

Afghanistan Spins Out of Control

by Ramtanu Maitra

The spontaneous riot in Kabul on May 29 made it evident that the Bush/Cheney-led occupation is now rejected everywhere in Afghanistan. The foreign troops and other foreigners have become the target of wrath of all Afghans.

The riots started when a U.S. Army truck accidentally crashed into a couple of civilian vehicles, killing some people. This triggered a violent response, with people taking to the streets and pelting stones at convoy vehicles. In turn, the security forces opened fire on a crowd, killing eight and wounding dozens. Kabul was subsequently placed under an overnight curfew, the first in several years.

The failure of the brutal neo-con policy of indiscriminate killing by U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, ostensibly to eliminate the al-Qaeda/Taliban nexus for the sake of rebuilding and ensuring a democratic future of Afghanistan, has finally rattled a few heads at the top. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told reporters on May 30, "Obviously, what has happened is symptomatic of perhaps deeper problems." He also said he had consulted with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about measures to help bring the situation under control.

In Kabul, President Hamid Karzai is shaken up by the latest developments. It has become evident that besides the physical threat that he faces, he, along with the occupying forces, will also be battered by the Parliament set up late last year. On May 30, under pressure from the population, Afghanistan's Parliament approved a motion calling for the government to prosecute the U.S. soldiers responsible for the deadly road crash. Saleh Mohammed Saljuqi, an assistant to the parliamentary speaker, cited the motion as saying, "Those responsible for the accident on Monday (May 29) should be handed over to Afghan legal authorities."

A spokeswoman of the U.S. military, who tends to ignore what the Afghan Parliament does or does not say, declined to comment. But she pointed out that the U.S. military will be investigating whether the American troops fired their guns into a group of demonstrators, or over their heads.

Although President Karzai's government has not identified, or even tried to identify, the rioters, for obvious ethnic and political reasons, what became clear nonetheless was that the targets of the angry rioters were the embassies of Britain and America, and the foreign non-government organizations (NGOs). The rioters attacked the NGO offices

while chanting "Death to America" and "Death to Karzai." Subsequently, as hostilities continue to escalate, three women and a man, all believed to be Afghans, working for the Action Aid charity, were shot dead in Mingajik district in the northern province of Jowzjan. They were reportedly attacked in their vehicle by gunmen riding motorcycles. Aid teams were often targeted in attacks blamed on the Taliban militia, but incidents such as these are relatively rare in Afghanistan's calmer north.

A large number of ethnic Tajiks were observed participating in the rioting. One Pakistani news daily pointed out that this is revealing. Because the majority of the Taliban are Pashtuns, Pashtuns remain divided on Karzai and the United States. While most anti-U.S. actions in Afghanistan come from the Pashtun ethnic group, these Kabul protests, which paralyzed the capital, heavily involved Tajiks. As one analyst pointed out, Kabul is a largely Tajik city, and the Tajiks hate the orthodox Taliban with a passion.

The May 29 demonstrators carried posters of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik leader of the Northern Alliance who had played a major role in expelling Soviet troops in the late 1980s, and then fought the Taliban tenaciously before being assassinated two days before Sept. 11, 2001. Significant numbers of Tajiks are clearly now turning against the United States. The Arab news daily *Al-Hayat*'s reporter in Islamabad, Jamal Ismail, suggested recently that some of the Tajik discontent derives from the way Karzai has eased out Northern Alliance Tajik leaders such as Marshal Muhammad Fahim and former Cabinet minister Yunus Qanooni, reducing Tajik dominance of the government in the name of ethnic diversity. There have also been attempts to limit the Tajik presence in the new Afghan Army, which is some 60,000 strong (some claim the strength as 80,000).

Reasons Behind Afghan Anger

Since late April, the anti-U.S. and anti-Karzai forces in southern and eastern Afghanistan have come alive. Regular clashes, large-scale battles are erupting every day. On the very day Kabul was shaken up by the rioters, more than 50 insurgents were killed in a U.S.-led air strike on a mosque in Afghanistan's southern province of Helmand. Several "Taliban leaders" were among those killed in the pre-dawn attack in the Kajaki district of the province, Amir Mohammad Akhundzada, the deputy provincial governor, said. Spokesmen for the U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan could not be contacted immediately for comment, according to Reuters.

During the last two weeks of May, about 300 people, some militants but also civilians, dozens of Afghan security forces, and four foreign soldiers have been killed in the battles in southern Afghanistan, the area that has been the focus of insurgency since U.S.-backed forces ousted the Taliban in late 2001. Five Canadian soldiers were hurt and up to six alleged Taliban militants were killed, during a gun battle in

southern Afghanistan in the early hours of May 29.

But there are other reasons and other organizations involved in exploiting Afghan anger. To begin with, the revelation in May 2005 that in Guantanamo Bay, where Muslim prisoners were held and interrogated, the Americans carried out deliberate desecration of the Holy Koran as psy-war against the prisoners, caused massive demonstrations in Afghanistan.

According to B. Raman, a former Indian intelligence officer, the violent demonstrations came in the wake of spreading anger against the United States and the Karzai government, due to the frequent use of air strikes by the United States in its counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban in the Kandahar area. The demonstrations also came at a time when the Hizbut-Tehrir (HT), which is headquartered in London and has an increasing following among Afghan youth of different ethnic groups, has stepped up its propaganda against the U.S., the U.K., and the Karzai government.

Of late, the HT has sought to exploit various issues to recruit youth in Afghanistan, including the alleged desecration of the Holy Koran at Guantanamo; the Danish cartoons caricaturing the Holy Prophet; incidents of violence in Guantanamo Bay; the denial of economic assistance to the Hamas-led government in the Palestinian territory by the West; and the alleged violation of the human rights of the Iraqis and the Afghans.

Corruption and Drugs

In southern Afghanistan, where the insurgents are most active, Karzai Administration officials have been regularly accused of promoting warlords. Veteran Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid pointed out recently in an article with the BBC that the southern Afghans believe that for the past five years, President Karzai has tolerated Pushtun warlords as governors, police chiefs, and administrators in the south. Most of these warlords were discredited and defeated by the Taliban in the 1990s, but were resuscitated by U.S. forces to help defeat the Taliban in 2001. Unlike Northern Alliance warlords who tended to defy President Karzai's authority, these Pushtun warlords were friends of the government and helped secure the Pushtun vote for Karzai in two Loya Jirgas and two elections in 2004 and 2005.

The evidence of continuing power of the warlords exists for all to see, in the form of vast poppy fields. London's *Independent* news daily reported on May 10, that a two-hour drive away from the southern city of Kandahar brings one to the massive poppy fields. An estimated 40,000 to 50,000 hectares of poppy are being cultivated in Helmand this year, at least a 50% increase over last year. "Afghan poppy farmers expect a record opium crop and a combination of factors have conspired to produce what is probably the biggest opium harvest in the history of a province that, last year, produced more than 20% per cent of the world's heroin on its own," the report said.

It is evident that a law and order vacuum has allowed an increasingly well-organized drug cartel, a corrupt local government, and resurgent Taliban to structure the poppy cultivation of the province as never before. That has combined with fine growing conditions this year to produce what, if these were wine producers, might be considered a memorable vintage. This record crop is a dispiriting blow for the international counter-narcotics effort, as almost 90% of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan.

At the same time, the anti-NGO outbursts exhibited during the Kabul riots were neither surprising nor altogether unjustified. In April 2005, President Karzai had called some of the NGOs operating inside Afghanistan "corrupt." After making known Article 8 of the new Afghan legislation that prevents NGOs from bidding for Afghan government-sponsored project contracts, Karzai had called a meeting with ambassadors and representatives from the United Nations and donor countries based in Kabul. Accusing some NGOs of squandering the precious resources that Afghanistan received in aid from the international community, Karzai had told the gathering: "We have a responsibility towards the Afghan people, as well as the taxpayers in the donor countries, to stop NGOs that are corrupt, wasteful, and unaccountable."

The Afghan President announced the establishment of a task force, consisting of Minister of Economy Mohammad Amin Farhang, Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Haneef Atmar and chief of staff of the President's Office Umer Daudzai, to examine the issue and submit recommendations in no more than a month.

To many observers of Afghan developments, Karzai's move against the NGOs was overdue. In November 2005, Abdur Rasheed Saeed of the Institute for War and Peace (IWP) reported that Planning Minister Dr. Ramazan Bashar Dost had told him of thousands of NGOs (there are some 3,000 NGOs in Afghanistan, of which close to 350 are foreign-based) that had failed to deliver effective assistance to the stressed Afghan people. In December, ostensibly under pressure from the NGOs and the countries they represent, Dost was forced to resign. It was evident that in asking Dost to step down, Karzai, whether he liked it or not, had to succumb to the external pressure.

Since becoming the Planning Minister in March 2004, Bashar Dost made it clear publicly that the NGOs were ineffective and had wasted money that should be spent on the Afghan people. Pointing out that existing Afghan law "didn't clarify the responsibility of NGOs and the procedure for their control," Dost spearheaded a draft law that would regulate their operations. He noted that when an NGO receives funds, either from a government or a non-governmental source, they are supposed to distribute most of those funds to the people of Afghanistan. "I have yet to see an NGO that has spent 80% of its money for the benefit of the Afghans and 20% for their own benefit," he said.