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Unhappy prospects for Afghan security

by Simon Roughneen

‘The security situation in Afghanistan is volatile, having seriously deteriorated in certain parts of the country. Attacks on national and international forces and on electoral, government and humanitarian workers and their premises in southern Afghanistan have intensified. At the same time, in a disturbing development, several of the most serious acts of violence since the start of the Bonn process took

place in the north and west of the country, areas that had been considered low-risk’.

A grim assessment surely. Not my words though, nor those of any random pundit or regional expert. These lines are taken from the latest United Nations report of the Secretary General to the Security Council and the General Assembly on the current situation in Afghani-

MAIN POINTS

Internal security in Afghanistan is in peril: militias have not disarmed, narcotics are becoming a staple of the economy, and the upcoming elections are poorly organised and open to manipulation. Solutions – from short term military assistance to targeted economic development – are not being implemented.

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stan and its implications for international peace and security. Though, it must be said, the report does not say a whole lot on the international impact of the situation in Afghanistan today.

Serious as these are, it might be just as well. Afghanistan's internal situation is enough of a problem of itself to deal with for now. And enough for the international community to be thinking about as it ponders how to create even a façade of stability in Afghanistan ahead of the coming Presidential elections.

A crucial aspect of the Bonn Process aimed at recreating a viable Afghan state, 23 candidates will contest the elections – including the incumbent Hamid Karzai. What should be the icing on the cake for the reestablishment of an Afghanistan minus civil conflict and sponsoring of terrorism, plus ethnic and gender parity and sound post-conflict reconstruction and development prospects now appears more like a volatile magnet for warlord rivalries and terrorist attacks by recidivist Taliban and al-Qaeda spoilers.

Why? Well, much of what should have happened due to Bonn has not taken place. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of militias is running behind schedule – just over 20% at the lat-

est UN estimate, and this being based on a positive interpretation of the statistics to hand. Of course, this does include the former Taliban and al-Qaeda elements who fled to the border areas of Pakistan in the wake of the US led invasion of Afghanistan in the winter of 2001.

As the latest SG report says, 'the provision of adequate security for the Presidential elections is essential'. However, it may well be that the staging of the elections in themselves will be achievement enough for a US administration firmly focused on its own re-election and the continuing debacle that is Iraq. Recent reports suggest that neither NATO nor the US forces in Afghanistan will play direct role in providing security at voting centres, leaving the task to the embryonic Afghan National Army, and causing international organisations to cancel observation missions due to lack of security guarantees.

A successful election based on a credible ANA deterrent would provide a good soundbite for Bush in the run-up to the elections - evidence of US and allied ability to aid the reestablishment of a functioning state in an occupied country. However, given the ongoing capability of what are apparently al-Qaeda operatives to hinder the pre-election process

in the south of the country, it remains to be seen whether the ANA – or al-Qaeda and/or the Taliban - will provide the Bush administration with the positive spin it wants.

What is needed in Afghanistan – both now for the elections and for the immediate and long-term security of the country – is men and money. More NATO troops for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and a lot more money for the reestablishment of a working political and economic system. Although US\$11.5 billion was promised by donors at Berlin, donors have historically failed to meet pledges in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Even if this target is met, it may not be enough. Other estimates point to a figure of US\$39 billion as the minimum needed over the 6-7 year time-period for reconstruction.

Security in Afghanistan requires focused developmental assistance, as an Afghanistan now producing 3,600 tonnes of opium - three-quarters of the world's supply in other words - will never be secure. Speaking in Kabul recently, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters that Pentagon planners were developing a counter-narcotics master-plan for Afghanistan. However, given that money and men are not forthcoming, it is hard

to see how any counter-narcotics plan can work. Farmers grow opium to feed their families. Warlords dominate the trade to maintain their political and military dominance in their own fiefdoms. Given that the invasion of Afghanistan depended greatly on the likes of Rashid Dostum, Ismael Khan and Mohammed Fahim, and that their militias play a part in the continuing campaign against what remains of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the US was not and is not sufficiently motivated to dismantle the rival factions.

The lack of prioritisation here can be seen in the DDR figures – and in the fact that the warlords mentioned are all candidates in the forthcoming election. Indeed, Fahim, as Minister for Defence, was the official responsible for implementing DDR. Poacher turned gamekeeper. Moreover, as Dr. Susanne Schmeidl, who works for Swisspeace in Kabul, told me, security for the elections is being handled by local governors (ie warlords) in some cases – severely compromising the 'free and fair' aspirations for the election.

So if the Pentagon is serious about a counter-narcotics plan, what they must really mean is that they plan to tackle the powerful warlords that dominate Afghanistan outside Kabul and whose representatives form most of the Transi-

tional Administration headed by Karzai. However this would either require the warlords to voluntarily cede their political, military and economic, or means a significant upgrading of the ISAF peace-keeping presence along with more US troops. What Rumsfeld means is as unclear as such an outcome is likely. As a recent UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Foreign Affairs report said, 'taking on the commanders is neither sensible nor a realistic option in the short to medium term'.

Of course, it is not just drugs and warlordism that compromise security in Afghanistan. Neither had any apparent role in the murder of 5 MSF staff in the north of the country on June 5. A negative assessment of the prevailing security situation contributed to MSF's recent decision to withdraw its operations in the country, which had persisted throughout the Soviet occupation, 1992-6 civil war as well as throughout the Taliban regime. As ISAF remains undermanned and reconstruction remains underfunded, former Taliban and perhaps al-Qaeda elements continue to attack aid workers, western and Afghan troops as well as locals involved in the electoral process – particularly in former Taliban strongholds around Kandahar.

Hamid Karzai is in Pakistan this week – seeking assurances from Pervez Musharraf that the Pakistan army and the Inter Services Intelligence will prevent Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorist attacks during the election. Although Pakistan authorities have netted a number of top al-Qaeda operatives over the summer, the same period has seen an upsurge in terrorist acts - in number of attacks attempted and geographic spread. The prospect of a Presidential election to undermine will surely prove a tantalising prospect for the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

So, real security seems to be an unlikely prospect for Afghanistan anytime soon. Hardly surprising - after all, Afghanistan has seen little but wars since 1979. What is surprising however, is that a failed state that produced the Taliban, feeds the habits of millions of heroin addicts around the world and sheltered the organisation responsible for 9-11, can be allowed to drift back into anarchy. The upcoming Presidential elections – both in the US and Afghanistan – will have a big say in how this drift is halted.

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