

British diplomat paints bleak view of Afghan war

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With insurgent activity rising and casualties at an all-time high, the representatives of the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan are growing increasingly pessimistic about the prospect of establishing a stable client-state. This year has already registered the largest annual number of US and NATO casualties—236 dead and over 1,000 wounded so far—since the invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.

The sharpest expression of the demoralisation in Washington and European capitals was the assessment made last month by the British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, to the French deputy ambassador, Francois Fitou. A memorandum by Fitou, relating a discussion he held with Cowper-Coles on September 2, was leaked in full to the French publication *Le Canard enchaîné*.

Cowper Coles, according to Fitou's memo, did not mince words about the position that confronts the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Their very presence, he reportedly said, "is part of the problem, not the solution". As the seventh anniversary of the US-led invasion of the country approaches, the British ambassador commented: "The security situation is getting worse. So is corruption and the [Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai] has lost all trust... The foreign forces are ensuring the survival of a regime that would collapse without them. In doing so, they are slowing down and complicating an eventual exit from the crisis."

All that could be hoped for, Cowper-Coles allegedly advised, was that the replacement of Karzai's regime with an "acceptable dictator" would allow NATO forces—which currently include some 8,000 British and close to 3,000 French troops—to withdraw in five to 10 years. "This," the diplomat was cited as saying, "is the only realistic outlook... and we must prepare public opinion [in the US and Europe] to accept it".

The British government claimed that Cowper-Coles's

conversation with Fitou had been "exaggerated" and the views expressed in the memo did not represent its attitude. The possibility has been raised in the British media that the leak was in fact part of a campaign by sections of the French establishment for its government to abandon its participation in the US-led occupation.

Two countries with frontline troops have already announced a timetable for their pull-out. The Netherlands is scheduled to withdraw its force of close to 2,000 from the volatile province of Uruzgan by August 2010. Canada, which has lost close to 100 dead, has said it will withdraw its 2,500 troops from Kandahar province by the end of 2011.

Whatever the veracity and motives of *Le Canard's* leak, both its publication and Cowper-Coles's alleged reference to the installation of an "acceptable dictator" dovetail with an ever more open discussion in both Europe and the United States over how to salvage the situation in Afghanistan. One option being increasingly discussed is to do a deal with the main leaders of the anti-occupation insurgency and incorporate them into the Afghan government.

Intelligence reports by leading US and European think tanks have assessed that the insurgency has three major components: the supporters of the former Islamist Taliban regime of Mullah Mohammed Omar, which was overthrown by the US invasion in October 2001; the ethnic Pashtun tribal force loyal to warlord Jaluluddin Haqqani, which has controlled significant areas of southern Afghanistan since the end of the Soviet occupation in 1988; and the Hezb-e-Islami movement of former Afghan prime minister and warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which is believed to have re-established influence across the ethnic Pashtun regions of eastern Afghanistan.

The driving force of the insurgency is the legitimate and deeply-felt sentiment among ordinary Afghans that the

US-led occupation is the latest attempt by a colonial power to subjugate the country for its own economic and strategic purposes. Karzai's government is viewed as nothing more than Washington's puppet.

This sentiment is not confined to Afghanistan. The Taliban, Haqqani movement and Hezb-e-Islami all have support over the porous border in the Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies (FATA) of Pakistan, where the population has centuries-old relations and ties with the Afghan Pashtun tribes. Moreover, there is broad sympathy throughout Pakistan and the Muslim world with the war against the US-led occupation. Since 2001, the Afghan insurgency has had little difficulty raising finances and recruits in Pakistan. US intelligence also alleges that significant numbers of Islamist militants from across Central Asia and the Middle East are fighting in Afghanistan.

The entrenched character of the insurgency; the failure of years of military operations on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border to end it; and the dwindling support within NATO for the war are driving the calls for a political settlement. No doubt as in Iraq, the aim is to divide anti-occupation forces by making a deal with some insurgent leaders.

On September 30, Hamid Karzai revealed that for the past two years he has been requesting the Saudi Arabian monarchy to assist in arranging peace talks with Mullah Omar. Omar is on the US government's most wanted list for providing sanctuary to the Al Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden. Karzai nevertheless guaranteed him safety inside Afghanistan and called on him to "come back to your country and work for your people's happiness"—an implicit offer of a share of political power.

Given the complete dependence of Karzai's government on the US military, it is highly unlikely such an offer was made without Washington's knowledge and consent. The US commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, pointedly refused to distance himself from Karzai's remarks when directly questioned by journalists the following day. He said only that opening up negotiations with Omar was a "political decision that will ultimately be made by the political leadership".

In more than a hint that the US was prepared to consider the return of Taliban-backed factions into the Afghan government, McKiernan stated: "Ultimately, the solution in Afghanistan is going to be a political solution, not a military one."

In a further sign that such a policy is being considered, the Bush administration is reportedly consulting with Seth

Jones, a leading analyst for the Rand Corporation, over a "new strategy" in Afghanistan. Rand recently published a major report, which argued that the most effective way historically to end guerilla wars was through a political compromise that gave political power and position to the insurgent organisations.

The British commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, made an explicit overture to the Taliban in an interview with yesterday's *Sunday Times*. "We're not going to win this war," he said. "If the Taliban were prepared to sit on the other side of the table and talk about a political settlement, then that's precisely the sort of progress that concludes insurgencies like this. That shouldn't make people uncomfortable."

All the governments that have troops deployed in Afghanistan are well aware that any moves toward rehabilitating the Taliban would shatter the ideological justifications they have given for not only the war, but also the attacks they have made on civil liberties and democratic rights over the past seven years. Quotes could be found from virtually every senior political leader—especially in the US and Britain—in which they declared that Islamist organisations like the Taliban were not only "evil" but the greatest threat to the security of so-called Western democratic values.

However, under conditions of a rapidly deteriorating global economy and growing social tensions, the continuation of the Afghan war will require more troops, more money and its extension over the border into Pakistan. In the corridors of powers in both Washington and the capitals of Europe, a sentiment has begun to emerge that a political means has to be found to stem the rising costs, and stabilise the occupation.



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