

Karzai's Actions Anger Britain

by Ramtanu Maitra

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, speaking to journalists on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum at Davos on Jan. 24, said he should not have listened to British and U.S. officials who said he should remove the local security forces that were already in place in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, the *London Times* reported.

Helmand is the province where more than 50% of Afghanistan's opium is produced, and where Britain has about 7,800 military personnel operating. It is also where the resurgent Taliban has challenged and defeated NATO forces. Referring to the strengthening of the Taliban in Helmand province, due to the British presence, Karzai told the journalists: "There was one part of the country where we suffered after the arrival of the British forces. . . . Before that we were fully in charge of Helmand. When our governor [Sher Muhammad Akhonzada] as Helmand governor in 2006, was there, we were fully in charge."

British Failure

"They came and said, 'Your governor is no good.' I said 'All right, do we have a replacement for this governor; do you have enough forces?' Both the American and the British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them."

Asked if he was blaming British failure for the return of the Taliban, he added: "I just described the situation of mistakes we made. The mistake was that we removed a local arrangement without having a replacement. We removed the police force. That was not good. The security forces were not in sufficient numbers or information about the province. That is why the Taliban came in. It took us a year and a half to take back Musa Qala. This was not failure but a mistake."

Karzai's statements made obvious that the blame for the failure of the Afghanistan mission must be placed squarely on the shoulders of Britain. The Afghan President had already angered the British when he turned down the joint effort of Washington and London to appoint Lord Paddy Ashdown as the UN's super envoy to Afghanistan. Ashdown, a "liberal" and a "democrat," who wears the vainglorious title bestowed by a feudal aristocracy on his shirtsleeve, was ready to pinch hit for London and Washington, who are looking increasingly like colonial powers trying to occupy Afghanistan, and further undermine authorities of the "duly elected" Afghan President. Having given in earlier to the British demand to remove

the Helmand province governor in 2006, and facing its consequences, President Karzai stuck it out and told off the British. Castled by Karzai's move, Ashdown announced his inability to take over as the super envoy.

According to an article in the *Asia Times*, an online news daily from Hong Kong, Karzai knew for months about the impending appointment of Ashdown as a key step in a new NATO strategy spearheaded by the United States and Britain, aimed at "stabilizing" the Afghan situation. Karzai knew detailed planning had gone into the move involving NATO, the EU, and the UN Security Council; but he waited patiently until the 11th hour before shooting it down publicly in a interview with the BBC at Davos. The move was pre-planned and carried out in a typical Afghan way with maximum effect.

What was evident, and President Karzai also made it plenty clear, was that Ashdown's appointment was the decision of Washington and London, and these two never considered it necessary to get the appointment approved by the Afghan President—President of an occupied country! In addition, Washington and London got UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to execute it.

Viceroy Ashdown

Asia Times said that Karzai anticipated that Ashdown, true to his reputation in the Balkans, would function as a colonial viceroy. Karzai knows that the Western agencies and organizations operating in Afghanistan lack coordination. But a "unified command" under Ashdown would create a counterpoint in Kabul to Karzai's own authority, something he couldn't allow to happen.

But, sources claim the appointment of Ashdown was part of a bigger package that London and Washington had bundled. The package included a persistent rumor that the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, a Push-tun-American, was slated to be the next President of Afghanistan. Reports indicate that Karzai took the "rumor" seriously, and had asked Khalilzad about it when they met in London last October.

By turning down Ashdown and making a public statement over it, President Karzai took the initiative and laid low the UN plan to impose a "viceroy" on Afghanistan

On the other hand, Karzai's statement about the failure of the British is not out of turn. A week before, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates drew criticism after he suggested in a newspaper interview, that NATO forces in southern Afghanistan do not know how to properly combat a guerrilla insurgency, and that that could be contributing to rising violence in the country.

On Jan. 30, three reports came to light, including one from the Afghanistan Study Group (the other two were from the Atlantic Council of the United States and the U.S. National Defense University's Center for Technology and National Security Policy), titled, "Afghanistan Stands Today at a Crossroads,"

according to a letter in the Afghanistan Study Group report from the co-chairs, U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James Jones (ret.) and former UN Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Panel members include Charles Robb, a former Democratic Senator, who served on the Iraq Study Group, and David Abshire, who helped organize the Iraq study. Abshire is president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency.

The Afghanistan Study Group report says the “progress achieved after six years of international engagement is under serious threat from resurgent violence, weakening international resolve, mounting regional challenges and a growing lack of confidence on the part of the Afghan people about the future direction of their country.” The Jones-Pickering assessment also says that the U.S. should rethink its military and economic strategy in Afghanistan, in large part, because of deteriorating support among voters in NATO countries.

The report says: “The study group believes two possible courses of action would have dire consequences—either withdrawing forces from Afghanistan or adopting a minimal approach. If international forces are pulled from Afghanistan, the fragile Afghan government would likely fall apart, again becoming a failed state while the Taliban and other warlords would gain control of various areas and eventually fight each other.”

Karzai’s plain speaking at Davos was perhaps the result of his long-term continuing differences with London and Washington over the Iranian role in the Afghan imbroglio. He visited Tehran in May 2006, and had thanked Iran for the support in the past difficult years, and especially for accepting Afghan refugees.

Karzai: Iran Is Our Close Friend

“We will never forget Iran’s goodwill in accepting our refugees in the past 20 years and Iran’s cooperation with Afghanistan in the past four years,” Karzai said on that occasion. “Afghanistan hopes to strengthen further trade and economic ties between the two countries.” Iranian exports to Afghanistan have risen from several million dollars in 2002 to \$500 million now.

What perhaps got Washington’s goat was when President Karzai visited the tomb of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a sworn enemy of the United States. Karzai said that Khomeini was a good friend of the Afghan people during their fight against the Soviet invasion.

At a joint press conference in 2006, following Karzai’s meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Gates, who was in Afghanistan for nearly 24 hours to meet with U.S. commanders and Afghan officials, Gates said he raised the issue of the Iranian munitions in his meeting with Karzai, but acknowledged that there was no evidence the Iranian government was behind the alleged shipments.

When asked whether he believed that Tehran, which has

been mostly a benign presence in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, had decided to change course and support its former foes, Karzai gave an impassioned backing for the Iranian government. He called it a force for good inside Afghanistan.

“Iran and Afghanistan have never been as friendly as they are today,” Karzai said. “In the past five years, Iran has been contributing to Afghanistan’s reconstruction, and in the past five years, Afghanistan has been Iran’s very close friend.”

In 2007, when President Karzai met with President Bush, he was expected to act as a puppet of the Bush Administration, but made the mistake of speaking his mind. In a CNN interview at the time, the Afghan President said terrorism in Afghanistan is getting worse, that the hunt for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is at a standstill, and then, he described Iran as a positive player—“a helper and a solution”—in the region.

On the eve of the summit, Karzai told CNN that “the security situation in Afghanistan over the past two years has definitely deteriorated.” He made clear that no one is “closer [to catching bin Laden], we are not further away from it. We are where we were a few years ago.” Additionally, he reiterated his earlier statements saying: “So far, Iran has been a helper” in the fight against terrorism. Each of these statements was reportedly contradicted by Bush upon the Afghan President’s arrival.

On Iran’s positive role in the region, Bush again told Karzai not to believe his own experience, but instead to accept the neoconservative version of events. “I would be very cautious about whether or not the Iranian influence there in Afghanistan is a positive force,” the American President pointedly told the Afghan President.

At Davos, Karzai said Iran’s ties to Afghanistan have increased dramatically in the last six years. He also said that “Iranians have helped us in Afghanistan and I hope this trend will continue.” “We have opened our doors to them. They have been helping us in Afghanistan,” Karzai said.

U.S. officials have been behind most of the allegations regarding Iran’s connections to the Taliban. But, Karzai expressed hope that these baseless allegations will not affect Afghan-Iranian relations.

In addition to his differences with the London-Washington axis on Iran, President Karzai has made known his opposition to increasing foreign troops in Afghanistan. On Jan. 30, Karzai said that training the Afghan police and army was more important than sending more foreign troops to the country, in an interview with *Die Welt*, a German newspaper. “More than anything else, we need help to rebuild our human capital and our institutions, our army, our police force, our administrative structure, our judiciary and so on,” Karzai told *Die Welt*. “Although the situation has finally improved, the unintentional bombing of Afghan civilians by NATO and U.S. troops is particularly painful. I am not sure that sending more troops is the right answer.”