

The quagmire deepens in Afghanistan

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In the wake of the US elections, the Bush administration has been anxious to affirm there will be no “course correction” in Afghanistan, despite the escalating armed resistance to the US-led occupation of the country.

Visiting the region last week, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher reiterated Washington’s “firm commitment” to the puppet government of President Hamid Karzai. He declared that last week’s US election results and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s resignation would have “no impact” on US military policy in Afghanistan.

Boucher stated that the “mission” in Afghanistan has “very strong support among Republicans and Democrats”. While the Democrats are calling for a shift in tactics in Iraq, there is no suggestion of any change in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan, like that in Iraq, remains a crucial component of US ambitions to secure domination over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

US military spokesmen indicated that American troop levels would remain at about 20,000, half of which are under NATO command. In October, NATO assumed formal responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan, including the south and east where armed opposition by the Pashtun majority is fiercest.

The international media has focussed attention on the crisis confronting the US in Iraq, but Afghanistan is no less of a quagmire. Five years after toppling the Taliban regime in Kabul, none of the Bush administration’s promises has been kept. A profound social crisis compounded by anger over repeated US attacks and abuse of civilians has fuelled an anti-occupation insurgency that has dramatically expanded this year.

A report released on Sunday found that the number of deaths had risen to more than 3,700 since the beginning of the year. The Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, comprising Afghan, UN and coalition officials, estimated that 1,000 of those killed were civilians, but the figure could be much higher. With nothing to distinguish the so-called Taliban from the Afghan population, the military undoubtedly counts many dead civilians as insurgents.

The frequency of attacks on government and NATO-led forces has more than quadrupled since last year to 600 a month. Insurgent groups have also embraced the tactic of suicide bombings, with 106 such attacks as of October 22, with 22 in September alone. This compares to just 17 suicide bombings for all of 2005.

When it committed an extra 3,000 troops to Afghanistan in May, the British government declared that the aim was to complete the three-year mission “without a shot being fired”. Since taking over formal control of the southern provinces in August, NATO troops have been involved in continuous fierce fighting. Since May, 32 British soldiers have been killed—higher than the British toll in Iraq.

Some 2,200 Canadian troops have also been in the frontline. Since 2001, 42 Canadian soldiers have died in Afghanistan—all but 10 this year. Per capita, the figure is higher than any other country in the occupation force. The death toll is the worst suffered by Canadian forces since the Korean War. In both Britain and Canada, public support for the military intervention in Afghanistan has fallen sharply to less than half.

The fighting has produced bitter recriminations inside NATO, with increasingly open criticisms of France, Germany and Italy for failing to provide more troops or allow their forces to be used in the worst conflict areas. NATO has a smaller force than in the Balkans to patrol an area some 60 times larger than Kosovo. An appeal in September for NATO members to provide an additional 2,000 to 2,500 soldiers fell on deaf ears and has still not been met.

NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer last week called for a radical overhaul of all operations—military and civilian—in Afghanistan, saying it was impossible to win “by military means alone”. Italy’s foreign minister Massimo D’Alema has also called for a review, saying “the strategy of military intervention has ... unfortunately... turned out to be ineffective.” US ambassador in Kabul Ronald Neumann recently said the US would have to remain for “multiple years” and spend “multiple billions” to avert failure.

Afghanistan will be high on the agenda of a NATO summit on November 28-29. But while all participants will no doubt agree on the problems, there is unlikely to be any agreement on a strategy.

In many ways, the US-led occupation confronts a crisis that is eerily similar to the disaster faced by the Soviet army in the 1980s. The widely-despised Karzai regime’s influence is largely confined to the capital Kabul, which is no longer immune from attack. In the south and east of the country, government and foreign forces are operating from fortified bases that are under continual attack. Any forays into the countryside are conducted in hostile territory, where insurgents

move freely with considerable local support.

Like the Soviet forces, the US and its allies have established heavily-guarded reconstruction teams, offering limited aid projects with the object of winning “hearts and minds”. These teams are not only subject to attack, but are increasingly regarded as part of the foreign occupation. Far from expanding, aid projects are collapsing. At least 30 aid workers, including from non-government organisations, the UN and humanitarian contractors, have been killed this year.

The *New York Times* reported last week that a recent CIA review found that support for President Karzai had significantly weakened. A separate poll conducted by the US-based Asia Foundation in Afghanistan reported that only 44 percent of the population thought the country was headed in the right direction, compared to 64 percent in its 2004 survey. The mood was the same across all ethnic groups. The study did not include two southern provinces where the security dangers were too high to poll anyone.

Abdul Shakoor, a shopkeeper in the southern city of Kandahar, told the London-based *Times*: “When we saw the Taliban go and the foreign soldiers come we were so full of hope. We were 100 percent sure that, with the world behind it, our government would improve our lives. But now our hopes are crushed. Since then, in this city, we have had three different governors. None of them has done anything for us. Our problems are getting worse.”

In a report released this month, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group stated: “Ordinary people see little change in their everyday lives; and while it is true ... that the [government] institutions are weak or even non-existent, in many cases where they do exist they are so corrupt and predatory that people would rather they were not there at all. Afghanistan continues to rank bottom of the South Asian region in the World Bank’s corruption and rule of law indicators.”

In 2004, the UN Development Program report listed Afghanistan 173rd out of 177 countries. Poverty and unemployment are extensive. Describing the situation outside Kabul, the *Times* article commented: “Kandahar still only has enough electricity for a maximum of six hours in every 48. Bad roads, open sewage systems, and a lack of fresh water are seen in the city as inconveniences very low down on the list of complaints. Kidnapping, banditry and police corruption rank much higher.” In rural towns and villages, the social crisis is far worse.

By contrast, a tiny layer of businessmen, government officials and militia commanders has benefited at the expense of the majority of the population. Associated Press reported last weekend on the social gulf in Kabul, where slum dwellers in Shirpur had been “evicted to make way for a ‘new Afghanistan’ of palatial homes—scores of four- and five-storey mansions boasting gold-painted marble columns and floor-to-ceiling windows flanking grand wooden doors.” One aid worker asked: “Why doesn’t the government help the poor?”

Why do the government people and commanders build big mansions and the poor people live in bad conditions?”

Outside Kabul, the economy is almost completely dependent on the lucrative opium trade. The latest estimate by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board found that the crop had increased by almost 59 percent compared to 2005. Afghanistan is the source of more than 90 percent of the world’s heroin and the area under poppy cultivation has increased from 8,000 hectares in 2001 to 165,000 hectares currently. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG): “Many [of the profiteers] are government officials, thus warping and corrupting fledgling institutions. The open way in which these ‘big fish’ operate, with opulent mansions and convoys of SUVs, further feeds accusations of government corruption and hypocrisy.”

Talatbek Masadykov, the head of UN assistance mission in Kandahar, told the *Times*: “Everywhere we’ve gone downhill here. We’ve never improved the situation. The security issue isn’t just to do with the Taliban—it’s to do with bad, weak governance. Fifty percent of this problem is internal. People don’t naturally want the Taliban back, not at all, but they increasingly think the government offers them nothing but insecurity, and that though the Taliban offer them nothing either, they may perhaps give them some stability and an end to corruption.”

The “Taliban” is simply a convenient term for an amorphous and rather loose grouping of disparate Afghan insurgent organisations. Many of their leaders, like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who opposed the Taliban regime, trace their origins back to the CIA-backed “jihad” against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The ICG, a private thinktank, said these groups have no difficulty recruiting angry and disaffected youth to their ranks, particularly in Pashtun tribal areas. Commenting on the killing of hundreds of “Taliban” in the past six months, the ICG noted: “It is increasingly apparent, however, that numbers count for little, since there is a seemingly endless supply of recruits, or ‘as many insurgents as you want,’ as a senior Western diplomat admitted.”

Neither the Bush administration nor any of its NATO allies has any solution to the social and political disaster created by the occupation of Afghanistan. Earlier in the year, prior to the upsurge of fighting, the Bush administration had planned to foist the responsibility for day-to-day security onto European troops, cut aid to Afghanistan by 30 percent and withdraw up to 3,000 US soldiers. The troop withdrawal, however, has been cancelled, compounding the crisis that the Pentagon and the Bush administration already face in Iraq and further exacerbating tensions with the European powers.



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