

War in Afghanistan: Worst Is Yet To Come

by Ramtanu Maitra

As the celebrated battle for the Arma Mountains wound down, the United States was again faced with the realities of Afghanistan. Despite Afghan interim chief Hamid Karzai's brave words that this was the "last battle" for the Taliban and the al-Qaeda, it is evident that the proverbial last battle will remain an illusion.

The American war machine will continue to notch up victories, eliminating a large number of Afghans—including members of the al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and many non-partisan individuals. At the same time, the Pentagon's claim of killing 700 al-Qaeda and Taliban in the Arma Mountains' caves and ledges was grossly exaggerated. News reports indicate that most of the Afghan opposition fled, helped by local commanders, and are consolidating in the eastern adjacent provinces of Paktia, Wardak, Khost, and Ghazni. *Asia Times Online*, citing unconfirmed sources, has even claimed that the Afghans have taken along with them some U.S. soldiers as hostages. Some al-Qaeda and Taliban forces have also slipped into the Taliban-friendly tribal areas nominally controlled by the United States' ally, Pakistan.

Even if the Pentagon succeeds in victoriously killing off all the known anti-U.S. groups, it is almost a certainty that the American presence will not be tolerated by the Afghans—Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, or just plain Afghan. As a result, the American forces have no choice but to fight Afghans as long they stay in Afghanistan. What could be worse, is the fate of those who are supporting the United States. It is likely that they will be pressured by the rest of the population, as the pro-Soviet Najibullah regime faced popular wrath once the Russian troops were withdrawn in 1989. In fact, the process may have begun already.

Lessons Forgotten

The United States is not wholly unaware of this syndrome. Americans encountered the "disease" in Vietnam in the 1960s, and forgot all about it. But, they might have remembered it now.

Hamid Karzai, a suave and Westernized Pashtun belonging to the royal Durrani tribe, was hand-picked to keep the throne of Afghanistan warm for the exiled 87-year-old King Zahir Shah. Washington hopes that those Afghans who were instrumental in putting Zahir Shah out to pasture in 1973, will

now welcome him back. Will they? Afghans note that quite a few virulently anti-Zahir Shah leaders, including former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, are very much in the thick of things, and they have made clear their disinterest in bringing the King back from Rome.

Meanwhile, Karzai is acting much like a travelling salesman for the American formula to the nations of the region, trying to garner support for Zahir Shah. It is expected that the former monarch will arrive in Kabul on March 21 to celebrate the Zoroastrian New Year, Nauroze.

Washington is suffering from a number of illusions. One is that it expects to establish peace on the back of the decrepit exiled King. But is Afghanistan, torn by foreign invasions, internecine war, and constant interference by neighboring nations, likely to embrace peace under a King who left his country in 1973, and has not been seen once, while an invader was ripping the country apart? Such American "optimism" is based on the idea that in the "global war on terrorism," anything is attainable; that past experience and history are non-essential factors; and that money can buy arms, friendship, good will, and loyalty.

In fact, the opposition to King Zahir Shah is more deeply entrenched within the country now than ever before. Afghanistan has been at war since 1979, when the Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul with Babrak Karmal sitting on the gun barrel. During the following ten years that it took the Afghan warlords, bankrolled by the West, to drive the Soviets back, King Zahir Shah was in Rome licking his wounds. Once the Soviets were driven out, the King used his Western connections, unsuccessfully, to get back to power. That game ended in 1995-96 when the Taliban took over, and then, Zahir Shah became a nonentity.

Now, it seems Afghanistan has come full circle. Zahir Shah is again the solution, claims the West. But the Afghan warlords, who have built their private armies all these years, do not want the old deposed monarch to take power in Kabul, backed by Washington. Moreover, the dominant United Front (formerly the Northern Alliance), which consists mostly of the Panjshiris, Uzbeks, and a smattering of Pashtuns, have no love lost for the old monarch. Pashtun warlords, who cherish their anarchic independence, see no reason to accept the diktat of an old monarch who is backed by ruthless Anglo-American power.

Zahir Shah's arrival will evoke mixed reactions in the region. Hamid Karzai was recently in Iran and Russia, among other nearby countries, to garner support for his King. For now, both Iran and Russia will support Zahir Shah's arrival, but for how long?

Moscow and Tehran both want a stable Afghanistan, but will watch the post-return period of Zahir Shah like hawks. Iran got rid of its Shah in 1979, and will not like to see monarchy re-established in its neighborhood under the auspices of the United States. Tehran is worried that this may give the deposed young Shah of Iran, now in the United States, and

his Western backers, some ideas.

Moscow has its own reasons to find Zahir Shah's return pregnant with problems. Over the years, it has built up the United Front, centering its power in the current Afghan Defense Minister, Gen. Mohammad Qassam Fahim, and the former KGB General and head of the 40,000-strong Uzbek Jumbish-e-Milli, Abdur Rashid Dostum. Dostum, whose ruthlessness is legendary in Afghanistan, is now Karzai's Deputy Defense Minister. Both Fahim and Dostum oppose Zahir Shah and both are very close to Moscow.

In addition, the Tajiks and Uzbeks, as well as the Hazaras of western Afghanistan, fear that with the return of Zahir Shah, the country's political and military power will revert to the Pashtuns. Russia's likely concern, is that it would mean the United States would then be in full control of Afghanistan. It should also be remembered that it was the United Front, backed by the massive bombing by the American B-52 bombers, that ousted the Taliban and won Kabul for Hamid Karzai.

The Second Illusion

President George W. Bush has sent Maj. Gen. Charles C. Campbell to Kabul to oversee the formation of a National Afghan Army to deal with the warlords and many such anarchic elements that roam the plains and hills of Afghanistan. An international security force (ISAF) is stationed in Kabul. Karzai, prodded by the United States and the United Kingdom, wanted to expand the ISAF beyond Kabul. However, General Fahim and the United Front have shot down this proposal. The reason is not difficult to comprehend. So far, the Afghan Army consists of United Front soldiers, with only a handful of Pashtuns. The plan to build a National Afghan Army is in trouble, since its entire leadership, so far, is in the hands of the United Front, represented by Tajiks and Uzbeks.

The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan is the Pashtuns, who are 40% of the population. But of 38 generals whom General Fahim appointed, 37 are Tajiks and one is Uzbek. So the current National Army plan means that soldiers recruited from the 15-17 million-strong Pashtun population, will serve under a command structure made up almost entirely of Tajiks. Moreover, 35 of the 38 generals hail from one small area north of Kabul, long the stronghold of the Panjshiris.

At the same time, instead of putting their efforts in building a truly national army which will represent the Afghan people, the three key ministers of the Karzai government have been jostling to carve out political territory for their faction. Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, and particularly Defense Minister General Fahim—all Panjshiris from the United Front—have strongly backed people loyal to themselves, not to Karzai or the nation as a whole. It was their appointees and associates whom Karzai accused of successfully plotting to assassinate Civil Aviation Minister Abdul Rahman, at Kabul Airport in February. Rahman had switched his loyalty, years ago, from the

Northern Alliance to the pro-Zahir Shah group.

Another large problem looms: The Bush Administration is silent on the opium issue. News reports tell of poppy plants shooting up in thousands of acres of eastern and southern Afghanistan. Farmers have already taken drug traders' loans, to be paid back in raw opium. Observers in Afghanistan foresee a crop of 3,000 to 3,500 tons—far below the year 2000's record crop, but enough to produce 300-350 tons of pure heroin, primarily headed for Europe. Washington's silence is, perhaps, maintained because it is not willing to do what must be done to stop the murderous heroin trade. The U.S. priority for the next few months, when the opium will be harvested and the drug money will be made, remains to demolish the al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Afghanistan has no national army which can monitor the poppy fields and destroy the crops. Thus, silence on this problem.

Kabul Cools Its Heels

But the consequences of this failure will be a powerful reality. The heroin cash will strengthen a whole range of Afghan warlords. Setting aside moral issues, the warlords strengthened by the drug money will continue with their anarchic ways, independent from Kabul.

Washington's other major failure is its unwillingness to strengthen Karzai, the lone Afghan in Kabul with a multitude of problems. U.S. military commanders have made it a point to deal directly with the Pashtun warlords, and they are hiring and firing Afghans at a daily rate for battles against al-Qaeda. Kabul is hardly involved. In fact, when the United Front army went to the Arma Mountains to lend the American-led troops a helping hand, the Pashtun recruits resented it. They do not trust the Panjshiri-dominated United Front army. They fear it may go on a Pashtun-killing spree, given half a chance. Even setting aside these genuine concerns, Washington has undermined Karzai's authority by dealing directly with the Pashtun warlords.

Worse for Karzai, is the United States' unwillingness to kick-start the reconstruction of Afghanistan. How much money is required to rebuild Afghanistan is not known. The World Bank says that some \$16 billion is needed over the next ten years. A more likely figure may be \$100 billion over ten years. At the Tokyo conference on Afghan reconstruction, Secretary of State Colin Powell pledged only \$300 million to Karzai. The entire developed world gave the Afghan interim chief IOUs amounting to \$4.8 billion. Unfortunately, Karzai has seen only some \$20 million so far, at a time when most of the country is starving and the economic infrastructure has been bombed to extinction for more than two decades.

When an Afghan asks, when will reconstruction begin? The answer is: When the situation gets stable, when al-Qaeda and the Taliban are no more, when Afghanistan has a National Army, when Afghanistan accepts a central authority, and the list goes on. Afghans hope to survive to see the end of the United States' "long war against terrorism."