

A focus for imperialist intrigue

Civil war erupts again in Afghanistan

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Fierce fighting has erupted in Afghanistan between the Taliban fundamentalist Islamic militia and opposition forces led by Ahmed Shah Masood. Over the last three weeks, the conflict has left hundreds dead and driven tens of thousands people from their homes. It has the potential to trigger broader regional strife as neighbouring countries and the major powers intervene to shore up their interests in the area.

The clashes began on July 28 when the Taliban government launched its summer offensive, backed by tanks, artillery and fighter aircraft, against Masood's remaining strongholds—in the Panjsher Valley, 50 miles north of the capital Kabul, and the two northeastern provinces. After early Taliban successes, Masood counter-attacked, regaining towns in the Shomali plains north of Kabul, and, in the north, restoring his supply lines to neighbouring Tajikistan. The latest reports indicate that the fighting in the Shomali plains may again be turning in favour of the Taliban.

According to some observers, at least 1,000 soldiers have died so far. Estimates put the number of refugees at anywhere between 100,000 and 300,000. According to the UN, around 10,000 people arrived in Kabul in just two days at the end of last week—many were dehydrated, destitute and carrying only a few belongings. The UN also claims to have confirmed reports that the Taliban have driven villagers from opposition-controlled areas and burned their homes.

The Paris-based charity Medecins du Monde appealed last Friday for food aid for 150,000 Afghans who had fled the fighting into the Panjsher Valley. Spokesman Doctor Guy Causse said the impoverished population in the valley did not have the resources to cope with the large influx of refugees. According to the agency, another 200,000 to 300,000 people had escaped to northern Afghanistan.

The exodus of refugees will further compound the country's economic and social crisis. A report released by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP) in early June predicted that more than one million people in Afghanistan would need relief over the next 18 months because of a sharp reduction in cereal production. The FAO/WFP estimates that cereal production will fall by 16 percent this year due to bad climatic conditions, increased pest infestation, and a turn by farmers from wheat to more lucrative cash crops.

The Taliban, who presently control more than 80 percent of the country, launched their offensive after the failure of UN-sponsored talks in the Uzbekistan capital of Tashkent last month to produce any agreement. The so-called Six-plus-Two negotiations included representatives from Afghanistan's six neighbours—Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—as well as Russia and the US.

On August 5, the UN Security Council condemned the Taliban offensive, demanding a halt to the fighting and a resumption of talks, and threatening to impose sanctions. A UN statement expressed concern at “reports of massive foreign assistance in support” of the offensive. Last Friday UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called on countries bordering Afghanistan to honour a pledge to keep out of the civil war, lest it become a “trans-national conflict”.

These statements are also directed against Pakistan, one of the few governments to extend official recognition to the Taliban government. Although Islamabad officially denies providing assistance to the Kabul regime, it is an open secret that the Taliban recruits in Pakistan for its militia and receives support and training from Pakistan military intelligence and “retired” officers.

The Taliban, who seized power in Kabul in September 1996 with the backing of Pakistan and the tacit support of the US, had their origins among students in Islamic seminaries in Pakistan. Having ousted the government of president Burhannudin Rabbani, the Taliban set about imposing their own version of deeply conservative Islamic law, including public executions and amputations, a ban on women and girls going to school or having a job, restrictions on the access of women to health care, and the outlawing of television, film and popular music.

While the Taliban are based among Pashtuns and the Sunni Islamic sect, Masood's Northern Alliance is largely drawn from Afghanistan's ethnic Tajiks. Prior to the Taliban offensive last year, which captured the key northern towns of Maimana, Shiberghan and Mazar-i-Sharif, the opposition forces also included the Jombesh-i-Isami with support among the Uzbek minority, and the Hezb-i-Wahdat based among the ethnic Hazaris who are predominantly members of the Shi'a sect of Islam. Masood, who was Defence Minister in the Rabbani government, now forms the main opposition to the Taliban.

The Clinton administration has reacted sharply against the latest Taliban military attacks. On August 3, US State Department spokesman James Rubin said the US was “deeply distressed” that “after agreeing to a peaceful solution... the result was the Taliban went straight to the battlefield and has taken additional military steps”. In what amounted to a veiled threat, Rubin added that the Taliban was “deluded” if it thought it could win the country's civil war.

The US military and intelligence agencies were deeply involved with Pakistan in arming, funding and training the mujahideen fighters drawn from the large Afghan exile community that eventually toppled the Soviet-backed government of president Najibullah in 1992. But the old Cold War alliances on the Indian sub-continent—US-backed Pakistan and Soviet-aligned India—are breaking up as the major powers pursue new strategic interests.

Although it did not initially oppose Pakistan's support for the Taliban, the US has recently come into conflict with the Kabul regime, mostly sharply over claims that Saudi exile Osama bin Laden was responsible for last year's bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. After launching cruise missile attacks on bin Laden's alleged training bases in Afghanistan last August, the Clinton administration demanded that the Taliban hand over the Saudi millionaire to US authorities for trial.

On July 6, the Clinton administration imposed economic sanctions on Afghanistan, barring Americans from trading with or investing in the country, and this month froze the US assets of the Ariana Afghan Airlines. Rumours have been circulating in newspapers in Pakistan and Saudi

Arabia that US special forces units have been preparing in Peshawar in northern Pakistan for a raid to seize bin Laden—a claim the Islamabad government denies. The Jamiat-e Ulema Islami (JUI) party in Pakistan, which is closely connected to the Taliban, threatened a “war against Americans” if the US launched any military assault inside Afghanistan.

Behind US demands for the extradition of bin Laden, however, are broader concerns. Along with Russia, China and the European powers, the Clinton administration fears that the victory of the fundamentalist Taliban in Afghanistan will fuel political instability within the region, particularly in the republics of Central Asia, which are the focus of a scramble by US, European and Japanese corporations to exploit the huge reserves of gas, oil and other minerals.

The cover story of the August 5 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* entitled “Heart of Darkness” spelt out the increasingly hostile attitude of the major powers towards the Kabul regime. “As the Taliban launch a new offensive against opposition forces, the threat which this Islamic regime poses to regional stability has gone unnoticed. Terrorists fighting the governments of virtually every Central Asian power find shelter with the Taliban. An equally dangerous by-product is the criminal economy supported by the Taliban, which spreads weapons and drugs throughout the region.”

According to the magazine, Afghanistan has become a sanctuary for “armed insurgents accused of terrorist attacks in China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan”. Some 400 Arab Islamic militants from a dozen Middle Eastern and African countries are said to be part of the 055 Brigade, funded by Osama bin Laden and fighting alongside the Taliban in the current offensive. “The diverse groups have their own agendas, mainly focussed on undermining the regimes at home, but some share bin Laden’s zeal for a global Islamic revolution. The resulting web of dangerous friendships threatens to export instability throughout the mineral-rich and commercially under-exploited hinterland of Central Asia.”

In an article heavily laden with hearsay and unnamed sources, it is difficult to find the line between truth and self-interested invention. It is certainly true that Islamic groups pose a danger to the unstable regimes that govern the Central Asian republics established in the early 1990s following the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. No doubt there are also some links to Islamic fundamentalists within Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It would be no surprise that the Taliban regime is supportive of opposition groups in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, both of which are used to supply military aid to Masood’s forces in Afghanistan.

But when the international media begin to see the hand of the Taliban, or more particularly bin Laden, behind every regional conflict from Dagestan to Kashmir and the Islamic rebels in Central Asia and western China, it indicates a rationale is being developed for more direct intervention by the US and other major powers into Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. After all, the Clinton administration has already fired cruise missiles on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Via NATO, the US is involved in military aid arrangements with some of Kabul’s neighbours in Central Asia although they are still nominally part of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In May, Radio Free Europe reported a visit by a US delegation led by Stephen Sestanovich, the State Department special envoy for the Newly Independent States, to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent to sign security agreements—one on “combatting terrorism” and a second on cooperation between the Pentagon and the Uzbekistan Defence Ministry. Under NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, US soldiers have taken part in exercises in Central Asia for the past two years, and Uzbek troops, part of a Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion, were due to fly to the US in the northern summer, for further training.

While the potential exists for huge profits from the exploitation of the Central Asian oil and gas reserves, the major corporations are clearly

concerned about the political stability of a region that is economically backward, and riven with ethnic and religious divisions now being exploited by the small ruling cliques of ex-Stalinist bureaucrats, nascent entrepreneurs and criminal elements in each of the republics. Tajikistan has already been torn apart by a five-year civil war that only subsided in 1997. Earlier this year the Uzbek capital of Tashkent was hit by a series of bomb attacks, sparking a wave of arrests and repression.

Within this shifting and unstable situation, the major powers are seeking to secure their own strategic interests. Hostility to the Taliban regime may become an axis around which new alliances begin to form. An initial shift in the orientation of the US administration away from Pakistan and towards India has already been seen in the military confrontation in the Kargil region of Kashmir, raising the possibility of a closer cooperation between the US and India on other issues of mutual concern, including the Taliban regime.

In that context, it is worth noting an article that appeared in the *Times of India* in July reporting on the “keen interest” of Indian intelligence agencies in tracking down bin Laden. After pointing out that the “Saudi billionaire-turned-terrorist” was on the United States’ top ten most wanted list, the newspaper stated: “Highly-placed sources said that intelligence agencies were in touch with their western counterparts as bin Laden’s training camps were of special interest to them... Senior intelligence and security officials said that if bin Laden was caught, it would be a stunning blow to the insurgency in Kashmir.”

For much of last century, Afghanistan and the north-west frontier areas of present day Pakistan were the arena of diplomatic manoeuvre, intrigue and betrayal, as well as military invasions and British “punitive expeditions” against recalcitrant tribes. In his own inimitable fashion, the writer Rudyard Kipling gave a name to the fierce rivalry between Britain and Russia for strategic control over the region: the Great Game. A hundred years later, the end of the Cold War arrangements is witnessing the revival of a modern day version in which the players and their relative importance may have altered but the cynicism and ruthlessness with which they pursue their interests, indifferent to the impact on the lives of vast masses of people, has not.



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