizens have also donated their blood to a central blood bank.

"I ask all my countrymen and women to voluntarily donate their blood to the bank, and participate in the good deeds in order to rescue the lives of their countrymen," the acting public health minister, Dr. Soraya Dalil said, while donating blood to mark World Blood Donor day on Sunday.

Women want privacy to shop for clothes

Frozan Rahmani - Jun 24, 2010 - 15:19

KABUL (PAN): Many people in Kabul are critical of the way in which women's clothes are sold from hand carts on the side of the road, saying they should be sold in shops and by female shop assistants.

In this bustling capital, market stalls are laden with women's T-shirts, underwear and other pieces of female attire. While women complain that buying clothes in public is embarrassing, doctors say it can lead to sexual angst and immoral behaviour among men.

Dyana, a ninth-grade student at Jamhoryat high school, said "It is difficult and embarrassing for most women and girls to buy their underwear in public, especially from and in front of men.

"I think it is better if such items are sold inside shops not outside".

She also said that customers should be able to try on clothes to see if they fit before they buy them, but in the bazaar, it was not possible to do this.

Masood, a 17-year-old boy selling caps, children's clothes and women's T-shirts from a hand cart in Kabul's main bazaar said, he sells clothes to women every day, but they are always in a burqa and do not want to be seen .

Rahila, a teacher at Zalikha high school in Kabul, said she felt shy when buying clothes in the market.

She said she wanted such items to be sold in shops and for the shopkeepers to be women.

In Kabul, there is one women-only mall in Baghi Zanas. Farzana, a shopkeeper at the mall, said women could buy everything they needed from the stores.

"Most of our customers are adult girls and they can easily try on clothes before they buy".

But the mall has only 10 shops and many women complain that is too far from the city centre .

Psychiatrists in Afghanistan also say that selling women's intimate clothes in public could excite men to act in a way which was not in line with Afghan or Islamic culture.

Dr Azizudin Himat, head of psychologist's association, says that when they reach puberty, both boys and girls start to become attracted to the opposite sex.

When young men see women's clothes, especially more intimate pieces of clothing, they can't help but think of sex, he said.

In Afghan society, adults cannot satisfy their sexual needs without getting married, and so up until that time, they are stressed, and seeing intimate clothing only exacerbates that, he said.

To avoid these problems, clothes that could provoke these feelings should be kept out of the public eye, he said .

Sayed Sharif u-din Ansari, a religious affairs adviser to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, said that in Islam, women are respected and so their lawful demands should be met, including not selling clothes in public.

Also, Sharia law forbids men from seeing clothing that belongs to women other than their relatives, he said.

But he said that preventing women's clothes from being sold in public was not a task that the Ministry of Women's Affairs could do on its own. The ministry could raise the issue, but it would need cooperation from the ministries of commerce, interior, haj and Islamic affairs and the municipality.