

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

Afghanistan This Week

Report# 133

Week: 14-20 August, 2010

Date: 22 August 2010

Mohammad Amin

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Political Headlines Summary

Afghans blame civilian deaths on U.S. despite spike from insurgent violence

KABUL - During the first six months of the year, 1,271 Afghan civilians had been killed in an increasingly violent war. On Tuesday, Hafizullah Azizi, a handsome 22-year-old who financially supported his mother and five younger siblings, was added to the list.

IEC hands out over 376,000 voting cards

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More than 2,000 foreign soldiers killed in Afghanistan

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Deadline set for dissolution of private security firms

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Private security firms needed: US

WASHINGTON (PAN): The United States, studying President Hamid Karzai's decree closing down all private security companies in four months time, has said is a need for such firms to continue operating in the war-torn country.

Afghanistan gives \$1m in flood aid to Pakistan

KABUL (PAN): Afghanistan on Tuesday provided Pakistan with \$1 million to help fund relief efforts for victims of unprecedented floods that have affected millions of people.

Massive anti-US rally held in Afghanistan

In eastern Afghanistan, hundreds of people have taken to the streets to protest against the mounting civilian death toll in US-led raids in the war-torn country.

938 polling centres to stay shut

KABUL (PAN): More than 930 polling centres would remain closed across Afghanistan due to insecurity on election day, the Afghan poll panel chief announced on Wednesday.

NGOs spending funds on non-development activities

KABUL (PAN): A government review of non-governmental organisations has found that 20 of them spend 60 percent of their budget on non-development activities, a minister said on Wednesday.

UN concerned about Afghans in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (PAN): The United Nations said on Friday it was increasingly concerned about the plight of flood-affected Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Geo-Strategic Headlines Summary

Obama and Karzai agree to keep the pressure on the Taliban

WASHINGTON (PAN): President Hamid Karzai and his US counterpart, Barack Obama, have vowed to keep up the pressure on the Taliban.

Gates, Petraeus differ on flexibility of Afghan exit

WASHINGTON — US Defense Secretary Robert Gates insisted Monday the July 2011 date to start withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan was set in stone, putting him at odds with his top Afghan war commander.

Getting Osama a key goal: Petraeus

KABUL (PAN): Detaining or killing Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden remains a key goal of American forces, NATO's top military commander in Afghanistan has said.

Americans have a stake in Afghan future: Clinton

WASHINGTON (PAN): Congratulating Afghans on 91 years of independence, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Tuesday Americans had a stake in Afghanistan's future.

Russia hosts Karzai, Zardari for Afghan summit

SOCHI, Russia — Russia on Wednesday hosts Pakistan's embattled President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghan leader Hamid Karzai for a regional summit expected to focus on security in Afghanistan.

'US Afghan pullout may be disastrous'

Amid disagreements between US officials over the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan, an Afghan analyst believes their pullout would be disastrous.

US supports Karzai on pvt security firms

WASHINGTON (PAN): The United States has backed President Hamid Karzai's call to regulate private security firms, but said a four-month deadline to close all such companies in the country would be hard to meet.

US military to stay longer in Afghanistan

KABUL (PAN): US Senator John Kerry has said the United States will not withdraw its troops until the Afghan forces are able to defend the country.

Obama establishes Pakistan, Afghanistan support office

WASHINGTON (PAN): The US president Barack Obama issued an executive order establishing a Pakistan and Afghanistan Support Office to help streamline projects in the region.

Social Headlines Summary

800 Afghans to get vocational training

KABUL (PAN): The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled announced on Sunday 800 people would be provided vocational training in five provinces as part of efforts to alleviate poverty in the country.

Afghanistan tops food insecurity index

The war-torn Afghanistan has been ranked top for having the world's least-secure food supplies, according to a survey of 163 nations.

Crack in mountain worries officials

FAIZABAD (PAN): A huge crack in a mountain near the historic Shiwa Lake in northeastern Badakhshan province has fuelled concerns that it may cause death and destruction.

Economical Headlines Summary

Afghanistan says finds 1.8 bln barrel oilfield

KABUL - Afghanistan said on Sunday it had discovered an oilfield with an estimated 1.8 billion barrels in the north of the war-ravaged country, where U.S. and other foreign forces are trying to tame a Taliban-led insurgency.

Political Headlines

Afghans blame civilian deaths on U.S. despite spike from insurgent violence

The Washington Post

08/15/2010

By David Nakamura

KABUL - During the first six months of the year, 1,271 Afghan civilians had been killed in an increasingly violent war. On Tuesday, Hafizullah Azizi, a handsome 22-year-old who financially supported his mother and five younger siblings, was added to the list.

Azizi, a driver for a British personal security firm, was returning to the company's fortified 16-room compound in central Kabul when armed masked men sprinted toward the house. The attackers shot Azizi and another driver with assault rifles and then engaged in a firefight with a guard, according to police and witnesses. Failing to breach the exterior wall, an attacker detonated an explosive device strapped to his waist, blowing out windows and rocking cars. The two Afghan drivers and two attackers lay dead.

The next day, Azizi's mother buried her son in the family graveyard near his father, an Afghan soldier who died in battle 17 years earlier.

Azizi is representative of an alarming spike in civilian deaths, up 21 percent this year largely because of an increase in insurgent violence, according to a U.N. report this week. (Add 1,997 injured, and the spike in overall civilian casualties is 31 percent.) Although NATO forces have largely made good on the pledge last year from Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal to decrease civilian casualties caused by their actions, the Taliban have ramped up their aggression, killing 920 civilians this year through suicide bombings, targeted assassinations and improvised explosive devices.

U.S. and NATO officials have used the figures to denounce the Taliban to win popular support for an increased presence that aims to clear out Taliban strongholds this fall. But ordinary Afghans have largely rejected this good guy-bad guy narrative and continue blaming the civilian deaths on the international forces, said experts who have studied the issue.

"What we found was that regardless of the region, province, education level or political views, in many cases Afghans blamed international forces as much as the insurgents for the increase," said

Erica Gaston, a human rights lawyer focusing on civilian casualties for the Open Society Institute who recently interviewed 250 Afghans.

Afghans contend that the troops are not doing enough to protect them; that foreigners are ensconced behind fortified walls and bulletproof vehicles while residents are out in the open; and that the presence of foreigners in their neighborhoods brings unwanted attention from insurgents.

"The [Afghan] government, NATO, the U.N., the American forces -- they make a big, big wall of cement and they are inside," said Zafar Khanbahar, 25, Azizi's cousin. "So the insurgents, to try to kill the troops, whenever they explode [a bomb], the people in the public are hit. I blame all of them, the government, NATO and the insurgents -- all."

This reaction from the public has vexed military officials, who issue several announcements weekly about civilians killed by insurgents. On the same day Azizi was killed, for example, NATO said that three civilians were killed by a roadside bomb in another province. "Insurgents continue to take innocent lives," said Col. James Dawkins, director of the ISAF Joint Command Combined Joint Operations Center. But often, it is the actions of U.S. forces that draw outrage. Last month, Afghans protested in Kabul after a U.S. contractors' SUV collided with another car, killing several civilians. Protesters set the SUV on fire and attacked the contractors when they returned for the vehicle.

Military officials said the forces' visibility makes it easier for aggrieved Afghans to find an outlet for their anger.

"A lot of Afghans will come to coalition forces alleging civilian casualties that we caused. This is to be expected. We are the only identifiable force. The insurgents aren't," said Lt. Campbell Spencer, who works with the military's Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell. "We provide medical services and compensation payments as well." Gaston said the military was taking the correct approach by fine-tuning aerial bombings and reducing night raids on homes. But by pushing deeper into Taliban-controlled areas, she said, international forces are causing more chaos. Spencer said that the Taliban has taken to holding Afghan civilians as hostages to make it more difficult for the forces to attack without killing innocent people.

"It's a great idea in theory, but in practice it is enormously risky to civilians," Gaston said.

It's not that locals don't blame the Taliban. But they insist that foreign forces are oblivious to their impact on neighborhoods.

Abdul Ahamad, 53, a shopkeeper who lives next to the Hart Security compound attacked by the suicide bombers, showed his damaged Toyota Corolla to a reporter. Its windows were blown out and the driver's side door was caved in. He said he had about \$200 in savings and could not afford to fix the car.

"The attack was because of this security company. If they were not here, we would not be attacked," Ahamad said. "Why should they come and reside here? They should stay in a place far from civilians."

Jim Heycock, Hart's chief operating officer, said the Kabul office employs about 50 Britons and more than 400 Afghans, providing salaries to locals who work as drivers, translators and guards. He said all employees are insured and that Azizi's family will get money to cover funeral costs and other expenses.

But that's little solace to Azizi's family. Azizi, who earned \$250 a month, helped cover the \$500 monthly rent with brother-in-law Najeebullah Bahar, 29, who works for Hart as a translator. Bahar's family has implored him not to return to the company.

"My family now tells me, 'If you go work over there, maybe one day they will kill you also,' " Bahar said. "Now I tell to my family, 'If I don't go over there, how can I provide money for the house?' "

IEC hands out over 376,000 voting cards

Rahmatullah Afghan - Aug 15, 2010 - 19:49

KABUL (PAN): More than 376,000 voting cards have been distributed over the past two months, an IEC official said on Sunday.

The voters' registration process started on June 12 and ended on August 12 for the parliamentary election scheduled for September 18, Independent Election Commission (IEC) spokesman, Noor Muhammad Noor, told Pajhwok Afghan News.

The voting cards have been distributed to 207,014 men and 152,147 women, with another 16,920 going to both male and female Kuchis, he said.

The cards were distributed to Afghans returning from other countries, those who had migrated from one province to another, people who had lost their old cards or who had turned 18 since the last registration centre. There are two registration centres in Kabul and one in each province.

There are now about 17 million people in Afghanistan with voting cards, Noor said.

More than 2,000 foreign soldiers killed in Afghanistan

Javed Hamim Kakar - Aug 16, 2010 - 16:35

KABUL (PAN): More than 2,000 foreign soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan over the past nine years, according to a website that reports on military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Of the 2,002 casualties, 1,200 were American, 331 British, 151 Canadian and the rest from other countries which make up the 46-nation NATO.

America and NATO launched their war on terror in Afghanistan in October 2001, following the September 11 attacks on the US that were orchestrated by Al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden, who had been given sanctuary in Afghanistan by the Taliban.

Only 11 foreign soldiers were killed that year, but over the course of time, the Taliban resistance has grown and the number of casualties increased.

In 2002, 69 soldiers were killed; 57 in 2003; 60 in 2004 and 131 in 2005. According to icasualty.org, casualties among foreign forces increased dramatically after 2005. In 2006, 191 soldiers were killed; 232 in 2007; 295 in 2008 and 520 in 2009.

This year could be the bloodiest for foreign forces, with 434 NATO-led soldiers killed in the first eight months of 2010, 279 of whom were American.

The southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar have seen the fiercest fighting, with 555 soldiers killed in Helmand and another 294 killed in Kandahar over the past nine years.

"The main reason for the increase in casualties is that we are launching major operations against the insurgents," spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), Gen. Josef Blotz, told Pajhwok Afghan News.

NATO has 120,000 soldiers stationed in Afghanistan under the command of American Gen. David Petraeus.

Afghan civilians have also suffered casualties in 2010. According to a report prepared by the United Nations, more than 1,200 civilians were killed and 2,000 injured over the past six months.

Deadline set for dissolution of private security firms

Frozan Rahmani - Aug 16, 2010 - 18:15

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai has set a four-month deadline for the dissolution of private security companies, his spokesman said on Monday.

The president would issue today a decree giving the private firms four months time to end their operations across the country, Waheed Omar told reporters in Kabul.

He said the dissolution would be carried out under a programme and the presidential orders, expected later in the day, would provide details of the process.

Omar also talked about Karzai's upcoming trip to Russia. The president, heading a high-level delegation, was to fly into Moscow on Tuesday to join his Pakistani, Tajik and Uzbek counterparts at a summit hosted by Russia, the spokesman said.

He said Karzai, in a letter to his US counterpart Barack Obama, had asked for a review of the US war strategy in Afghanistan in order to make it a success. The war on terror could not be won as long as rebel sanctuaries across the border remained intact, he warned.

About arrangements for the September 18 election, Omar said the National Security Council, at a meeting on Monday, decided that the list of polling stations should be reviewed. He said 4,800 polling centres had been declared safe and would open on voting day.

About Hazara-Kuchi clashes that left 10 policemen and nine civilians wounded in Kabul, Omar said they had received information that certain elements were involved in fueling the tension. He said a commission had been set up to resolve the issue on a permanent basis.

Private security firms needed: US

Lalit K Jha - Aug 17, 2010 - 15:07

WASHINGTON (PAN): The United States, studying President Hamid Karzai's decree closing down all private security companies in four months time, has said is a need for such firms to continue operating in the war-torn country.

"At this moment, we believe there is still a need for private security companies to continue to operate in Afghanistan. We certainly agree that over time this responsibility should transition to the government of Afghanistan," a State Department spokesman said.

PJ Crowley told reporters: "I think we have a shared goal of improving oversight and management. We will continue to work with the government of Afghanistan as a deliberate process to move to where this responsibility can transition to the government of Afghanistan. He added the US would study Karzai's decree, understand the details better and work with the Afghan government on the issue. "At the present time, the Afghan government itself relies on private contractors..."

He said the US agreed with Karzai's stance that security should become a responsibility of Afghanistan under its leadership. "He mentioned this in his inaugural address. He mentioned it again during the London and Kabul conferences. And we'll work through the issue with the government of Afghanistan."

Crowley said though the US had increased the size of its military contingent to help establish and sustain security in Afghanistan, yet there were unmet requirements that could only be filled with private security contractors.

The spokesman said: "Right now, were in a war zone. The security requirements are significant. Yet the need for us to be able to take our diplomats away from Kabul to engage directly with the Afghan people, to work side-by-side with the military, that it means that we have a need for security."

That requirement was currently being met, in many cases, by private security contractors, he explained. Over time, as the Afghan government's capabilities expanded the need for military and private contractors would be reduced, he went on. How fast that can be accomplished is the

essence of our current strategy.

As the international community moved diplomats and NGOs around the country, it relied on private security contractors to fill that gap between what the military provided and what the Afghan government was unable to deliver, Crowley concluded.

Afghanistan gives \$1m in flood aid to Pakistan

Abdul Qadir Siddiqui - Aug 17, 2010 - 16:08

KABUL (PAN): Afghanistan on Tuesday provided Pakistan with \$1 million to help fund relief efforts for victims of unprecedented floods that have affected millions of people.

Up to 1,600 people have been killed and two million made homeless in Pakistan's worst floods in decades.

Hundreds of villages across Pakistan have been marooned, highways have been cut in half and thousands of homeless people have been forced to set up tents along the sides of roads.

Afghan finance minister, Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, handed over the assistance to Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul, Muhammad Sadiq Khan, at a press conference on Tuesday.

Zakhilwal said the people and government of Afghanistan shared the grief of the people of Pakistan.

"Even though this aid amount is far less than what is really needed by the flood victims... our government wants to express its solidarity with our brothers and sisters hit by floods," the minister said.

The minister urged well-off people to help Pakistanis at this critical situation and also extend support to thousands of Afghan refugees displaced by floods. It is estimated that there are about two million Afghans living in Pakistan, many of them in the northwest, worst affected by the flooding which started about three weeks ago.

The United Nations has warned that up to 3.5 million children could be in danger of contracting deadly diseases from contaminated water and insects in a crisis that has disrupted the lives of at least a tenth of Pakistan's 170 million people.

The Pakistani envoy said the assistance from Afghanistan was more valuable than relief given by other countries because the assistance had the real spirit of brotherhood.

About 10 days ago, the Afghan government sent a team of doctors with four helicopters, medicines and other necessary relief goods to Pakistan.

Sadiq said it was a timely assistance as there was a great need for helicopters to rescue people marooned by floods.

Afghanistan also suffered massive human and property losses over the past one month due to flooding triggered by heavy rains. Dozens of people have been killed, scores of others wounded and thousands of acres of farmland land destroyed mostly in the east and north.

Massive anti-US rally held in Afghanistan

Wed, 18 Aug 2010 12:01:08 GMT

In eastern Afghanistan, hundreds of people have taken to the streets to protest against the mounting civilian death toll in US-led raids in the war-torn country.

Some 600 demonstrators blocked the main highway linking the Capital, Kabul and the eastern city of Jalalabad on Wednesday.

The protesters were chanting slogans against the growing foreign presence in the country and Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

An Afghan father and his son were killed when their house in Nangarhar Province was stormed overnight by NATO soldiers, triggering an outcry that led to the demonstrations.

The US-led forces in the country say they killed two militants in the operation, a claim local villagers have firmly rejected.

Earlier this week, a similar rally was held in the eastern province of Wardak.

A UN report published earlier this week said that 386 civilians were killed by NATO or Afghan forces in the first six months of 2010.

On Monday, at least five Afghan civilians, including a woman and her three children, were killed after a NATO supply vehicle hit their motorcycle in southern Afghanistan.

According to Afghan officials, the accident took place on a road in Helmand province, a Press TV correspondent reported Sunday.

Civilians have been the main victims of violence in Afghanistan, particularly in the country's troubled southern and eastern provinces.

The issue of civilian casualties has caused friction between Washington and the Karzai government in Kabul.

938 polling centres to stay shut

Abasin Zaheer - Aug 18, 2010 - 13:00

KABUL (PAN): More than 930 polling centres would remain closed across Afghanistan due to insecurity on election day, the Afghan poll panel chief announced on Wednesday.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) had sought security for 6,835 centres, or 19,945 polling stations, Fazal Ahmad Manawi told a press conference in Kabul.

He said the forces had assured them of ensuring security at 5,898 polling centres (18,762 stations). The election chief was referring to a letter he received a day earlier.

On polling day, 938 centres (2,448 stations) would stay shut because of the unsatisfactory security situation, the official revealed. Efforts at increasing the number of polling centres were unlikely to succeed, he said.

Not a single polling centre has been closed in Kabul, Kapisa, Parwan, Jawzjan, Balkh, Bamyán, Panjsher, Badakhshan and Takhar provinces.

In central Ghazni, 107 polling centres have been closed, according to Manawi. The rest of closed centres are located in 24 other provinces.

Up for grabs in the September 18 parliamentary election will be 249 Wolesi Jirga, lower house, seats. About 2,442 people, including women, are in the run for the berths.

NGOs spending funds on non-development activities

Abdul Qadir Siddiqui - Aug 18, 2010 - 21:30

KABUL (PAN): A government review of non-governmental organisations has found that 20 of them spend 60 percent of their budget on non-development activities, a minister said on Wednesday.

The Ministry of Economy is reviewing the budgetary affairs of international and local NGOs to ensure transparency, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, told a gathering attended by heads of several NGOs in Kabul.

Without naming any group, the minister said the NGOs they had reviewed showed that 60 percent of their budget was used on their own expenses.

He said the NGOs had explained that most of the non-development budget was spent on high rents.

Earlier, there were reports that large chunks of aid money go abroad.

Arghandiwal said the review process was launched two weeks ago and had started with foreign NGOs but would review the funding sources, costs and other affairs of all 303 foreign and 1,327 local aid organisations in the country.

Other objectives of the programme are making NGOs accountable, countering corruption and bringing transparency in their works, he added.

Without going into details, the minister said legal action would be taken against NGOs involved in corruption after the completion of their review programme.

He said efforts were part of the pledge the Afghan government had made at the international conference in Kabul

A spokesman for the Ministry of Economy, Muhammad Sadiq Amirkhel, said that by law, NGOs have to present a detailed activity report to the ministry every six months.

However, he said no organisation had sent the ministry its report so far.

At Wednesday's gathering, the minister called on NGOs to include their projects in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and plan all their projects in line with the law of Afghanistan.

UN concerned about Afghans in Pakistan

Pajhwok Report - Aug 20, 2010 - 16:54

ISLAMABAD (PAN): The United Nations said on Friday it was increasingly concerned about the plight of flood-affected Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

It said some of the refugees were under pressure to repatriate by speculators seeking to develop land that until now has been occupied by refugee settlements.

Of the 1.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, more than 1.5 million are in flood-affected provinces. Dozens of Afghan refugee villages have been damaged and destroyed.

"In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone, more than 12,000 dwellings in refugee villages have been swept away, leaving almost 70,000 people homeless," the UN refugee agency said.

Welcoming assurances from federal authorities that all affected people should be able to return to their homes, including Afghan refugees, UNHCR hoped local arrangements could be made quickly to ensure the spirit of this commitment cascades down to all levels, and moves by land speculators are stymied.

One of the worst hit refugee villages has been Azakheil in Nowshera district. More than 23,000 people lost homes there. A UNHCR technical team is assessing the feasibility of rebuilding on the site.

Geo-Strategic Headlines

Obama and Karzai agree to keep the pressure on the Taliban

Lalit K Jha - Aug 14, 2010 - 13:17

WASHINGTON (PAN): President Hamid Karzai and his US counterpart, Barack Obama, have vowed to keep up the pressure on the Taliban.

The two leaders spoke for an hour on a video teleconference call on Friday and discussed a number of topics, including the Kabul Conference, the upcoming Afghan parliamentary election, anti-corruption efforts, civilian casualties and regional relations.

The US ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, and Gen. David Petraeus, commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, also joined the conference from Kabul, the White House said.

It was the first teleconference between the two leaders after Karzai wrote a letter to Obama urging him to review the Afghan war policy.

"Both leaders agreed that the United States and Afghanistan should continue to work together to keep the pressure on the Taliban and to build Afghan capacity," the White House said in a statement. "Both leaders also agreed to continue in our shared efforts to combat violent extremism, protect the Afghan people, improve governance, and deliver basic services, particularly at the local level," it said.

"Obama reaffirmed that the US is committed to partnering with the Afghan people to ensure that Afghanistan is a stable, secure, and prosperous country," the statement said.

Meanwhile, Robert Gates, the defence secretary, said that the US had almost finished its surge of an extra 30,000 troops.

Gates, speaking to reporters in California, said that 98 percent of the extra 30,000 soldiers Obama ordered in December would be in place by the end of August, with the final few thousand to arrive in October.

"As people look at how things are going in Afghanistan, it's worth remembering that the full surge only now is getting under way, because only now are all the troops getting in there. We have close to 100,000 troops there," Gates said.

NATO members have contributed another 50,000 troops.

Gates, Petraeus differ on flexibility of Afghan exit

AFP

08/16/2010

By Andrew Gully

US public support for the near nine-year war and Obama's handling of it are at an all-time low.
AFP Photo

WASHINGTON — US Defense Secretary Robert Gates insisted Monday the July 2011 date to start withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan was set in stone, putting him at odds with his top Afghan war commander.

Gates and General David Petraeus were in lock-step on the need for a gradual withdrawal, but a series of interviews exposed discord over the flexibility of the start date given last November by US President Barack Obama.

"There is no question in anybody's mind that we are going to begin drawing down troops in July of 2011," Gates told The Los Angeles Times.

But Petraeus, asked in a separate interview whether he could reach that juncture and have to recommend a delay to Obama because of the conditions on the ground, replied: "Certainly, yeah.

"I think the president has been quite clear in explaining that it's a process, not an event, and that it's conditions-based," he told NBC television's "Meet the Press" program on Sunday.

"The president and I sat down in the Oval Office and he expressed very clearly that what he wants from me is my best professional military advice."

Afghanistan, with the help of its Western backers, is trying to build up its army and police so that they can take responsibility for security from US-led NATO forces by the end of 2014.

The Taliban, toppled in a 2001 US-led invasion, still control large swathes of the south and have put up stiff resistance to a surge of 30,000 more US troops due to swell American numbers to 100,000 in the coming weeks.

US public support for the near nine-year war and Obama's handling of it are at an all-time low, according to opinion polls here, while the death toll for American troops hit a record monthly high in July of 66.

Both Gates, in the LA Times, and Petraeus, in a series of interviews with NBC, The New York Times and The Washington Post, sought to reassure a skeptical public that the American-led coalition can succeed in its aims.

Petraeus told The New York Times he did not just want to preside over a "graceful exit," while Gates suggested some security responsibilities could begin to be transferred to Afghan forces as early as early next year.

Obama's mid-2011 deadline to begin a limited withdrawal has been strongly criticized by some who believe it sent out the message America is not in the fight for the long-term and boosted the Taliban's resolve to wait it out.

Others attack him for not pulling out troops fast enough as they believe US and NATO forces are bogged down in an unwinnable conflict.

Petraeus, giving his first major interviews since assuming command of more than 140,000 coalition troops in Afghanistan last month, also said he would be prepared to negotiate with Taliban with "blood on their hands."

The general, who helped turn around the Iraq war for Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush -- partly by wheeling and dealing with warring factions -- said a new reconciliation and reintegration strategy aimed at persuading Afghan insurgents to change sides was "fairly imminent."

There is "every possibility, I think, that there can be low- and mid-level reintegration and indeed some fracturing of the senior leadership that could be really defined as reconciliation."

In his interview with The Washington Post, Petraeus said 365 insurgent leaders and 2,400 rank-and-file fighters have been killed or captured over the past three months.

The operations have led "some leaders of some elements" of the insurgency to begin reconciliation discussions with the Afghan government, he told the newspaper, characterizing the interactions as "meaningful."

Petraeus formally took over command of the Afghan war in July after Obama dismissed General Stanley McChrystal after he and his staff made disparaging comments about senior US administration figures.

The interviews came hours before the icasualties.org website announced that the total number of foreign troops killed since the start of the Afghan war in 2001 had topped 2,000, including 1,226 Americans and 331 from Britain.

Last week, the United Nations said the number of civilian casualties in the Afghan war had risen sharply in the first six months of this year to reach 1,271 Afghans. Another 1,997 people were wounded.

The Taliban called late Sunday for a committee to "conduct investigations into the civilian casualties across the country."

Getting Osama a key goal: Petraeus

Javed Hamim Kakar - Aug 16, 2010 - 15:12

KABUL (PAN): Detaining or killing Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden remains a key goal of American forces, NATO's top military commander in Afghanistan has said.

The arrest of Osama, an iconic figure, stays an important task for all of those who are fighting terrorism around the globe, Gen. David Petraeus told a news channel on Sunday.

He suggested on NBC's "Meet the Press" the elusive terror mastermind was hiding in a remote mountainous area of Pakistan, a key US ally in the war on terror.

In response to a query, the commander held out the prospect of reconciliation with Afghan insurgents, including negotiations with their leaders.

However, he hastened to add: "It doesn't mean that Mullah Omar is about to stroll down main street in Kabul anytime soon and raise his hand and swear an oath on the constitution of Afghanistan."

He saw the possibility of low- and mid-level reintegration and indeed some fracturing of the senior Taliban leadership that could be really defined as reconciliation.

Petraeus identified rebel safe havens in Pakistan, a weak government in Kabul and a terrorized populace as key challenges to NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

He said NATO-led forces were trying to seize Taliban-held territory and create small pockets of progress. The aim was to keep Al Qaeda and other militant outfits at bay, he explained.

"I have literally talked to the (Afghan) president on average about once a day. There have been a couple of times when we've had multiple meetings on a given day

"And again we have the kind of relationship that I believe we can each be forthright with the other and that means occasionally, again, confronting issues that are difficult for either of us," said Petraeus.

Americans have a stake in Afghan future: Clinton

Lalit K Jha - Aug 17, 2010 - 19:31

WASHINGTON (PAN): Congratulating Afghans on 91 years of independence, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Tuesday Americans had a stake in Afghanistan's future.

This is an occasion to celebrate the freedom your nation achieved more than nine decades ago a proud moment in your long and rich history, Clinton said.

It is also a chance to look to the future a future that people across Afghanistan are working hard to build, in partnership with citizens from many nations, joined together in a shared vision of a secure, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan, she said.

Clinton, who has visited Afghanistan five times, two of which as the Secretary of State, said every time she returns, she is reminded of the warmth of the Afghan people and the resilience that they show in the face of great challenges.

I have seen for myself the progress that youve been making and that weve been honored to support you in doing one street at a time, one community at a time promoting peace and planting the seeds for long-term progress, she said.

The people of the United States share a stake in your future. So we are proud to join you today in celebrating your past, Clinton said.

But more importantly, as we extend to you our best wishes for a happy and safe Independence Day, to send you our strong support, our partnership and our friendship for all of the years ahead, she said.

Russia hosts Karzai, Zardari for Afghan summit

AFP

08/18/2010

By Anna Smolchenko

SOCHI, Russia — Russia on Wednesday hosts Pakistan's embattled President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghan leader Hamid Karzai for a regional summit expected to focus on security in Afghanistan.

The Pakistan leader is expected to fly in to the Black Sea resort of Sochi for only a few hours after he was heavily criticised at home for his handling of the devastating floods that have caused a massive humanitarian crisis.

A key aspect of the meeting will be a rare bilateral encounter between Zardari and Karzai, whose country has consistently accused Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency of supporting Taliban insurgents.

Pakistan has reacted furiously to the allegations, particularly after Karzai declared in July that "this war is in the sanctuaries, funding centres and training places of terrorism which are outside Afghanistan."

Russia, still haunted by the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan which cost over 13,000 Soviet lives, has kept a wary distance from the troubles of NATO forces in the country.

Moscow had made clear it has no plans to send troops to Afghanistan but like several other ex-Soviet states has allowed NATO states to use its airspace for the transit of equipment.

But the summit also allows Russian President Dmitry Medvedev the chance to show his country is engaging in a major international issue at a time when it is seeking to improve its profile on the world stage.

Also taking part will be Tajikistan President Emomali Rakhmon, whose country borders Afghanistan.

"It is planned that special attention is given to the issue of regulating the situation in Afghanistan, the fight against terrorist and narcotic threats, economic reconstruction and the development of Afghanistan and the region," the Kremlin said in a statement ahead of the meeting.

The meeting is the second such four-way meeting of the heads of state, the first taking place in the Tajik capital Dushanbe in July 2009.

Medvedev's foreign policy advisor Sergei Prikhodko said ahead of the meeting that Russia would be interested in delivering helicopters to Afghanistan.

"The question of the delivery of Russian helicopters will be discussed, if it is raised by the Afghan side," he added, the Interfax news agency said, adding that Afghanistan required 100 additional choppers.

Kremlin sources told the agency that such a move could put Russia in direct competition with NATO states also interested in the contract but the whole issue of financing also had to be addressed.

Zardari had originally been planning a two-day visit to Russia but the situation with the floods means his visit has been cut to a few hours and he will not even attend lunch, officials in Islamabad have said.

Moscow is not usually seen as a close ally of Islamabad, not least because of its historically close relationship to Pakistan's traditional foe India.

'US Afghan pullout may be disastrous'

Mon, 16 Aug 2010 18:16:46 GMT

Amid disagreements between US officials over the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan, an Afghan analyst believes their pullout would be disastrous.

"The situation in Afghanistan tells us that the withdrawal in July 2011 would not be a realistic strategy to be followed. Americans and foreign troops need to be here to control insurgents in Afghanistan, otherwise the withdrawal would cause disaster," Sabir Seddiqi, a political analyst in Kabul, told Press TV.

In 2009, Obama promised that the American troops would start coming home in mid-2011. His critics argue that this could send the message that the US is not in the fight in Afghanistan for the 'long haul' and that such a message would only strengthen the Taliban's resolve to wait it out.

Seddiqi believes that by the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban could come back to power.

He added that the Americans might delay the withdrawal and develop excuses for the move, since if they begin a pull-out, it would appear as a sign of weakness, signaling to Afghan troops and Taliban that no one will be backing the Afghan troops and no one will be confronting Taliban.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates told the Los Angeles Times that Washington would start withdrawing troops in July 2011. He also said that NATO could even begin transferring some security responsibilities to Afghan forces as early as next spring.

Meanwhile, the US commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus told US media that it is based on conditions and that he might advise Barack Obama not to do that. He said the pullout is a process that is conditions-based.

The US president has been largely criticized for not pulling out troops fast enough in what many believe to be an unwinnable war.

US supports Karzai on pvt security firms

Lalit K Jha - Aug 18, 2010 - 17:26

WASHINGTON (PAN): The United States has backed President Hamid Karzai's call to regulate private security firms, but said a four-month deadline to close all such companies in the country would be hard to meet.

"We continue to support the Afghan governments intent to properly regulate the activities of private security companies in Afghanistan. There are questions of implementation, however, Mark Toner, deputy spokesman for the state department, told reporters on Tuesday.

The challenge, Toner said, was the four-month deadline that Karzai set on Tuesday for private security companies to disband. There are about 40,000 contractors working for 52 companies, half of which are Afghan. The government will buy the weapons from the companies before cancelling visas of their foreign staff. Afghan guards would be able to join the police, if they were eligible, according to the decree.

Since last fall, Toner said, the US has been working proactively with Karzai on issue of private security companies.

Karzai noted his concerns about the companies, which he said created a parallel security force, in the speeches he gave at the London and Kabul conferences in January and July respectively.

The companies mainly provide security for NATO convoys, embassies and international non-governmental groups.

Were still gathering information about the decree and how it would specifically affect the United States and our contracts with private companies, and well continue to work with the Afghan government, Toner said.

The Pentagon has also supported Karzais decision but raised concerns about the deadline. "We share a common goal with president Karzai, and that is the elimination of the need for private security contractors in Afghanistan. But while we share that goal, we also recognize that Afghanistan presents a daunting security challenge," Pentagon spokesman, Bryan Whitman, told reporters.

With respect to a timeline of four months, obviously that's a very aggressive timeline, and it's one that our forces, our commanders, as well as the State Department and ambassador, will be working with the government of Afghanistan to achieve what we believe is a common goal," Whitman said.

There is a strong desire among the international community for Afghanistan's government to reach the point of managing security in its own country, he said. Ultimately, we all look forward to the day that the security environment is such when you don't need private security contractors, that the security of the country can be secured by the armed forces and police forces of Afghanistan," Whitman added.

US military to stay longer in Afghanistan

Niamatullah Zafarzai - Aug 18, 2010 - 20:36

KABUL (PAN): US Senator John Kerry has said the United States will not withdraw its troops until the Afghan forces are able to defend the country.

Kerry expressed these views during a visit to the southern province of Kandahar on Wednesday,

a statement issued by NATO's media office in Kabul said.

US ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and US forces top commander in Afghanistan General David Patreus were accompanying the senator.

Kandahar governor Toryalai Wessa briefed the visiting delegation about the security situation in the province, the statement said.

Wessa said Kandahar was one of the important provinces, where situation was different from other parts of the country.

The governor demanded of the delegation that the US troops should stay in Afghanistan until the formation of Afghan National Army was completed.

He told the delegation the people of Kandahar City needed power supply and the US government should provide 20 megawatt plant to ensure smooth power supply to the residents.

Eikenberry said their stay in Afghanistan was for a longer time and the United States wanted long-term relations with Afghanistan. He said the US government would continue supporting Afghanistan until the country stood on its own feet.

The statement said the education department officials of the Kandahar province demanded of the US delegation to launch special scholarships for Afghan students. Health department officials asked for the construction of a hospital in the province.

Obama establishes Pakistan, Afghanistan support office

Lalit K Jha - Aug 19, 2010 - 11:31

WASHINGTON (PAN): The US president Barack Obama issued an executive order establishing a Pakistan and Afghanistan Support Office to help streamline projects in the region.

The new office would replace the existing Afghanistan Support Office and its maximum term will be three years, according to the order issued on Wednesday.

The role of the Pakistan and Afghanistan Support Office, or PASO, will be to support executive departments and agencies in strengthening governments in the two countries, enhance the capacity of governments to resist extremists and maintain an effective US diplomatic presence in both countries.

PASO, to be headed by an official at director level, will be a temporary unit within the state department.

It will work to promote a more capable, accountable and effective government in Afghanistan that serves the Afghan people and eventually can function, especially regarding internal security, with limited international support, and to stimulate an economy that will provide licit opportunity for the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the executive order said.

PASO will be based in Washington, Kabul and Islamabad.

Social Headlines

800 Afghans to get vocational training

Frozan Rahmani - Aug 15, 2010 - 16:31

KABUL (PAN): The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled announced on Sunday 800 people would be provided vocational training in five provinces as part of efforts to alleviate poverty in the country.

The project would be implemented in Logar, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Khost and Nimroz provinces, said Minister of Labour Amina Afzali. She added two private companies, Naween and Danish, would train 800 people in masonry, painting, wiring, packaging, carpentry and mechanics.

She said the project was for vulnerable individuals such as internally displaced people, the jobless and the returnees. Women and families of war victims and martyrs would be trained under the six-month project. She said the project, costing 18 million afghanis, was being funded by the World Bank and the ministry.

Currently, 53 percent of Afghan population is jobless, with 36 percent living below the poverty line. The ministry says more than 300,000 Afghans have so far received vocational training.

But 25-year-old Sultan Mahmood is pessimistic about such trainings. A painter, he comes to the Haji Yaqub Square daily in the hope to find a job. "This project is of no use. Even if thousands are trained daily, there will be no jobs for them."

The 10th grade student believes the creation of jobs is the only way to overcome poverty in the country.

But Afzali branded the training programme as an opportunity for the jobless. He said they planned to assist 40,000 poor families in Badghis, Logar and Badakhshan provinces in the coming winter. The project will cost 90 million afghanis and each family will be provided with \$200 in cash.

Afghanistan tops food insecurity index

Thu, 19 Aug 2010 03:37:12 GMT

The war-torn Afghanistan has been ranked top for having the world's least-secure food supplies, according to a survey of 163 nations.

The UK risk assessment company Maplecroft released the Food Security Risk Index 2010 on Thursday.

"The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan impacts infrastructure readiness, and the capability for distribution of supplies is greatly reduced," Fiona Place, an environmental analyst at Bath, England-based Maplecroft said.

Since the 2001 US-led invasion, the people of Afghanistan have been under severe conditions and security has not returned to the state.

The survey was based on indicators such as rates of malnutrition, cereal production and imports, gross domestic product per capita, natural disasters, conflicts and political violence, water insecurity, and the effectiveness of government.

Based on the index published, Afghanistan, ranking first, is followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, Liberia, Chad and Zimbabwe, completing the top-10 list of nations with the least secure food supply.

"Of 50 nations most at risk, 36 are located in Africa," said Fiona Place.

According to the index, Finland had the most secure food supplies, followed by Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Canada, and the United States.

Crack in mountain worries officials

Gul Muhammad Tanha - Aug 18, 2010 - 15:36

FAIZABAD (PAN): A huge crack in a mountain near the historic Shiwa Lake in northeastern Badakhshan province has fuelled concerns that it may cause death and destruction.

The crack was getting wider day by day, the director of the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) told Pajhwok Afghan News.

Sanaullah Amiri said the fissure was 270 metres long and 70 metres wide; it has broadened considerably over the past one month.

Lake Shiwa, 14 metres long and three metres wide, is located near Amu River in Shaghnan district and the cracked mountain is just two kilometres north of the lake.

Several springs inside the mountain contributed greatly to widening the gap. Officials fear the water may head to the lake, raising its level and eventually joining Amu River. If this happens, thousands of families in Afghanistan and Tajikistan will be washed away.

However, Amiri said a joint team of Afghan and Tajik geologists had been working to find out the long-term impact of the opening.

According to a preliminary study of the joint team, the crack would be wide enough in four years from now and the springs would start flowing into the lake, inundating nearby villages.

The fracture was "alarming", the provincial executive director said, fearing a full opening would wreak havoc in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Sibghatullah Khaksari said recent downpour and snowfall were to blame for the widening of the crack.

Economical Headlines

Afghanistan says finds 1.8 bln barrel oilfield

Reuters

08/15/2010

By Sayed Salahuddin, Andrew Hammond

KABUL - Afghanistan said on Sunday it had discovered an oilfield with an estimated 1.8 billion barrels in the north of the war-ravaged country, where U.S. and other foreign forces are trying to tame a Taliban-led insurgency.

The discovery of the basin between northern Balkh and Shiberghan provinces was made after a survey conducted by Afghan and international geologists, said Jawad Omar, a spokesman for the ministry of mines.

"I do not know its price in the market. But the initial survey says there are 1.8 billion barrels of oil and I think there will be more than what it is estimated," he told Reuters.

He said the country will offer the reserves for developing along with other minerals in the coming months.