Afghanistan - The unending war against the Taliban

Jun 23rd 2005

Afghan troops have launched a big assault on Taliban insurgents, who they fear are regrouping to attack September's parliamentary elections. Almost four years after the American-led invasion, Afghanistan still looks far from pacified. European countries are sending more troops, while Afghanistan's government accuses Pakistan of harbouring the rebels.

THE Taliban failed to deliver on their threat to disrupt last October's presidential election in Afghanistan, in which voters defied the rebels and turned out in force. The success of the American-backed Hamid Karzai in becoming the country's first democratically elected president is bound to have been a blow to the Taliban's morale. However, the rebels are far from beaten, and Mr Karzai's government is worried that they are regrouping to launch attacks on the forthcoming parliamentary elections—originally due in April but now scheduled to take place in September. So far, two candidates have been killed in attacks blamed on the Taliban, the latest this week in Uruzgan province.

This week, Afghan troops, reportedly backed by American helicopters and British fighter jets, launched a big assault on Taliban insurgents near the borders between Uruzgan and two other south-western provinces, Kandahar and Zabul, to take back a district captured by the Taliban last week. On Thursday June 23rd, government officials said more than 100 insurgents had been killed so far in the operation, making it the heaviest defeat inflicted on the Taliban in the past two years. According to Reuters news agency, Afghan officials said troops were closing in on another group of rebels in the area—possibly including two of the most senior Taliban leaders, Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Brother.

Part of the Taliban rebel force is thought to have escaped across the border into Pakistan, stoking the Afghan government's anger at its neighbour for allegedly harbouring the insurgents. President George Bush, concerned at deteriorating relations between two important allies in his "war on terror", spoke to the Pakistani president, Pervez Musharraf, this week, after which General Musharraf rang Mr Karzai to reassure him that Pakistan was not trying to meddle in Afghan affairs.

Pakistan's government insists it is not helping the rebels but argues that it is impossible to seal its long border with Afghanistan. However, there seems little doubt that pockets of support for the Taliban exist in Pakistan, especially in the border province of Baluchistan (see map). They may still have backing in parts of the Pakistani security establishment, such as its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), which is known to have helped the Taliban in the past.

Indeed, Pakistan helped the Taliban to form in the first place. The Islamist group’s founders were militant clerics belonging to the Pushtun, a devoutly Muslim ethnic group that straddles the border between the two countries. In the mid-1990s, the ISI and other parts of Pakistan’s armed forces took the clerics under their wing, helping them recruit fighters and providing the guns, transport, training and battle plans they then used to conquer most of Afghanistan in the civil war that followed the collapse of the former, Soviet-backed regime.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, America and its allies invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime, because of its refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders.
sheltering in the country. Pakistan, despite having backed the Taliban, swapped sides and became an American ally—or at least, General Musharraf and Pakistan’s leadership did. Some analysts believe that the Taliban is now busy recruiting fresh members in Pakistan and sending them to fight over the border. On Tuesday, Mr Karzai’s spokesman criticised the Pakistani authorities for failing to arrest Taliban leaders on their territory, one of whom, he said, had been interviewed on Pakistani television last week.

More troops needed

President Vladimir Putin of Russia complained this week that the American-led force in Afghanistan was proving ineffective at battling the Taliban and that terrorist training camps continued to operate there. Mr Putin fears that Islamist rebels in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya are still being sent for training in the Afghan camps. Indeed, an Afghan official said on Thursday that at least two of the insurgents killed in the battle in south-western Afghanistan may have been Chechens.

There is certainly an argument for reinforcing the 20,000 mainly American troops who are helping Afghan forces hunt the insurgents. But given the even deadlier insurgency in Iraq (see article), there is at least as strong an argument for boosting troop levels there—and America’s military is already over-stretched.

A separate, NATO-led force of around 8,000, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), has the job of improving security for the Afghan people, though until recently its peacekeeping was largely confined to the capital, Kabul. Last week, plans were announced to boost ISAF’s numbers by 2,000 during the parliamentary election campaign. Spain—whose new, Socialist government pulled its troops out of Iraq in 2004 but kept them in Afghanistan—said on Thursday it would provide 500 of the extra soldiers. Britain, the Netherlands and Romania are also contributing to the boost in ISAF’s strength.

One area in which Mr Karzai’s government and its foreign protectors have had success is in repressing the growing of opium poppies in Afghanistan. Besides flooding the world with heroin, the opium-poppy trade provides the rebels, and Afghanistan’s troublesome warlords, with money to buy weapons and further destabilise the country. After an upsurge in poppy cultivation last year, surveys by Britain and the United Nations in March this year found that renewed efforts to eradicate it seemed to be working. However, as with the rebels themselves, there is a danger that the poppies will quickly spring back up if the efforts to repress them are not maintained. Despite routine assurances from the Afghan government that it is getting a grip on the situation, all that has been seen so far are some successful battles in a war that shows no sign of ending.

Afghanistan: Zabul's no Kabul

Jul 7th 2005 | QALAT
In Afghanistan’s badlands, things are getting worse, not better

THE 19th-century British fort that dominates the skyline above Qalat offers an easy reference point for low-flying Apache helicopters heading for the America base near the town, the capital of Afghanistan’s southern province of Zabul. Yet despite being backed by impressive foreign muscle, the government’s control in Qalat barely reaches the city limits. On the Pakistani border, deep in the conservative Pushtun belt from which Mullah Omar’s movement first emerged to gain control of Afghanistan, Zabul remains Taliban country. Security has deteriorated so badly on the Kabul to Kandahar highway that 17 new emplacements were built along a 60-kilometre (40-mile) stretch north of Qalat in June. The road is beginning to look like the Maginot line.
Since March, the level of violence in south-eastern Afghanistan has reached and then surpassed the levels of the same time last year. The shooting down of a Chinook helicopter carrying 16 American personnel in Kunar province on June 28th was the biggest single success the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies have enjoyed against American forces since the war of 2001. After the optimism that followed the low levels of violence during last year's presidential elections, is the tide turning? As the pockmarked walls of the British fort attest, America wouldn't be the first foreign power to lose its way in Afghanistan.

Despite claims that support for the Taliban is weak or extracted under duress, support in rural Zabul, at least, remains high. “In the rural areas the people are uneducated and they follow what the mullahs tell them,” says Mohib, an English teacher in Qalat. “The rural people are conservative and they don't like foreigners.” Locals say Zabul has only one functioning high school for boys: a campaign of arson and intimidation has closed all but five of 170 schools in the province.

Violence is also expected against workers and candidates in September's parliamentary elections. Ragabea Ranjba, a female candidate, accepts she will have little opportunity to present her manifesto. “We can't campaign because there is no stability here,” she says.

But despite the siege mentality evident in Qalat, the American and Afghan government forces claim to have fought and won several large battles in the south recently. These have been engagements on a scale rarely seen since 2002. Some 600 people are said to have died since March, three quarters of them alleged insurgents. The Taliban have repeatedly concentrated their forces, bringing together as many as 200-300 fighters and aiming to seize and hold entire districts for short periods. It is a bold tactic, which has been repeatedly punished with airpower. In late June, the Taliban held Mian Nishin district, north-west of Qalat, for two days, losing 178 fighters according to the government.

The causes of these large-scale engagements appear to be twofold. The latest rotation of American forces in the south has brought in the tough 173rd Airborne Brigade. Their ongoing Operation Determined Resolve has been an attempt to put the insurgents on the back foot ahead of the elections, by pushing into areas of the south hitherto regarded as Taliban safe havens. Yet it is also clear that the Taliban promise of a “spring offensive” was no bluff. Since March, they have showed themselves to be a still functional and well-equipped movement without any apparent shortage of manpower. A recent line proffered to the press that this is the last gasp of the Taliban rings hollow. Taliban fighters are clearly crossing and re-crossing from Pakistani border areas in large numbers. In the police chief’s office in Qalat, General Abdul Sabur Al-Allahya casually lists five locations he claims are Taliban training camps on the Pakistan side of the border. Afghan officials accuse parts of the Pakistani administration and intelligence services of sympathy, even collusion, in training, logistics and intelligence support.

Other parties with a more clearly vested interest in instability are not hard to find in southern Afghanistan. From the vast opium business through to local warlords and tribal bodies opposed to disarmament and the imposition of strong central government, many would like to maintain the status quo. To this must be added a growing frustration amongst ordinary Afghans with the pace of reconstruction and the corruption that is taking hold in the organs of government. The blood-letting seems unlikely to abate ahead of September's elections, or indeed for a long time after that.

**Afghanistan: Lions at bay**  Aug 25th 2005 | BAZARAK

The victors against the Russians and the Taliban are now losers

THE fields and rivers of the Panjshir Valley are still littered with the rusting remains of Russian tanks, reminders that this was the heartland of the anti-Soviet jihadi of the 1980s. Ahead of Afghanistan's first fully democratic parliamentary elections on September 18th, the gun turrets have become improvised billboards for campaign posters. But enthusiasm for what Panjshiris hope will be a big transfer of power from Kabul is
tempered, as it is across the whole Afghan north, by anxiety. It is an inescapable fact that since the Panjshiri-led Northern Alliance entered Kabul in 2001, with American B-52s circling overhead, the focus of political power has shifted inexorably away from the north. There have been no bigger losers than the Panjshiris, and they are deeply aggrieved. In the villages strung along the valley there is a feeling that not merely have the sacrifices of the *jihad* and the defeat of the Taliban been forgotten by western countries they thought were their allies, but that somehow the Panjshiris themselves have come to be recast as the villains of the piece. “We are the people who defeated the Soviets. We are the *mujahideen* who fought the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Now the world community has forgotten this and we are called gunslingers, warlords, *mujahideen* criminals,” says Haji Tajuddin, father-in-law of the late Ahmed Shah Masoud. The greatest of the Panjshiri commanders, Masoud was killed by al-Qaeda suicide-terrorists two days before the September 11th attacks on New York.

Masoud's successors, men such as Yunus Qanuni and Muhammad Fahim, have indeed been cast as warlords and systematically sidelined. So too have the Uzbek leader, General Rashid Dostum, and Herat's self-styled potentate, Ismail Khan, and not without reason. Mr Dostum and Mr Qanuni, however, both boast considerable democratic credibility after standing in last year's presidential election. Many Panjshiris still claim that the ballot was rigged against Mr Qanuni.

It is a far cry from the heady days of late 2001 when all were Northern Alliance leaders and key allies of the American-led coalition. The Tajik centres of power in the interior, education and defence ministries as well as the intelligence service and the police have all been steadily eroded. Abdullah Abdullah, the foreign minister, is the last Panjshiri leader to retain high office.

To add insult to injury, Panjshiris think the government of President Hamid Karzai has been taken over by the very people they defeated in 2001: the Pushuns. As Tajik influence has waned so the majority ethnic group (around 48%), the historically dominant force in Afghan politics from which the Taliban was overwhelmingly drawn, has made a comeback. Pushtsuns now occupy a majority of the key government posts, a situation many western diplomats regard as a prerequisite to long-term stability in the country.

The Karzai government has pursued a policy of rapprochement with those Taliban who are prepared to lay down their arms, and a number of former Taliban leaders will be elected in the parliamentary elections. Panjshir was recently appeased with the status of a province, but there is widespread dismay that it will have only two seats in the parliament.

Though it is close to Kabul and security is good, Panjshir has yet to see significant reconstruction. The only road is still a bone-jarring unsurfaced track. The governor, Haji Bahlol Khan, is working to establish a base for American military engineers to begin work, but the prospect of foreign troops in the valley provokes mixed feelings. The UN disarmament programme aimed at stripping the country of 25 years' worth of accumulated weaponry has met fierce resistance. Living with the daily reminders of their past military struggles, Panjshiris remain far from convinced that the peace they have enjoyed since 2001 will last.

The enmities that underpinned and were exacerbated by the civil war remain close to the surface. And across the north it is clear that though the chance for democracy is welcomed, real doubts remain about the intentions of the Karzai government and international community, and the long-term prospects for peace. “The whole *mujahideen* are coming together,” says Haji Salahuddin, the emir of Bazarak, the provincial capital. “We don't want to fight but if someone fights us, we will.”