

Afghanistan: US sets stage for a massacre in Kunduz

Peter Symonds

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The conditions are being established for a slaughter at Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan. Up to 20,000 Taliban fighters, including several thousand of the Taliban's foreign supporters, are trapped in the city—many of them fled there last week after neighbouring cities such as Mazar-e-Sharif and Taloqan fell to the US-backed Northern Alliance. Apart from the southern city of Kandahar, it is the last significant Taliban stronghold.

According to Pakistani newspapers, Taliban leaders inside Kunduz indicated on Monday their willingness to surrender but not to the Northern Alliance, which has already carried out the summary execution of prisoners elsewhere. Taliban commanders indicated that they were prepared to lay down their arms before a UN observer team or a multinational coalition force and hand over the city in return for safe passage.

The US quickly stepped in to scotch any such plan. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he would do everything he could to prevent a negotiated deal to end the stalemate in Kunduz. Referring to the foreign Taliban fighters, he said: "My hope is that they will either be killed or taken prisoner. They're people who have done terrible things." He left any talks up to the Northern Alliance, saying that the US was not inclined to negotiate a surrender.

The UN rapidly followed suit, washing its hand of any involvement in a surrender. Special representative to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi acknowledged that the UN had been contacted by Taliban leaders in Kunduz but was not in a position to agree as it had no forces in the area. He told the press that he would ask his deputy Francesc Vendrell to ask the Northern Alliance to "treat this situation with as much humanity as possible".

As a result, the Northern Alliance will decide the fate of thousands of Taliban fighters. General Mohammed Daud, the Northern Alliance commander on the Kunduz front, has already made his attitude clear. He is prepared to negotiate a deal with Afghan Taliban leaders but has ruled out any talks with "foreign terrorists". He declared last week: "We will not deal with them, they are killers... The foreigners are living between life and death."

Another Northern Alliance commander Pir Muhammad was even more explicit: "These foreigners have killed thousands of

civilians. Their hands are covered with the blood of our people. We will avenge this." He said the Northern Alliance would have no trouble picking out the "terrorists" and foreigners among the thousands of other troops in Kunduz. "We know who the criminals are," he said.

Daud has issued an ultimatum to the Taliban to surrender by Friday or face the consequences. Negotiations are still underway but only with Afghan representatives of the Taliban.

Sketchy details from refugees fleeing Kunduz, which had a population of around 100,000, paint a picture of chaos. The US is continuing to heavily bomb the city on a daily basis. A number of civilians have been killed and injured, including three children who were playing when a bomb hit a nearby house. One refugee, who made clear she did not support the Taliban, said: "People are not happy with the bombing... They say the Americans should bomb the front lines [rather than the city] because our children are being killed."

The international media have highlighted reports that foreign Taliban supporters in Kunduz are preparing to fight to the death and have executed hundreds of Afghan deserters. The press routinely identifies all foreigners with Osama bin Laden, the alleged perpetrator of the September 11 attacks, and his Al Qaeda network. Within Afghanistan, US propaganda transmitted in local languages by radio from US planes reinforces the same message, exhorting Afghans to drive the "foreign terrorists" out of the country.

The majority of "foreigners" fighting alongside the Taliban, have not, however, been recruited by bin Laden. Many are supporters of Islamic fundamentalist parties in Pakistan. Some are not even trained fighters but raw recruits who joined in recent weeks after being incensed by the US attacks on Afghanistan. Mahsood Ali, 22, held prisoner by the Northern Alliance in a squalid jail in Taloqan is one such "foreign terrorist". He came to Afghanistan from Peshawar three weeks ago with three of his friends. They are all dead and, clearly fearing for his own life, he told a *Time* reporter: "I think I made a mistake coming to Afghanistan."

The exact composition of Taliban forces in Kunduz is unclear. Even General Daud, however, who claims that there are more than 10,000 foreign fighters in the city, says that only 1,000 are connected to Al Qaeda network. According to him, at

least two-fifths are Pakistanis and the remainder are from Central Asia and the Middle East. The purpose of branding all foreign Taliban as “terrorists” is obvious: it is to justify in advance any slaughter that takes place in Kunduz and elsewhere.

The fate being prepared for the “foreign terrorists” is evident in neighbouring Mazar-e-Sharif, just 200 kilometres to the west of Kunduz. The entry of the Northern Alliance into Mazar-e-Sharif on November 9 was the start of the rapid collapse of Taliban across the country.

Reports soon began to emerge that the Northern Alliance had murdered Taliban fighters. On November 14, UN spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker, speaking in Islamabad, confirmed reports that 100 Taliban had been killed by Northern Alliance troops. “I don’t know whether we can say they’re out of control and running amok,” she said. The Northern Alliance denied the accusation, claiming that the Taliban had not surrendered but were killed in the course of fighting.

More details have now begun to emerge. A *Time* journalist who entered Mazar-e-Sharif last week pieced together the story from local Northern Alliance commanders, their fighters and civilian eyewitnesses. According to this account, some 900 Pakistanis were left behind by the Taliban as they fled the city. Northern Alliance troops found them holed up in a former girls schools, which they used as their garrison. Fighting broke out when they refused to surrender.

The following day, two US fighter bombers were called in and, guided by “spotters,” scored two direct hits on the front of the school, killing scores of those inside. A crowd of onlookers gathered outside the school. Some called on the Pakistanis to give themselves up, others chanted “Kill the tourists”—a contemptuous reference not only to their recent arrival but also their fighting skills.

The bitterness stems from a legacy of atrocities in Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban first took the city in 1997 but provoked a local uprising with the imposition of their rule, particularly among the ethnic Hazaras whose adherence to the Shiite sect is treated by the Taliban as heresy. The local militia—now part of the Northern Alliance—brutally murdered at least 1,000 Taliban prisoners. The Taliban captured the city the following year, taking their revenge by butchering thousands of Hazaras—men, women and children.

According to the *Time* report, the Pakistanis decided to surrender following the US attack on the school. The Pakistanis could hear the chants of the crowd. “But they shouted back that they were coming out to be arrested. Alliance soldiers waited until more than 100 had emerged, eyewitnesses say, then opened fire. Most of the Taliban soldiers were cut down as they walked. A handful fought back, scaled the walls and escaped into the city. The Alliance troops gave chase, shooting them as they ran through the streets and pursuing them into nearby houses. The Taliban took several families hostage; eyewitnesses said an unknown number died in the crossfire.”

The standoff continued for several days. On November 12, a number of local mullahs approached the school calling on the troops to surrender. Suspecting another trap, the Pakistanis shot them. The Northern Alliance then attacked the building and set fire to it. Some of the Taliban were taken prisoner when they ran out and immediately put down their weapons. Others were shot in cold blood. The siege finally ended the following day when Northern Alliance troops stormed the building. Of the 900 fighters, only 325 were taken prisoner. Red Cross officials have recovered 400 bodies and 200 remain unaccounted for.

One question remains. What was the US involvement in this atrocity?

For weeks now, hundreds of US special forces troops, military advisers and CIA operatives have been active in Afghanistan. While there is a virtual media blackout on their activities, it has been reported that they have been operating closely with the Northern Alliance and were involved in preparing and planning the offensive against Mazar-e-Sharif. Special forces troops have been engaged in identifying targets and guiding the attacks of US warplanes.

If the cloak of secrecy is ever lifted from this dirty affair, there are some obvious questions. How closely were US advisers involved in planning the Northern Alliance offensive against Mazar-e-Sharif and what were the orders in relation to Taliban prisoners? Did US military personnel accompany Northern Alliance troops in the capture of the city and in what capacities? Who were the “spotters” that brought in the air strikes against the Taliban-held school on November 10?

Whatever the direct US involvement, US spokesmen have made no strong protest against this massacre or the summary execution of Taliban prisoners elsewhere by Northern Alliance troops. This tacit approval gives the green light to the US-allied warlords to carry out further atrocities.



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