

AFGHANISTAN on the Eve of the London Conference

By AHMED RASHID, LAHORE/PAKISTAN, January 12, 2010.

The hastily arranged London conference in which over sixty countries will express their commitment to Afghanistan comes as the military, social and political situation in the country has further deteriorated and bears little resemblance to the hopes and aspirations of the Afghans and NATO at the end of the Bonn conference in 2001.

Nine years after 9/11 and all the blood and treasure expended on efforts in the region, President Barack Obama told People magazine on January 11 that “the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains the epicenter of al’ Qaeda, their leadership and their extremist allies.” Al’Qaeda has now spread from Afghanistan to Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and for the first time has a large number of cells in European countries.

President Barack Obama’s controversial and risk-laden plan to first step up and then in eighteen months start drawing down US troops in Afghanistan, has convinced governments in the region and the Taliban that the US-NATO is preparing for a pullout after 18 months. This could lead to further conflicts within Afghanistan as regional governments work on preparing Afghan proxies for the post-US-NATO era.

As the London conference opens, it is still an open question as to how effective the Afghan government will be as a partner to NATO. The rigged elections last year, the disillusionment with the democratic and development process by millions of Afghans, the continuing controversy over the appointment of a new cabinet and whether the government is really prepared to fight corruption and drugs has created an internal crisis that foreign forces are ill prepared to deal with. It is equally unclear whether the Afghan security forces can be built up sufficiently in the next 18 months to start taking charge of parts of the country as envisaged by the Obama plan.

The Taliban are now a country wide movement, having expanded their attacks last year to the previously quiet west and north of Afghanistan. Their leadership has safe havens in Pakistan. Casualties on all sides have risen dramatically with the UN reporting 1200 security incidents a month in 2009 – a 65 percent rise from the previous year. The Taliban have infiltrated parts of the Afghan army and police – key components of the US plan to start transitioning to local security forces by July 2011. Development programs have come to a halt in large parts of the country and 50 percent of UN staff has left the country due to security concerns.

According to a December report by Major General Michael Flynn, NATO’s military chief of intelligence in Afghanistan, the Taliban now have shadow governors in 33 out of 34 provinces and the movement “can sustain itself indefinitely.”

Moreover, the Taliban have stepped up their vicious campaign to intimidate or kill any Afghan civilians working for the government, aid agencies, women’s groups and even the UN. “We are now at a critical juncture...the situation cannot continue if we are to succeed in Afghanistan,” said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in a report to the UN Security Council on January 4. “There is a risk that the deteriorating overall situation will become irreversible,” he added.

In recent months, US-Pakistan tensions have escalated as Washington demands that the Pakistani military “capture or kill” the Afghan Taliban leadership living in Quetta and Karachi

and their allies such as Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Himmetyar, who live in North Waziristan. Pakistan says it is too busy fighting its own acute Taliban and terrorism problem and its forces are overstretched.

In fact, it is unlikely that Pakistan will launch a military offensive against the Afghan Taliban leaders as it views them as potential allies in a post-American Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's military is deeply fearful of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan, because it could result in civil war and mayhem in its backyard as well as strengthen what it feels is India's growing influence in Afghanistan.

The international community seems to have learnt few lessons. Although the US and NATO have now adopted a more constructive counter-insurgency strategy that involves protecting population centers and roads and stepping up development programs in these enclaves, many NATO countries still refuse to go on the offensive against the Taliban because of their government's caveats or operational restrictions.

Such military contingents belonging to powerful countries like Germany, Spain and Italy depend on American forces to rescue them when they are in trouble. It is not surprising that the Taliban are concentrating on attacking these countries' forces who they consider weak and uncommitted.

European countries have been unable to deliver on police training or provide sufficient numbers of trainers or funds to help rebuild the Afghan army. The so-called peace-keeping and nation-building operations that some of these countries tout as their mission are impossible to fulfill as the insurgency now threatens all such activities.

Both Generals, Stanley McChrystal, the head of NATO forces in Afghanistan, and David Petraeus, the head of Central Command, have said they cannot shoot their way to victory in Afghanistan. Obama is clear about defeating al' Qaeda, but more inclined towards negotiations with the Taliban. In his December West Point speech, Obama said he supported Kabul's efforts to "open the door to Taliban who renounce violence and respect the rights of other Afghans."

The present US military strategy looks at peeling away Taliban commanders and fighters and resettling them without yielding any major political concessions or changes to the Afghan constitution. However, on talks with the Taliban leadership, Washington and other countries remain deeply divided. The State and Defense Departments, the White House and the CIA are divided amongst themselves, while there are also divisions between the US and its allies. Russia, Central Asia and India are categorically against any dialogue with the Taliban fearing that would only strengthen Pakistan.

However, as a result of secret negotiations in Saudi Arabia in the spring of 2009, the Taliban are showing some flexibility. In three recent statements including one by Mullah Mohammed Omar in November 2009, they have spoken of giving guarantees of peace, non-interference and posing no threat to neighboring countries – inferring that al' Qaeda would not return with the Taliban. In the Taliban's riposte to Obama's West Point speech there was not a single mention of jihad or imposing Islamic law. Instead the Taliban spoke in terms of a nationalist and patriotic struggle and said it "is ready to give legal guarantees if the foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan."

The Saudi talks were held between former (or now retired) Taliban, former Arab members of al' Qaeda and Karzai's representatives. These talks created no breakthrough, but led to a spate of important 'active' Taliban leaders visiting Saudi Arabia through last year. There was quiet encouragement by US, British and Saudi officials for the Taliban to renounce al' Qaeda and lay out their negotiating demands. The Taliban's principal demand is that all foreign forces must announce a timetable to leave Afghanistan. However, the key to talking to the Taliban leadership will be determined by what cooperation Pakistani intelligence gives to the process as Taliban leaders live there.

Any talks with the Taliban need more than covert intelligence cooperation. There is an urgent need for a public political and humanitarian strategy that can attract the Taliban, reduce violence and mitigate the anger of those Afghans opposed to all such compromises. The US

and NATO have talked up the need for such a public strategy over the past year but have accomplished little. A public strategy of reconciliation and reintegration of the Taliban need several precursors which should include:

- * Convince Afghanistan's neighbors and regional countries to sign on to a reconciliation strategy with the Taliban to be led by the Afghan government. The US has failed to create a regional strategy over the past year and regional tensions are worse now than a year ago.
- * Allow Afghanistan to submit names to the UN Security Council so that sanctions against Taliban leaders and their names on a list of terrorists imposed in 2001 can be removed, as long as those Taliban renounce violence and al' Qaeda. Russia and India have refused such requests.
- * Pass a UN Security Council Resolution giving the Afghan government a formal mandate to negotiate with the Taliban and allow the US, NATO and the UN to help sustain that process.
- * While NATO and Afghan forces will be responsible for the security of returning Taliban and their families, enlist the help of international humanitarian agencies such as the UN High Commission for Refugees or the International Committee of the Red Cross to work with the Afghan government to monitor the return of Taliban and their families arranging for compensation, housing, job training and other problems they may face in resettlement.
- * Provide adequate funds, training and staff for an Afghan government led reconciliation body that will work with Western forces and humanitarian agencies to provide a comprehensive and transparent package of security and facilities for returning Taliban.
- * Encourage the Pakistan military to provide security and humanitarian support to returning Taliban and their families. Encourage Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to help the Taliban set up a legal political party as other Afghan militants have done and provide a neutral venue where talks can be held with the Taliban leadership. The US should release all remaining Afghan prisoners held at Guantanamo.

Unless such publicly announced policies are implemented soon the Taliban may well conclude that it is safer and more productive to sit out the next 18 months, wait for the Americans to leave and then try and capture Kabul – although that would almost certainly lead to a renewed civil war which NATO forces would be unable to control. The situation is critical and needs to be addressed in a far more comprehensive way than we have seen so far.