A year after the fall of Kabul

Afghanistan mired in poverty, insecurity and despotic rule

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30 November 2002

It is a year since the US drove the Taliban regime from power and installed Hamid Karzai as head of an interim administration. The whole process was sanctified at a UN conference of handpicked Afghan "representatives" convened in late November at the Petersberg Castle, a luxury hotel outside the German city of Bonn. There was no shortage of high-blown rhetoric at the time, proclaiming a new period of peace, prosperity and democracy in Afghanistan.

Twelve months later, the promises have proven to be worthless. The economy is in tatters. Much of the international financial aid that was pledged has never materialised. Millions of Afghans live in dire circumstances, lacking adequate food, clean water, clothing, shelter and electricity, let alone access to proper schools and medical services. Most of the country is divided into a patchwork of fiefdoms controlled by competing warlords, militia commanders and tribal chieftains, each intent on expanding their own wealth and power at the expense of their rivals and the vast majority of the population.

In Kabul, Karzai presides over a shaky administration, deeply divided by ethnic and factional rivalries. The only concession to democratic appearances was a stage-managed loya jirga or grand tribal council in June, which rubberstamped Washington's choice of Karzai as interim president. Lacking any significant social base of his own, Karzai is dependent on the major powers, principally the US, for finance, military muscle and political support. His position is so precarious that Washington decided in July to assign a squad of US Special Forces troops to act as his bodyguards.

Karzai's political impotence is manifest whenever he attempts to take any action. In early November, the president announced a purge of corrupt and abusive regional officials. In a display of force designed to show that he, and not the warlords, ruled the country, Karzai ordered the dismissal of some 20 local bureaucrats, military commanders and intelligence chiefs on allegations ranging from drug running to extortion.

The sackings followed a seven-week tour of parts of the country by teams of government inspectors. One of the chief inspectors, Abdullah Anwari, explained to the *Washington Post:* "Everywhere we went, people asked us for help. Our aim was to free the public from tyrannical and illegal behaviour, to annihilate anarchy and strengthen the central government. If we accomplished that, even in a few places, it will be a historic step."

No one seriously believes that the purge did anything to end "tyrannical behaviour" or "annihilate anarchy". Cabinet minister Yusuf Pashtoon explained that the aim of the exercise had never been to challenge the regional warlords. "Some people wanted the big fish caught immediately, but this is an important first step in a 100-mile walk. By going after some really bad apples, and promoting some good ones, we hope the higher-ups will take notice and correct themselves," he said.

All the major regional powerbrokers have representatives in Karzai's cabinet and have no intention of voluntarily giving up their power. Figures like General Abdul Rashid Dostum in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and Ismael Khan in Herat in the west operate as a law unto themselves, maintaining their own militias, levying taxes and customs and meting out arbitrary punishments as they see fit. And they do so with the tacit approval of the US, which backed, and in some cases financed and armed these warlords as part of its operations to oust the Taliban.

A recent report by the US-based Human Rights Watch describes the situation in the country's west. "Ismael Khan has now created a virtual mini-state in Herat, with little allegiance to Kabul. Herat has remained much as it was under the Taliban: a closed society in which there is no dissent, no criticism of government, no independent newspapers, no freedom to hold open meetings, and no respect for the rule of law. Through 2002, political motivated arrests and violence have been common. In addition to political cases, ordinary criminal detainees have been held for days, beaten severely or tortured, intimidated and insulted."

The Human Rights Watch report explained that the US provided Khan with military and financial assistance in late 2001 and early 2002 and, with Khan's agreement, maintains a base of operations for special forces and other troops near Herat. A string of senior US military and civilian officials have met with Khan, including US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in late April, who described the local despot as "an appealing person... thoughtful, measured and self-confident".

An investigation in any other area would unearth a similar story. In northern Afghanistan, fresh clashes erupted this week between forces loyal to Dostum and those connected to rival warlord General Atta Mohammed. Dostum, an Uzbek, and Mohammed, a Tajik, both worked closely with US forces last year to drive the Taliban out of Mazar-e-Sharif and other northern cities. Since then, however, they have been engaged in a brutal turf war in which scores of fighters have died and thousands of civilians, particularly ethnic Pashtuns, have been driven from their homes.

It is symptomatic of relations in Kabul that in late October, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, rather than an Afghan official, went to Mazar-e-Sharif to attempt to put an end to the feuding through a mixture of bribes and bullying. Khalilzad, who acts as a proconsul dictating US terms in Afghanistan, declared to the press that it was time for the regional commanders to "clarify" whether they wanted to join the government. Given that the US had already suspended aid to northern Afghanistan, Khalilzad's warning could only be construed as implying the threat of military action.

For the past year, Washington has deliberately maintained a chaotic state of affairs to ensure that it retains the whip hand in Afghanistan. While 4,800 multinational peacekeeping soldiers have been confined to Kabul, some 8,000 American troops have been free to roam the country at

will. US officers, CIA agents and other officials have maintained relations with various warlords and local commanders, in some cases supplying them with money and weapons. Large arms caches found by US troops in the hunt for remnants of the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda groups were handed over to local favorites, not to the central administration in Kabul.

Karzai, who has no militia personally loyal to him, commands only the national army, which currently numbers four battalions or about 1,400 soldiers trained over the past year. While they are technically "volunteers," the regional warlords have supplied the vast majority of these soldiers. This tiny force is completely outgunned and outnumbered by an estimated 200,000 militia fighters under the control of various local strongmen.

Earlier this month, General Richard Myers, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, signalled a shift in orientation, when he declared: "I think in a sense we've lost a little momentum there [in Afghanistan], to be frank." In a tacit admission that there is growing hostility to the US military presence, he indicated that the focus would be more on "the reconstruction piece in Afghanistan". The army plans to send 200 civil affairs specialists to carry out small-scale construction projects aimed at winning "hearts and minds".

Clearly there are concerns in Washington that the mounting antagonism to the US military, particularly evident in the southern and eastern Pashtun areas of the country where American forces have been most active, is behind a growing number of sporadic attacks on US troops. Military spokesman Colonel Roger King commented recently: "Someone is getting shot at somewhere just about all the time. There are attacks on us daily. It's low-level. It's disorganised. We don't have proof of who it is. It's not like not like they're card-carrying members of anything."

The discontent and opposition is being compounded by the country's deep economic crisis. After two decades of civil war, much of Afghanistan's industry, agriculture and infrastructure have been destroyed, leaving the country dependent on international economic assistance. Less than half of the $1.8 billion aid promised for this year at a donors' conference in Tokyo in January has eventuated. Overall, $4.5 billion in aid was pledged over five years, less than half the $10 billion that the UN deemed necessary.

The US Congress recently passed legislation magnanimously granting $3 billion in assistance to Afghanistan over the next four years. Of this, $1 billion will be spent on extending the international peacekeeping force beyond Kabul and another $300 million on grants and loans to private businesses. The remaining $425 million a year in recovery projects amounts to just $17 a person a year, and is dwarfed by an estimated $15 billion spent by the US on military operations over the last year.

By comparison, the total Afghan budget, brought down in mid-October, is just $460 million. Lacking any significant sources of revenue of its own, the government is reliant on foreign assistance and is still looking for $90 million or 20 percent of the budget. Public servants, police and soldiers are often without pay, leading to their involvement in bribery, looting and robbery. Outside Kabul, government officials are for the most part left to fend for themselves, placing them at the mercy of local warlords.

Much of the aid and financial assistance is outside the control of the Afghan administration and is directed toward the strategic and economic interests of the US and other major powers. Karzai complained last month that $800 million of the $890 million of the aid spent in Afghanistan had gone to the UN and its mushrooming bureaucracy of associated agencies in Kabul.

Washington has made the reconstruction of the country's national highways linking the major cities and surrounding countries as one of the top priorities and is rounding up some $650 million from donor countries to carry out the project. A decent road system will, of course, have some economic spin-offs for the Afghan population. It will also more closely integrate the country and provide for the more rapid deployment of troops to key troublespots.

But the overriding motive for the road system relates to Washington's ambitions in Central Asia, to secure its domination of the region's vast oil and gas reserves in particular. National highways in Afghanistan will provide reliable road access to landlocked states such as Tajikstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, enable the US to develop its political and economic influence in these countries and undercut their current dependence on US rivals Russia, China and Iran to provide transit routes.

The last item on Washington's list of economic priorities is the welfare of ordinary Afghans. During his visit to Afghanistan this month, US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill stressed the need to create the conditions that "will help fuel the development of the private sector". Apparently oblivious to the squalour in the Afghan capital, O'Neill explained that he had hard pushed for a five-star hotel in Kabul, which he thought "would be a useful addition to the economy".

In Kabul, there is a vast gulf between a miniscule affluent elite and the overwhelming majority of the city's population, which has doubled in size to 2.7 million over the past year. About 600,000 of the estimated 2 million Afghans who have returned from exile over the last year, along with many others from rural areas, have flooded into the capital attracted by its relative peace and the possibility, however slim, of employment.

Most residents face a difficult daily struggle just to survive. The rapid expansion, the proliferating network of UN and other aid agencies and the demands of government agencies have sent rents soaring fivefold, putting decent housing beyond the reach of most. Less than half of housing is electrified, and its supply is subject to frequent blackouts. For the few who can afford it, a generator is the means of ensuring light and heat. While top government and foreign officials are chauffeured around in air-conditioned four-wheel drives, most Kabulis compete for a place in the city's 150 public buses, or walk.

A recent article in the *Washington Post* described the situation: "The cost of living for ordinary Kabulis is spiralling out of control. Most houses and apartments in undamaged districts have become too expensive for even middle-class professionals to afford. Some professionals have reluctantly returned to Pakistan, while others have taken jobs here but left their families abroad.

"In September, the government introduced a new currency, hoping to stabilise prices and exchange rates, but instead its value has plunged against the Pakistani rupee, causing consumer prices to shoot up. Staples such as rice and oil have doubled, while beef has tripled."

At least 100,000 squatters live a marginal existence in the bombed out ruins of houses, without access to water or electricity. They scavenge for firewood and depend on food handouts to survive. Kandi Gul told the *Washington Post*: "My son spends all his time looking for work, and I'm too old to go out. We have no future here, but we don't have enough money to go back to Pakistan either. Only God is keeping us alive."

Outside the capital, conditions are even worse. Many of the two million refugees who have returned this year have nothing on which to survive. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has helped them on their way with money for fares, a bag of flour and a survival package consisting of plastic sheeting, soap and hygiene cloth. Some also received blankets but those are now in short supply.

According to aid agencies, between two and four million Afghans—8 to 16 percent of the population—are considered "highly vulnerable" to the approaching winter and need food, clothing and blankets. In many areas, medical services are rudimentary or non-existent. The country has about 7,000 trained doctors, or one for every 3,500 people. Most are concentrated in the main cities. The country's maternal and child mortality rates are among the worst in the world.

These appalling conditions have created a deep reservoir of discontent and anger. Aid coordinator Rafael Robillard recently commented: "Many

Afghans are waiting for the outside world to come and help them. If aid does not come there might be a crisis for the government. There could be a revolt if the situation continues for another two years like this."

The indifference of the Bush administration and its allies to the misery confronting millions of Afghanis simply underscores the fact that its decision to topple the Taliban and bring Afghanistan under US sway was aimed at securing American interests in the region, not the aspirations of the Afghan population for peace, freedom from oppression and decent living standards.