

An attempt to portray the Afghanistan disaster as a success

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Under pressure from the Bush administration, 65 delegations, representing more than 50 countries and various international institutions, gathered in Berlin on March 31-April 1 to discuss financial aid and assistance to Afghanistan. While publicly, the discussion focussed on the scourges of drugs, poverty, warlordism and “terrorism,” privately, the assembled officials and representatives all knew that Washington’s primary objective, faced with an escalating crisis in Iraq, was to transform Afghanistan into a “success story”—at least, until after the US elections in November.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell hailed the efforts of Washington’s puppet regime in Kabul led by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, declaring: “In just a few short years, with the help of the international community, Afghanistan has gone from a failed state ruled by extremists and terrorists, to a free state with a growing economy and an emerging democracy.” Naturally, none of those present objected or pointed to the obvious gulf between these self-serving claims and reality. Afghanistan remains under US-led military occupation, and mired in extreme poverty.

The financial commitments amounted to just \$8.2 billion over the next three years. The US will provide the largest share—\$2.2 billion in 2004 and \$1.2 billion in 2005—with conference co-sponsors, Japan and Germany, pledging about \$400 million and \$390 million respectively, with lesser amounts from other attendees. The total fell pitifully short of the \$28 billion that a UN-sponsored study, “Securing Afghanistan’s Future”, estimated would be necessary in the next seven years to lift the country’s annual per capita GDP to just \$500 by the year 2015.

For the last two years, Afghanistan has been virtually ignored. Most of the \$4.5 billion promised at the 2002 reconstruction conference in Tokyo has not materialised. A *Washington Post* article noted: “About \$2 billion has been placed in bank accounts for disbursement, with about \$1.8 billion committed to projects that have been started, though not much of that has been spent yet in the country.” The latest offer of aid is not a belated recognition of the plight of ordinary Afghans. It is to assist the Bush administration’s agenda: to prop up Karzai, open up the economy to foreign investment, and paper over the social catastrophe that Washington has helped create.

Veteran American journalist Seymour Hersch outlined the Bush administration’s logic in a recent interview with the *New Yorker* magazine. “The Administration, faced with a problem in Iraq that isn’t going to go away and is not going to get better, determined last year that we would finally begin to spend some of the money that should have been spent right away in Afghanistan.” Hersch noted that there was “tremendous pressure” from the US to ensure that the Afghan elections take place this year, explaining: “The idea is that the

White House will be able to say, ‘Look, we can make democracy... we went to Afghanistan, we’ve got the war, and it’s now a democratic country; it’ll happen in Iraq, too.’”

US claims that “peace” and “democracy” can be imposed at the point of a gun are just as false in Afghanistan as they are in Iraq. Two years after the US-led intervention ousted the Taliban regime, Washington, with the assistance of NATO and the UN, completely dominates the country—politically, militarily and economically. Some 11,500 troops US-led forces remain in the country and have recently been reinforced by 2,000 Marines and special forces units. In another attempt to bolster the Bush re-election campaign, a huge coordinated hunt is underway with Pakistani troops in the mountainous border areas, aimed at capturing or killing top Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders—above all Osama bin Laden.

At the Berlin conference, Powell identified drugs, warlords and criminal elements as major threats. He appealed to US allies for more soldiers to expand the 6,500-strong NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond its operations in Kabul to the establishment of “provincial reconstruction teams” in other centres. Outside the capital, the country is effectively under the control of a multitude of rival warlords, military commanders and tribal chiefs. Even those who have been granted official positions by Kabul operate as a law unto themselves: collecting their own taxes, maintaining large private armies and ruthlessly suppressing any opposition.

Washington is directly responsible for creating this oppressive situation. All of the major warlords trace their origins to the CIA-sponsored tribal and Islamic fundamentalist Mujaheddin fighters who fought against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s. The CIA turned a blind eye to the opium production that escalated dramatically in this period to finance these militias. The present chaos closely resembles the conditions that emerged following the fall of Moscow’s puppet Najibullah in 1992, which the Taliban militia exploited—with the backing of Pakistan and tacitly the US—to come to power in Kabul in 1996.

While Powell now decries the power of the Afghan warlords, the US military and intelligence agencies have shamelessly used these thugs since 2001 to defeat the Taliban and maintain a shaky hold over the country. A number of the “warlords,” or their representatives, hold ministerial posts in the Karzai government, including the key defence post held by General Mohammed Fahim. After the fall of the Taliban, opium production—one of the few lucrative sources of income for the country’s impoverished farmers—has flourished. Estimated output jumped from just 185 tonnes in 2001 to 3,400 tonnes in 2002 and 3,600 tonnes in 2003—or three quarters of the world’s total production. Afghanistan’s opium industry is worth \$2.54 billion annually, or well

over one third of the country's total GDP.

In a recent article in the *New Yorker* entitled "The other war: Why Bush's Afghanistan problem won't go away," Hersch explained: "Despite such statistics, the American military has, for the most part, looked the other way, essentially because of the belief that the warlords can deliver the Taliban and Al Qaeda. One senior NGO official told me, 'Everyone knows that the US military has the drug lords on the payroll. We've put them back in power. It's gone so terribly wrong.'"

Having handed the country over to the warlords, the US now finds they are an obstacle to its ambitions. Efforts are being made to train and arm a centralised Afghan national army and police force. The army, however, is riven with ethnic bias and divisions, suffering from a desertion rate of more than 10 percent last year. With around 7,500 soldiers, it is outmanned and outgunned by some of the larger militias that have Soviet-era tanks and artillery pieces. It is unlikely that key regional powerbrokers will give up their influence without a struggle. Nor will the US, which faces growing armed opposition particularly in the south and east of the country, be able to dispense with their services completely.

Two weeks ago, fighting erupted in the western city of Herat between Ismail Khan and rival General Abdul Zaher Naibzadah who was appointed by Kabul as the regional military commander. The US has criticised Khan for having close political links with Iran, while Karzai is resentful that Khan rakes in an estimated \$300,000 a day in levies on trade with Iran. In the last few days, Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum has overrun Maimana, capital of the northern province of Faryab, after a local commander refused to obey his orders and pledged allegiance to Kabul instead. Afghan army troops have been flown to both cities.

Presidential and parliamentary elections, initially planned for June, have been rescheduled for September. So far only 1.6 million of the estimated 10 million eligible voters have been officially registered, most of those being in the main urban centres.

Like the installation of Karzai, the election process has been stage-managed by the US, with UN support. The vast majority of the Afghan population has had absolutely no say on the constitutional framework or the electoral system. Last June a "loya jirga" or tribal assembly of vetted delegates representing, for the most part, various pro-US factions and warlords, rubberstamped a constitution that vests sweeping powers in the hands of the president—a position that has been earmarked for Karzai.

Karzai, who has close ties with Washington going back to the 1980s, was appointed as president at a UN conference in late 2001. He is completely dependent on US support, right down to the provision of his personal bodyguard. His every step is guided by the US ambassador to Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, who functions much like the British political agents in nineteenth century colonial India, appointed to supervise local maharajas and tribal chiefs.

Every political party, and thus any opponent to Karzai, will be carefully screened before the election. A recent briefing by the International Crisis Group reported that the United National Party (UNP), formed by former members of the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, was yet to be registered, despite being among the first to apply for official status. A party member explained that pressure was being exerted by fundamentalist Islamist leaders to stop it going ahead.

Washington would certainly prefer Karzai to emerge from any election as the winner to legitimise his position. But regardless of

what administration is installed via the poll, it will be completely reliant on the US and the other major powers, politically and economically. One figure highlights the country's economic dependence—the financial projection contained in the "Securing Afghanistan's Future" report for next year's government income from domestic sources. Out of a total budget of \$4.67 billion, just \$300 million will be raised internally—the rest will come from foreign loans and aid.

The UN-sponsored report, drawn up with the assistance of the World Bank and IMF, provides a detailed economic prescription for the next government. "The private sector must be the driver of economic growth, so removing obstacles to private sector development is an urgent priority." The funds allocated from the Berlin conference are to provide the transport, energy, communication and other infrastructure required by foreign investors.

The current average annual per capita income is \$200—one of the lowest in the world. The country ranks below sub-Saharan Africa on most indices: 70 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day; 48 percent of children under the age of five are moderately or severely underweight; the mortality rate for under five-year-olds is 257 per 1,000 births, or over a quarter; and the maternal mortality rate is 1,600 per 100,000 live births. Life expectancy is just 42.8 years.

The report noted: "One aspect of poverty is hunger and poor diet. According to preliminary analysis from a recent household survey, more than half rural Afghans cannot afford a food consumption level of 2,100 calories a day (which defines the poverty level). Poverty is also about lack of access to essential services... like water and electricity (it is estimated that less than 20 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water, only 6 percent to a regular supply of electricity)... It is likely that around one million people in Afghanistan are disabled—about 25 percent due to war and 75 percent due to poverty, inadequate health care, poor nutrition, preventable diseases, congenital defects and accidents."

The money allocated at the Berlin conference will do nothing to alleviate this appalling social crisis. The market agenda being imposed on Afghanistan will only deepen the social divide between a tiny privileged elite, largely based in major urban centres, and the vast majority of the population. The social gulf between rich and poor will only further fuel deep-seated resentments and hostility, and lead to escalating political opposition to the US-led occupation and its puppet regime in Kabul.



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