

## **Losing the Peace in Afghanistan**

**By Sam Zia-Zarifi**

“Failure is not an option.” From President George W. Bush on down, this is how American officials describe their policy toward Afghanistan. This statement crops up so often that it sounds like a mantra, as if simply repeating it enough times will guarantee success. Recently, leaders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have also taken to this statement, reflecting the extent to which NATO officials believe that the organization’s future depends on its success in bringing security to Afghanistan.

Yet repetition of the statement alone does not remove the suspicion, oft-heard in Afghanistan, that it reflects more a political calculation of the cost of failure to U.S. and western interests than it does a commitment to the well-being of the Afghan people. Unless the United States, the de facto leader of the international community in Afghanistan, develops and implements policies that take into account and protect the rights and well-being of Afghans, failure is a very real possibility.

U.S. officials have increasingly referred to Afghanistan as a success story that can serve as a model for Iraq. There are successes to point to in Afghanistan. When the United States and its Coalition partners helped oust the Taliban, they opened a window of opportunity for ordinary Afghans to resume their lives. In the first year after the fall of the Taliban, some two million Afghans who had fled their country returned (although millions more remain refugees); girls and children regained the possibility of attending school or holding jobs; and the voices of civil society, silenced by over two decades of repression and fighting, again emerged around the country.

Long-term success in Afghanistan (as in other post-conflict situations) will mean protecting and expanding these developments until they become stable and sustainable. This is what Afghans hoped and believed the international community, led by the world’s lone superpower, would help them do. But key elements of the U.S. approach in Afghanistan—relying on regional power brokers (warlords) and their troops to maintain order, and downplaying human rights concerns—have in fact slowed the pace of progress and, in many instances, stopped or even reversed it. It is this failure to grasp the opportunities provided in Afghanistan that makes U.S. policies there more of a model of what to avoid than what to replicate.

Failure is never far from the minds of Afghans. For the past two years, wherever Human Rights Watch has been in Afghanistan, Afghans have ranked insecurity as their greatest worry. When they talk about insecurity, Afghans often speak of their fear that the current international project will fail. They fear a return to the mayhem of the warlords or the harsh rule of the Taliban, and they fear new troubles sure to arise from a criminal economy fueled by booming heroin production. Afghans are keenly aware that they are only accidental recipients of international support.

Despite the self-congratulatory liberation rhetoric emanating from Washington, London, and other western capitals, Afghans know that it wasn't humanitarian concern, but the September 11 attacks and Osama bin Laden's unwanted residence in Afghanistan that prompted the international community to take notice of Afghanistan again. Afghans fear that the world outside will fail them and banish them again to insecurity, conflict, and chaos, as happened after the Afghan mujahideen's success in driving out the Soviet Union. Failure following quickly upon proclaimed liberation is an option that Afghans have experienced before, and have no wish to repeat.

Afghans are right to worry. The signs are troubling. Despite the initial enthusiasm for rebuilding the country, the world seems to have forgotten them. International support has been scarce. Comparisons with recent peacekeeping and nation-building exercises are troubling. As pointed out by the humanitarian organization CARE International, in Rwanda, East Timor, Kosovo, and Bosnia, donors spent an average of \$250 per person annually in aid. If that average were applied in Afghanistan, the country would receive \$5.5 billion in aid every year for the next four years. Instead, it has received pledges amounting to less than one-fourth of that sum. The Henry L. Stimson Center, a Washington, D.C.-based think-tank, has pointed out that in Kosovo the international community spent twenty-five times more money, on a per capita basis, than it has pledged in Afghanistan. Similarly, in Kosovo the international community committed fifty times more troops per capita than it has in Afghanistan. Comparisons with Iraq, of course, are even worse: while Iraq received U.S.\$26 billion in reconstruction aid in 2003, Afghanistan received less than \$1 billion.

This inattention has had a tremendously negative impact. Taliban forces are resurgent and emboldened in their attacks on U.S. troops as well as on the government of President Hamid Karzai and the foreign community supporting him. Warlords, militias, and brigands dominate the entire country, including the city of Kabul. Many women and girls, freed from the Taliban's rule, have again been forced out of schools and jobs due to insecurity. Poppy cultivation has soared to new highs, providing billions of dollars to

the Taliban, warlords, and petty criminals who resist the central government. Foreign states with long, mostly destructive histories of interference in Afghanistan's affairs—Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, Uzbekistan, and Russia—are again picking local proxies to push their agendas.

What explains the lack of commitment to Afghanistan? A major reason is that the United States, like previous foreign powers in Afghanistan, sees the country as endemically violent and thus excessively relies on a military response to the country's problems. Viewing the country through a prism of violence has contributed to a number of erroneous policies in Afghanistan, to wit: focusing on the short-term defeat of Taliban and al-Qaeda forces with little regard for long-term security concerns; the resultant reliance on warlords on the national and local levels without regard for their legitimacy with the local population; and the shortchanging of nonmilitary measures. This skewed understanding of Afghanistan's problems and their solutions has persisted despite recent indications that Washington policy-makers now recognize the continuing threats posed in Afghanistan and understand some of the mistakes of their past policies.

What would failure mean in Afghanistan? For the community of nations dedicated to the machinery of global order created after the Second World War, abandoning Afghanistan again would constitute a defeat with repercussions well beyond Afghanistan's borders. The country might once again become a training ground for terror.

President Bush declared in April 2002 that he envisioned nothing short of a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan. The whole world is gauging how the United States and other international actors perform in Afghanistan. For NATO, which has just taken over the responsibility of providing security in parts of Afghanistan, failure would mean losing a *raison d'être* in a world without a Soviet threat. Failure in Afghanistan would be a sign of the global community's impotence and insincerity in transforming failed states. For most Afghans, failure would mean a return to warfare, chaos, and misery.

The goal of creating a stable, civilian government in Afghanistan faces four different but interlinked challenges: increasingly powerful regional warlords, resurgent Taliban forces, growth of the poppy trade and other criminal activity, and a continuing threat of meddling regional powers, in particular Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. All of these challenges have grown more pressing due to international inattention, and all are likely to become even more threatening as Afghanistan enters a politically charged election year, with a constitutional process recently completed and a presidential election set for June of 2004. Failure to meet any of these challenges will greatly increase the

chances of failure in Afghanistan and a return to a conflict that savages the Afghans and destabilizes Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and, by providing a haven for criminals and terrorists, the world.

Such an outcome is not inevitable in Afghanistan. Nearly all observers, Afghan and international, agree that progress can be made in Afghanistan. It requires an increased, consistent commitment by the international community. It requires integration of military and economic reconstruction efforts. Most basically, and most crucially, it requires listening to ordinary Afghans who seek international assistance so they can work toward peace and prosperity. A serious commitment to Afghanistan has to be made, and made clearly. There are signs that in some quarters of the U.N. and, most importantly, of the U.S. leadership, this need is now understood. However, this commitment is still not being felt in Afghanistan. Without it, failure is likely.

### ***Shortchanging the Peace***

There is widespread agreement among Afghans and international observers that there can be no reconstruction without security, and there can be no security without reconstruction. In Afghanistan, as in other post-conflict situations, construction crews cannot build roads, clinics, or schools if they face threatening forces; armed groups will not give up the way of the gun unless they can make a living and protect their families and livelihood without it.

This is by no means an intractable problem; rather, it points out how international support should be used to help a country emerging from conflict regain a stable peace. International financial aid supports the task of reconstruction, while international security assistance allows hostile groups to stop fighting long enough for reconstruction to help them. The financial aid has to be sufficient in scope to spark reconstruction and generate a self-sustaining cycle of economic growth. The security assistance must be robust enough to discourage forces opportunistically, or intractably, opposed to peace from spoiling the reconstruction. This model has gained widespread acceptance in the past two decades over the course of major reconstruction efforts throughout the world. This was broadly the model promised to Afghans as the U.S. was ousting the Taliban. The international community signaled its commitment to this model in the Bonn Agreement and at the Tokyo donors' conference.

Despite grandiose promises, the international community has been stingy with Afghans. In a shocking display of political short-sightedness, countries that have declared war on terror and on drugs—Afghanistan's two biggest exports in the recent past—have failed or refused to marshal the resources necessary to combat the resurgence of armed groups and drug lords in Afghanistan. Afghans will be the first to pay the price for this failure, but they will not be the last.

President Bush repeatedly invoked the Marshall Plan as a model for U.S. support for Afghanistan. Certainly such a sweeping reconstruction effort, modeled on the United States' largesse and support for Europe after the Second World War, is what is needed in Afghanistan. The country is one of the poorest in the world, with little infrastructure surviving three decades of conflict, no major developed natural resources, and staggeringly poor health care. According to UNICEF, an average of 1,600 women die in Afghanistan for every 100,000 live births. This figure is 12 times worse than in neighboring Iran, and 130 times higher than in the United States. In the northeastern province of Badakhshan, in particular, the area where the country's strongest warlords come from, the mortality rate is 6,500 per 100,000 live births—the highest maternal-mortality ratio ever documented in the world. The mind can barely comprehend the level of human misery now, much less if the current international reconstruction effort fails.

Far easier to grasp is the level of financial assistance necessary and adequate for the job of reconstructing Afghanistan: most estimates suggest that at least \$15-20 billion U.S. dollars will be needed over the next five years. The Afghan government believes it needs even more: some \$30 billion. These are relatively small sums, as recent peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts go. By comparison, recent reconstruction budgets in Kosovo, Bosnia, and East Timor were up to fifty times greater when measured on a per capita basis. The amount pledged by donors for Afghanistan is also significantly smaller than the \$26 billion sum pledged for the reconstruction of Iraq by the United States this year alone. (And, as *The Economist* magazine has pointed out, Afghanistan is larger than Iraq in terms of population, area, and need.)

Not many of those who control the purse strings in the international community seem to have listened to the call for assistance. Despite the call for \$20 billion over five years, the international community has pledged only \$7 billion (\$1.6 billion from the United States).

Of this \$7 billion sum, the international community has to date actually provided only \$4 billion. Only a third of this amount has made its way to Afghanistan over the last two years. And of that amount, only some \$200 million has resulted in completed projects.

So: two years after the fall of the Taliban, during a period when international and local experts have suggested that five to eight billion dollars worth of international aid was necessary for reconstructing Afghanistan, only some two to five percent of the amount has been delivered to Afghanistan. This hardly seems like the formula for success.

### ***Wanted: Peacekeepers***

Two years after the fall of the Taliban, security remains poor in much of the country, with most indicators pointing downward and upcoming elections likely only to aggravate the insecurity. The U.S. has simultaneously pursued two policies in Afghanistan. These could be complementary, but instead they conflict with each other: fighting the war against remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and creating a stable civilian government in Kabul that could eventually bring peace to the whole country. For much of the first year, the first issue dominated, making a mess for the second.

As part of “Operation Enduring Freedom,” the United States currently has some 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, with another 2,000 from the United Kingdom, Australia, and other Coalition members. The mandate of these troops is to combat the Taliban, not to provide security for Afghans. In fact, as of this writing, these troops freely engage and support local warlords and military commanders who ostensibly will fight the Taliban, with little or no regard for how the warlords treat the local citizenry. These troops have no mandate to protect civilians in case of fighting between rival militias; they will not act to enforce the writ of the central government against recalcitrant warlords.

The mandate to help support the central government (but not Afghan civilians directly) falls to the five thousand strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which has had a completely distinct command and control structure from the U.S. forces. Of the five thousand, some one thousand are devoted to protecting embassies and other important foreign institutions.

A comparison with recent post-conflict situations, put forward by CARE International, illuminates the limited scope of the international community’s commitment to Afghanistan: while in Kosovo, Bosnia, and East Timor the international peacekeeping

force amounted to one peacekeeper per seventy or so people, in Afghanistan that ratio was one peacekeeper per five thousand people.

There is no question that ISAF has been modestly successful in increasing security in Kabul, hence helping support the remarkable economic development that the city has witnessed over the last two years, and demonstrating how quickly Afghans can and will work toward creating a civil society if given the space to do so. But even in Kabul and its immediate environs ISAF did not (or could not) carry out one of its central missions, which was to rid Kabul of factional militias. Armed men, particularly those associated with the forces of Defense Minister Marshall Fahim and fundamentalist warlord Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, still roam the streets by day and engage in robbery and banditry by night.

Afghans outside Kabul have been clamoring for two years to share in the benefits of international security assistance. From the first moments that Human Rights Watch researchers traveled around Afghanistan after the U.S. rout of the Taliban, Afghans told us that they wanted foreign peacekeepers. The chief U.N. representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, eventually took up this call for expanded security. President Hamid Karzai joined in the clamor too, after his initial bursts of misplaced optimism were taken advantage of by U.S. officials, who claimed that Afghanistan was secure and needed no more aid in that regard.

Many senior European officials also generally accepted the argument for greater security forces. But they said their countries did not have adequate forces to offer; or if they did, they didn't have the ships or airplanes to get them to Afghanistan; or if they did, they lacked the trucks and helicopters necessary to transport them around the country. Meanwhile, the United States—which possessed the only readily available logistical force capable of providing security throughout Afghanistan—kept asking why Europe could not contribute more to the Afghan cause.

This state of affairs lasted until mid-2003. By then, it had become apparent that the security situation in Afghanistan was seriously deteriorating. The Taliban had resurfaced as a military threat in the south and the southeast, while serious clashes were taking place between different factional forces on a regular basis in the northwest and the west. Given this reality, those European allies of the United States that had refused to cooperate with the attack on Iraq felt compelled to contribute to the operations in Afghanistan.

After squandering the first year after the fall of the Taliban, the international community signaled its growing seriousness about dealing with the security problems of Afghanistan. These signals have yet to be translated into concrete results.

The first tentative step was the creation of so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These teams combine some 300 to 400 military and intelligence personnel with reconstruction specialists. The U.S. initially fielded four such teams to Gardez (in the southeast), Kunduz (the north), Mazar-i Sharif (northwest), and Bamiyan (center). As of this writing, the U.K., Germany, and New Zealand have agreed to take over one PRT each, and four other PRTs are scheduled to join them by early 2004 in Herat (the west), Parwan (center), Jalalabad (southeast), and Kandahar (south).

By most accounts, the PRTs have somewhat improved security conditions, although this should not be exaggerated: the city of Mazar-i Sharif, for instance, is still a flashpoint of local conflict despite the presence of a well-regarded British PRT. But the real problem with the PRT program is that it is a bandage being touted as a cure. After months of claiming that no expansion of ISAF was possible because it would require thousands of (unavailable) armed troops, it seems dishonest of the U.S. and the European powers to now claim that a few hundred lightly armed reconstruction teams will suffice to secure Afghanistan. The security mandate of the U.S. PRTs is more focused on force protection than the protection of Afghans. And, at least some military experts have warned that sending the relatively small PRTs out across Afghanistan without adequate military support raises the possibility of leaving them vulnerable to hostile action—threatening repetition of problems encountered in Bosnia, where U.N. peacekeepers effectively became hostages to Serb forces and were unable to protect the civilians under their purview.

Humanitarian aid organizations, which still provide for many of the basic needs of the Afghan people, vociferously oppose the PRTs' confusion of military and aid missions. Such blurring of distinctions poses a real threat to civilian aid workers, who become viewed as agents of the military forces instead of as independent actors, and thus become targets for attack.

It remains to be seen how the PRTs will interact with the newly reconstituted ISAF under NATO command. Clearly, the Afghanistan operation is a major undertaking for NATO. It constitutes NATO's first combat operation outside of Europe, and it signals a possible new direction for an international alliance whose original mission—countering the Soviet threat to Europe—no longer exists. Lord Robertson, NATO's chairman,



powerfully expressed his vision of a new, leaner and meaner NATO that can serve as a global force. He criticized the alliance's current force configuration, where the 1.4 million men in arms of NATO's non-U.S. members can field only 55,000 troops. Whether NATO can overcome its institutional weaknesses remains to be seen. Several military and civilian NATO officials have voiced concerns about the coalition's lack of sufficient logistical and communication equipment in Afghanistan. Such shortcomings could render NATO forces, as well as the PRTs, vulnerable to attack.

### ***Fear, Drugs, and the Taliban***

Criminality, particularly poppy cultivation and the heroin trade, has blossomed again in Afghanistan, generating billions of dollars for forces outside the control of any legitimate authority. Much of this trade and the money it generates is under the control, or at least the influence, of various major and minor military commanders, who use this money to increase their military capability and gain independence from the central government and any international troops working with them. The Taliban, too, has used this trade to finance its increasingly sophisticated and brazen attacks. These problems could have been avoided, had the U.S. and the international community acted more responsibly in Afghanistan. All these problems are still resolvable, if the world acts quickly and seriously.

In the absence of the Taliban, which in some years managed to stop nearly all poppy production, or any other limiting authority, opium cultivation has again exploded in Afghanistan. Farmers who have waited futilely for agricultural assistance from the central government or the international community have turned to poppy cultivation. As a result, Afghanistan has regained its position as the world's leading producer of heroin. According to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crimes, the country's 3,000 metric tons of opium production in 2003 constituted two-thirds of the world's supply and generated revenues of \$2.3 billion for Afghan warlords, corrupt provincial authorities, and even the Taliban. Both the absolute and the proportionate impact of drug trafficking is expected to be still higher in 2004 because the laboratories used to transform poppies into opium and heroin are now increasingly located in Afghanistan. This sum—equivalent to nearly half of the legitimate gross domestic product—finances forces opposed to central authority.

Criminality in general—including smuggling of timber and other goods to and from the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia—generates large sums of unregulated income. The lure of illicit income is especially strong in the absence of legitimate economic

outlets due to failures of reconstruction. Not surprisingly, there are strong indications that the regional armed leaders—the warlords—are extensively involved in the drug and smuggling trade. The more powerful warlords, those with a major political base, do not even need to rely on drug trafficking, confident that they can avoid such potentially problematic sources of income.

### ***The Rule of the Warlords***

Who are these warlords? Warlord is not a technical word. In Afghanistan, it is a literal translation of the local phrase “jang salar,” and it has simply come to refer to any leader of men under arms. The country has thousands of such men, some deriving their power from a single roadblock, others controlling a town or small area, and still others reigning over large districts. At the apex of this chaotic system are some six or seven major warlords, each with a significant geographic, ethnic, and political base of support. Over the last two years, Human Rights Watch has documented criminality and abuses by commanders small and large, and by nearly all of the major warlords: General Atta and General Dostum in the north, Ismail Khan in the west, Gul Agha Shirzai in the south, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf in the center, and, the most powerful, Marshall Fahim, the senior vice president and minister of defense.

Fahim’s background and current behavior illustrates why these men inspire such fear among Afghans. Fahim was one of the mujahideen who fought the Soviets for years under the predominantly Tajik Northern Alliance and the group’s fabled leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud. When the mujahideen forced out the Soviets, he became the chief of security for the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani. He inherited the command of the Northern Alliance on September 9, 2001, when suicide bombers assassinated Massoud.

As the fortuitous leader of the last remaining credible force fighting the Taliban, Fahim found himself in a strong position to negotiate with grateful American military forces and to gain an important position in the transitional Afghan authority. Thus his innovative approach to the post of minister of defense: he brought his own army with him. The Northern Alliance forces, estimated to include about 70,000 troops, possess heavy artillery, land and air transport vehicles, and armored vehicles; and they have no loyalty to President Karzai or any other civilian government in Afghanistan. With this force behind him, Fahim bullied Karzai, the United Nations, and the United States into giving him the vice presidency.

Marshall Fahim put this advantage to good use. He immediately began placing fellow Tajiks from the small Panjshir valley north of Kabul in important positions. As he reconstituted the Afghan army, with American and European assistance, he amassed a large cache of weapons and supplies intended for the national army. It is clear that he did not envision the army as facing a foreign threat or even a significant local threat from the Taliban. At the end of 2002, Kabul and the area directly controlled by Fahim (northeast of the capital) housed fourteen divisions. In the north, there were at least ten divisions. By contrast, the west received only four divisions, while the south got another four, and the southeast and the east each received five. The center received two. Of the thirty-eight generals chosen for the new army by Fahim, thirty-seven were Tajiks (the other was Uzbek). Of the thirty-seven Tajiks, thirty-five were linked to Fahim's political group; of a total of one hundred generals appointed by Fahim in early 2002, ninety were from his group.

Fahim's reach extended beyond political and military power. Like many other senior political and military officials, Fahim has reportedly enriched himself through an extensive patronage network that perpetuates and extends his power. Not surprisingly, this network displays nepotism familiar from the Tajik-controlled military.

And yet none of this power translates into improved conditions even for Fahim's fellow Tajiks in Badakhshan, which remains one of the poorest, most oppressed areas in Afghanistan. In Badakhshan, women suffer from the lowest standards of health care in the world, poppy cultivation is rising exponentially, and criticism of the state of affairs is not tolerated.

Despite this sorry record, U.S. military officials defend Fahim as a stalwart ally against the Taliban and a heroic fighter against the Soviets. This is how the warlords cast themselves, and how the U.S. has treated them: mujahideen, defenders of the faith and homeland, who fought against the Soviets and the Taliban until, with American support, they liberated Afghanistan.

In its unwavering support for Marshall Fahim and the other warlords, the United States pretends to forget that they ruled the country for four ruinous, devastating years—years so bad that many Afghans were relieved when the Taliban routed the warlords. The warlords, in their public pronouncements, never refer to what they did from 1992 to 1995, but no Afghan fails to recall these years without a shudder. Marshall Fahim himself has been personally implicated in various purges and atrocities committed by Northern Alliance forces during the civil war that killed some 10,000 civilians in Kabul

in 1992 and 1993. Other warlords, like Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Ismail Khan, General Dostum, and Gul Agha have essentially similar bloody backgrounds.

Furthermore, these warlords and U.S. officials neglect to mention that on October 6, 2001, when the United States began attacking the Taliban, there were almost no warlords left in Afghanistan. By that time, the Taliban had either co-opted the major warlords, or destroyed them. Arbitrary and criminal rule by local warlords had for the most part been replaced by the brutal authoritarian rule of the Taliban, until the September 11 attacks on the United States once again drew the attention of the United States to Afghanistan.

The American attack assumed a military strategy that avoided ground combat and the resulting threat to U.S. forces. The strategy of aerial bombardment, while capable of punishing the Taliban, lacked the ground troops necessary to secure territory. To carry out this task, the United States needed local troops, and for this the United States physically brought back the warlords, rearmed them, financed them, supported them militarily, and reinstalled them in power. The CIA simply handed suitcases of cash to warlords around the country. This investment allowed local commanders to resume their former positions and rearm themselves, ostensibly to take on the Taliban. It also gave them the seed money to become self-sufficient by engaging in smuggling, drug trafficking, and general criminal activity. Predictably, their rule has been nasty and brutal, as grimly documented in numerous accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch researchers and others from throughout Afghanistan over the past two years.

Just as predictably, the warlords have performed as poor proxies in the fight against the Taliban. Most famously, local troops subcontracted by American forces are believed to have allowed Osama bin Laden to escape capture in the mountains of southeastern Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's retreat. In the time since, these ostensible allies have attacked their personal rivals by providing false information to goad or trick U.S. forces into attack. The depredations and lawlessness perpetrated by these armed thugs have fueled the drug trade, fostered resentment that has renewed the appeal of the Taliban's harsh brand of justice, and squandered the good will of the Afghan people toward the international community.

Take the case of Hazrat Ali, the warlord of Nangarhar province, based in the southeastern city of Jalalabad, astride the main road between Kabul and Pakistan. Hazrat Ali is an ally of Marshall Fahim; in fact, Fahim imposed Hazrat Ali on the province, favoring him over a local candidate in 2002. Wanton looting, sexual assault on women, girls, and boys, intimidation of critics, and brigandage have been the hallmarks

of Hazrat Ali's rule—though such abuses are by no means unique to the area under his command.

Press reports consistently link Hazrat Ali to the burgeoning opium trade and smuggling networks now choking Jalalabad. When Human Rights Watch publicly criticized Hazrat Ali, he responded by publicly threatening Human Rights Watch's researchers. But U.S. and U.K. officials have confirmed that Hazrat Ali has received (and likely continues to receive) direct payments for his role in fighting the Taliban and maintaining order in his sector. Meanwhile, the British government, which has taken the lead in the anti-narcotic effort, has failed to provide adequate resources for the job in the area under Hazrat Ali. Afghan anti-narcotic officers have complained about the lack of financial and military support from American and British forces on the crucial trunk road between Kabul and Pakistan.

### ***The Return of the Taliban***

The warlords' reemergence and blatant misrule, and the international community's seeming acquiescence, has created fear and despair around Afghanistan, but nowhere more so than among the rural Pashtun of the south. The Pashtun are Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, comprising about 40 percent of the population. They formed the backbone of the Taliban movement, in part reflecting the greater prevalence of conservative religious beliefs among Pashtuns, and in part reflecting their fear of non-Pashtun groups, such as the Northern Alliance, gaining control over Afghanistan. The dominance of Tajik forces in Kabul, personified by Marshall Fahim, has further stoked the Pashtuns' sense of marginalization from political developments in Afghanistan. Thus the Pashtun areas of southern and southeastern Afghanistan have witnessed an upsurge in activity by the Taliban and forces under the command of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a long-active extremist warlord with links to Pakistani security forces and Saudi Arabian Wahhabist groups.

The result of this upsurge has been an absolute breakdown in security in the Pashtun areas and increasing human rights violations. The United Nations and international non-governmental organizations now consider nearly two-thirds of the Pashtun-belt as no-go areas. The assassination on November 16, 2003, of Bettina Goislard, a young French staffer for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, underscored this terrible threat. Goislard was the first U.N. worker killed in Afghanistan, but by September 2003, an average of some three- dozen Afghan and international staff members of various aid agencies and reconstruction teams were coming under armed attack. The targeting of

foreign and local humanitarian groups suggests a troubling change in tactics by the Taliban and other groups opposed to the central government in Afghanistan.

The resurgent Taliban has exhibited even more violence and less tolerance than during its previous incarnation. Attacks on aid groups in the period between May and August 2003 occurred nearly three times as often as during any period in the previous year. Flush with income from the drug trade (which previously the Taliban seems to have avoided and actively combated), the Taliban can now outspend and outman not just the weak central government in Kabul, but even the U.S. forces: In areas around the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban is reportedly paying their fighters as much as \$70 a week, going up to \$120 a week for fighters who attack American forces. The United States is reportedly paying its local warlord allies \$60 a week. Not surprisingly, the Taliban now claims to hold large portions of several southern and southeastern provinces.

One thing that unites the Taliban and local warlords who are ostensibly allied with Karzai's government or U.S. forces is their opposition to any legitimate political process in Afghanistan that could return peace and civility to the country. Human Rights Watch documented numerous instances of warlords intimidating local representatives during the constitutional drafting process, which ended in December. These warlords are intent on imposing their own representatives on the upcoming Afghan government and thus completing their entrenchment as sources of power, a process that they began during the emergency *loya jirga* (grand council) in June 2002. As presidential elections slated for June of 2004 approach, it is likely that the warlords will also step up their efforts to grab power.

The Taliban has exhibited less interest in influencing the electoral process than in simply stopping it. It has declared the constitutional process invalid, instead offering their own limited version of religious law. Through "night letters" (surreptitiously distributed pamphlets) and, increasingly through public pronouncements, the Taliban has threatened to harm candidates as well as those who vote in the elections. The Taliban has reserved special venom for those Afghan women daring enough to stand as candidates, threatening not only them, but also their families.

The impact of Taliban intimidation has been dramatic. Compared with elections preceding the emergency *loya jirga*—which itself faced serious intimidation and intrusion by warlords, participation in elections has dropped across Afghanistan, with the lowest levels seen in the south. The United Nations has reported that popular participation in

elections to pick representatives for the constitutional process was so low in some precincts as to challenge the legitimacy of the elections.

### ***The Failure Option***

The degenerating security situation has already seriously hampered Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction. Nevertheless, the electoral process, dictated by the Bonn Agreement, marches on. International experience suggests caution before embarking on a national election where national security has not been established. In Bosnia and Liberia, for instance, the election process aggravated political power rivalries and fostered violence.

The Afghan government is responsible for providing security for elections, but currently lacks the requisite capability. The Afghan National Army, with at most 7,000 effective troops, is still under the command of Marshall Fahim, and lacks the military capacity or the political legitimacy to protect voting booths. The Afghan police force, even more necessary than the army for providing security in cities and towns and along the main roads in Afghanistan, is even worse off than the army. The United Nations Development Fund has established a Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA) to gather the estimated \$350 million necessary to reform and fund the Afghan police force over the next five years. As of this writing, only \$10 million had been delivered to LOTFA by the international community. (The European Union, shocked by the lack of security and the burgeoning drug trade, has reportedly agreed on another \$50 million, but this sum had not been delivered at this writing). Police officers, many of whom complain that their salaries have not been paid, cannot reasonably be expected to protect Afghan voters and candidates.

In short, at present there appears to be no alternative to the international community assuming the burden of providing security in the run-up to elections—a responsibility familiar from efforts in the Balkans and in East Timor. Yet inexplicably, the United States and the international community as a whole seem to be ignoring this lesson. The shortage of international security forces, discussed above, is particularly acute when considered in the context of the 2004 elections: Not a single international trooper is mandated to protect the election process. The American forces lack this mandate, the PRTs lack this mandate, and even ISAF (even if expanded under NATO command) lacks this mandate. Although NATO performed an important role in securing elections in Kosovo, apparently the organization's planners have not yet considered such a responsibility in Afghanistan.

Afghans and international observers agree that international assistance is essential to safeguard Afghanistan during this political season, yet international assistance has still not been offered. Without such assistance, a weak Karzai government will likely find itself hostage to the competing demands of ethnically based warlords and the external threat of the Taliban. Afghanistan may return to conditions similar to those that prevailed a decade ago, with several ethnically based militias vying with the Tajiks for control of Kabul while the Taliban, thriving on Pashtun resentment, threatens from the south. Such an outcome would, of course, constitute a failure of the worst kind for Afghans and Afghanistan.

Even if the election takes place without serious incident, there are dangers for Afghanistan—the most obvious is international apathy. With its attention diverted to developments in Iraq, for example, the international community could declare the election a success, usher in a new Afghan government, applaud, and then leave. Under these conditions, the inevitable face-off between the entrenched warlords would begin in earnest as soon as the last foreign soldier left the country.

### ***The Road Forward***

A better future for Afghanistan is possible, but it requires international commitment and resources sufficient to begin to set the country on a better course and give Afghans time to prepare to shoulder the burden themselves.

First, the international community must provide economic assistance commensurate to the task of rebuilding Afghanistan. Every step of the reconstruction of Afghanistan has been hampered by a lack of financial assistance. The international community should begin by at least honoring existing pledges to Afghanistan, and then considering new and greater pledges at the upcoming donor conference in Tokyo.

Second, the international community must take responsibility for providing security beyond Kabul. The expanded PRTs are a move in the right direction in terms of improving security, but they hardly suffice. Their mandate needs to be expanded geographically (to cover more areas of Afghanistan) and focused to concentrate on security and leave reconstruction to other organizations. NATO, whose own credibility is on the line, must reassess its mission in Afghanistan, greatly bolster its military capability, and assume rules of engagement that focus on protecting the rights of the



Afghan people. Afghan warlords, while they may have thousands of armed men at their command, can hardly stand up to a serious western military force, as amply demonstrated by the much-vaunted Taliban's rapid dissolution in the face of sustained force. The warlords know this, as do many mystified Afghans, who cannot understand why the United States and international institutions seem so cowed by the warlords.

Military experts have repeated that Afghanistan's reconstruction needs a "robust spine"—a military force, relying on air power and quick deployment, that can support the legitimate central government and the reconstruction project. Its existence, and the commitment it signifies, would suffice in many areas to bring into line the majority of regional commanders, whose chief impetus right now is opportunistic profit at the cost of the central government.

Meanwhile, groups intractably opposed to a civilian government in Afghanistan—so-called total spoilers, such as the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and even some warlords temporarily allied with the central government, like Sayyaf—must be dealt with as a real military threat for some time to come. No Afghan army can or should be expected to assume this burden alone in the near future. Nor should a poorly thought out Afghan army be created as an ostensible cure-all or excuse for international disengagement, as such an army would almost certainly become just another tool in the power struggle between competing factions. For the time being, the responsibility for security rests with the United States and its coalition partners.

Finally, the international community should give greater priority to deploying human rights monitors to gauge conditions on the ground and listen to what the Afghan people are saying. The United States seems to have very little official capacity for engaging the Afghan people directly. The PRTs, for instance, do not have a human rights protection mandate and, as far as is known, do not include any monitors dedicated to human rights protection. The U.N. too lacks this capacity. The United Nations has adopted an admirable policy of operating with a light footprint, but there is a time when the print can be too light. Afghanistan is in such a period now. Only eight human rights monitors are envisioned for covering all of Afghanistan, as opposed to the hundreds that monitored the post-conflict period in Guatemala, East Timor, or the Balkans. Even worse, of these eight, only five positions are filled. U.N. officials claim they simply cannot find qualified candidates for these posts. At a policy level, this seems to violate one of the tenets of Lakhdar Brahimi's own blueprint for U.N. operations, namely that bureaucratic obstacles should not be allowed to hobble operational needs. On a more practical level, however, this obvious failure of management bolsters the suspicion that

the United Nations may be reluctant to listen to what Afghans have to say, lest it upset the carefully balanced (though ultimately unstable) political structure maintained in Afghanistan by the United States and the United Nations.

The international community should also support emergent voices for accountability and the rule of law in Afghanistan, such as the brave but beleaguered Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Created by the Bonn Agreement, the Commission has performed admirably to date, listening to ordinary Afghans and voicing their concerns, even as each report it issues on abuses by members of the current government is followed by threats to AIHRC members.

One thing AIHRC members have asked for, repeating the demands of ordinary Afghans, is justice for past and current abuses. As mentioned above, many of the senior members of the current cabinet have bloody hands. They should be investigated, arrested, prosecuted. They should be kept out of politics, as was envisioned by the Bonn Agreement. The international community shamefully failed to follow the will of the Afghan people when they allowed warlords into the emergency loya jirga process. They are making the same mistake during the constitutional process. It is essential to begin a process of securing justice for the worst crimes, demonstrating that a repeat of the past will not be tolerated. Ignoring this issue, which consistently tops the list of demands by ordinary Afghans, will aggravate insecurity, decrease legitimacy, and perpetuate longstanding conflicts. The international community should help by providing funding, expertise and, most importantly, political support to create a justice mechanism capable of helping Afghans grapple with their bloody past.

More specifically, the United States must promote respect for the rule of law in Afghanistan. The U.S. military must cease cooperation with regional warlords outside the purview of the central government. U.S. forces must assume a mandate that respects and protects the rights of Afghan civilians against abusive local warlords.

Perhaps more importantly, U.S. military forces must abide by international human rights and humanitarian law while conducting operations in Afghanistan. The use of excessive force during military operations in residential areas has generated tremendous resentment against the international community. The U.S. practice of detaining Afghans without charge or other due process rights at ad hoc prisons in Bagram and other locations around Afghanistan has made a mockery of respect for justice. Such rights violations are a festering sore for many Afghans and a terrible example for a country where every two-bit warlord runs a private prison.

Success or failure in Afghanistan is ultimately not a military issue, or at least not only a military issue. Current international policies toward Afghanistan demonstrate very little integration of the military and reconstruction efforts. Continuing in this manner is to court failure.