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Afghanistan's Unrelenting Challenges

War-ravaged Afghanistan has made significant progress toward rebuilding in the last two years. Hamid Karzai's government presided over a Loya Jirga (grand council) that approved a constitution in January 2004. It has made progress in securing Kabul and creating a new army, but security is still its biggest challenge. It needs to establish itself as the major power center in the country and prepare for elections. The recently concluded Berlin conference brought in pledges of $8.2 billion, substantial but less than Karzai had requested. The international community will therefore continue to play a vital part in Afghanistan's recovery.

Security First: The government's weakness outside Kabul has allowed the remnants of Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami to reorganize. Since January, there have been at least 32 attacks targeting foreign soldiers, aid workers from the United States and Europe, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Afghans working for them. The recent surge in guerrilla attacks following a U.S. military offensive against insurgent elements in the mountainous regions of the southeast illustrates the problem.

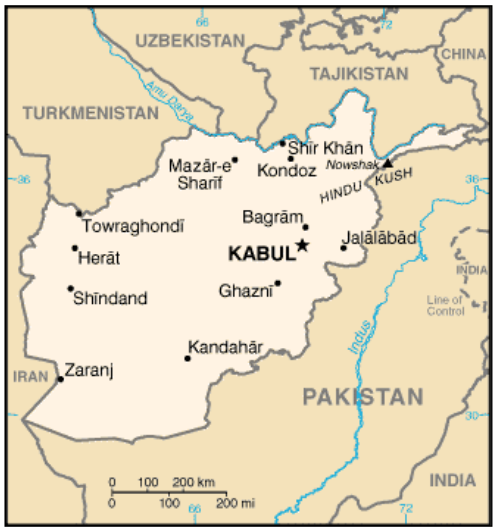
Afghanistan has two kinds of foreign military presence. Some 5,500 NATO peacekeepers have had considerable success in enhancing security in Kabul. A small contingent is working in Kunduz. But their mandate and numbers are limited. In addition, about 14,000 U.S.-led coalition forces are in Afghanistan, mainly to conduct military operations like the one near the Pakistani border in February and March.

The United States has also deployed "Provincial Reconstruction Teams" (PRTs) to about 12 sites, in an effort to expand security and promote reconstruction outside the capital. Each 30-100 person team is commanded by a senior U.S. military officer and includes personnel from Special Forces, Civil Affairs, Army Engineers, the State Department, USAID, and other agencies involved in assistance. The hope is that the PRTs will eventually also include Afghan soldiers and government officials. They have been well received, but still represent a relatively small resource.

The government came to office with no effective security force, in contrast to an estimated 100,000 well-armed militias available to local warlords. So far, approximately 7,500 men have been trained for the new Afghan National Army by the cooperative efforts of the United States, Britain, and France. Germany trained 2,000 policemen in 2003. The government expects to have over 10,000 personnel in the Afghan National Army and 20,000 in the police force by June 2004.

Dealing with the Warlords: At the heart of government and politics in Afghanistan is the power that regional warlords wield in the countryside. Important warlords, especially in northern Afghanistan, received U.S. funding and support during the war in 2001. The United States has continued to work with some of them in the fight against Al Qaeda in rural Afghanistan. At the same time, several warlords use narcotics trade to help maintain their control and fund their private militias. A number of them have grim records of human rights abuse and violence.

The government needs to establish enough authority over the warlords to enforce its own decisions. Karzai's administration, like others in the past, has tried to do this by a combination of cooption, negotiation, maneuvering, and tests of strength. Several important positions in the government have gone to warlords with a strong geographic base. Vice President and Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim is a powerful Tajik leader from Panjshir. Vice President Karim Khalili is a Hazara warlord from Bamiyan. They have repeatedly assured the government of their loyalty, but continue to treat their home areas as tightly controlled power bases.



From CIA World Factbook

Last month, an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Ismail Khan, the principal local leader in Herat, and the subsequent assassination of his son, led to violent clashes in which about 200 people were killed.

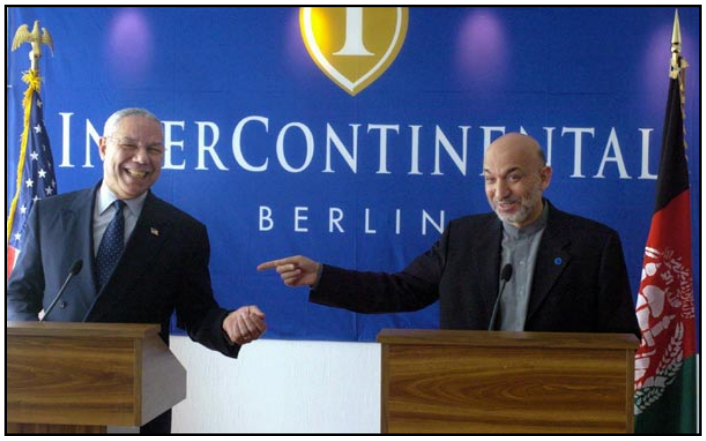
According to newspaper reports, Karzai has sent forces from the National Army to Herat against Ismail Khan's wishes to restore order. They gave a good initial account of themselves. If this forceful response holds up, it could be a sign that the government is beginning to shift the power balance.

Ethnic Rivalry: The largest of Afghanistan's groups, the Pashtuns, represent between 38 and 60 percent of the population, depending on whose figures you believe. They have historically dominated Afghan politics. President Karzai is a

Pashtun. In the early days of his government, non-Pashtuns—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turkmen—were prominent largely because of the important role they played in opposing the Taliban. More recently, the number of Pashtuns in the cabinet has increased, and Karzai has been working to shore up his support among Pashtuns.

The new constitution became one more episode in the struggle of Afghanistan's ethnic leaders to improve their positions. Karzai pushed hard for a presidential government, arguing that present circumstances in Afghanistan call for strong central control. This issue galvanized Pashtun support for Karzai. Non-Pashtun leaders put aside their normal differences in an effort to insist on a parliamentary form of government, fearing that Karzai's likely election as president would give dominance to Pashtuns. The presidential system ultimately won out, but ethnic dissatisfaction provided an opportunity for regional leaders to further their factional politics.

Preparing for Elections: Elections for a new president and parliament, the final phase of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, were scheduled for June 2004. If these first post-Taliban elections are seen as free and fair, and if the result is a government perceived as broadly representative, they will build trust in the new system and start to bring contenders into the political process. If not, the elections could exacerbate the country's political divisions.



Secretary Colin Powell and Afghan President Hamid Karzai during their press conference at the second international donor meeting in Berlin recently. Politicians from 56 states discussed the rebuilding of the war-torn country and financial aid. (Credit: AP Photo from Dept. of State website)

In March 2004, Karzai announced that he was postponing both elections until September 2004. This was a wise but painful decision, since Karzai had attached great importance to meeting the Bonn schedule. Only about 15 percent of an estimated 10.5 million eligible voters have registered so far, most of them in Kabul and other urban areas.

Registration and arranging for polling stations are the main requirements for a presidential election. A parliamentary election is more complicated: it requires delimitation of constituencies, establishment of constituency-based voter rolls, and a decision on whether elections will involve single-member constituencies or a more complex system of proportional representation by regions. The original plan to hold both elections simultaneously was intended to insure proper checks on presidential power, an important consideration against the background of Afghanistan's ethnic politics. But some observers argue that parliamentary elections should be delayed further, since the requirements for parliamentary elections may not be met by September 2004.

Rebuilding the Economy: With a per capita income of $200—one of the lowest in the world—around 70 percent of the 22 million people in Afghanistan live in extreme poverty. According to the World Bank, over 2 million refugees have returned home since 2001. As many as 3.4 million could return in coming years, mostly from Pakistan and Iran. There are an estimated 500,000 disabled or injured. About 500,000 people are internally displaced. The economy needs to accommodate refugees, disarmed militiamen, and widows, numbering in the millions. Many of these people are illiterate, unskilled, and lack initial capital to start a business. These numbers point to a smoldering volcano that could erupt with unrest and anarchy.

In 2002, Afghanistan produced an estimated 3,400 metric tons of opium worth about $2.5 billion dollars—more than half of the country's official GDP. According to one report, over 1.5 million Afghan people are involved in some aspect of this trade. To discourage opium production, the country needs to provide not only effective law enforcement but also alternative sources of income. One way to develop alternatives is through microfinance schemes for small businesses and rural families, such as the ones introduced by NGOs like BRAC-Afghanistan.

Many observers have talked about reviving the trade routes linking Afghanistan to Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In the short term, trade potential is limited. Reintegrating Afghanistan into world trade starts with a major rebuilding of its infrastructure and human capital, primarily in telecommunications, roads, education, skills training, health, water, and sanitation sectors. A gas pipeline would be a major economic and political investment, but it could provide an alternative route to the world market for Central Asian energy resources. None of these investments will bear fruit without a major improvement in security.

Integrating Government Power, Security and Economics: The problems of security, warlords, ethnic rivalries, and economic reconstruction are closely intertwined, as are the measures Afghanistan needs to take to address them. The UN-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program (DDR), intended to provide alternative employment to militias, needs to be revitalized. But even with a major effort to create a new army and demobilize militias, the short-term security task requires a stronger peacekeeping presence not just in Kabul but also in towns around the country.

At the same time, Afghanistan's external donors need to help the Karzai government use foreign aid as a strategic resource, by giving the central government a role in the allocation of aid outside Kabul and, equally importantly, by giving high priority to security on the roads and in provincial towns, so that the aid can get to its destination. The most difficult challenge is creating an effective antinarcotics program, both to remove Afghanistan

from the criminal economy and to eliminate a lucrative source of income for warlords determined to challenge the central government.

Afghanistan in 2001 inherited a dysfunctional society torn by more than two decades of armed conflict. Stable civil and economic institutions are vital to insure lasting peace and an enduring political order in Afghanistan. These include an independent judiciary, vigorous media and NGOs that include space for women and minorities, and an education system.

Calling All Nations: President Karzai has repeatedly asked the international community for a long-term commitment of funds and attention. The Afghan government requested $27.5 billion for the next seven years (about $4 billion per year) in the Berlin conference held in March-April 2004. The conference pledged $8.2 billion for three years (averaging $2.73 billion per year).

The 2001 war in Afghanistan and the Bonn conference that followed were a joint effort of the United States and other UN member countries. The 2003 war in Iraq took the international spotlight off Afghanistan. The world has a large stake in the success of Afghanistan's complex rebuilding effort; even with the difficult prospects for Iraq, it cannot shortchange Afghanistan.

Aun Ali and Teresita Schaffer

For additional information on the status of reconstruction efforts, please see the report from the CSIS Post Conflict Reconstruction Project: "Afghanistan: Preventing a Return to a Failed State," at http://csis.org/isp/pcr/0403_AfghanistanReport.pdf

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