

Opinion

Afghan Dilemma

By Ehsan Bakshandeh

In recent weeks, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has stepped up criticisms over the poor performance of foreign forces in his country. In an interview with the "New York Times", Karzai particularly lashed out at British and US forces for misconducting the war in Afghanistan. He complained about US-led invasion of Afghan villages and said terrorists should be hunted in the Taliban and Al-Qaeda sanctuaries in neighboring Pakistan which is going to sign a peace deal with the Taliban this week.

Karzai said, "for the success of the world in Afghanistan, it would be better to recognize this inherent character in Afghanistan and work with it and support it."

Karzai also attacked the number of civilian deaths inflicted by the coalition. Although levels of "collateral damage" inflicted by NATO operations have dropped substantially, deaths still continue. Two women and two children were killed recently in an air raid by NATO troops on a suspected Taliban position after a firefight. Up to 9,000 civilians have died since 2001.

Karzai himself was the target of several assassination attempts, the last on April 26.

"I am not happy with civilian casualties coming down; I want an end to civilian casualties," he said. "As much as one may argue it's difficult, I don't accept that argument."

Last year, Afghans experienced a year full of violence and terror. The year 2007 was described by the United Nations as the "bloodiest year" for Afghanistan since the US-led invasion in 2001. Yet the Afghan president didn't criticize the US as harsh as he did last weekend.

Political pundits believe one of the main reasons behind Karzai's harsh criticism and courage to lash out at the Bush administration at the current juncture is the next US presidential elections.

In 2004, Karzai won the presidential elections in view of the great support of George Bush. Karzai was under pressure from the public opinion of Afghanistan for being too lenient with the US-led forces. Now that the embattled Bush is leaving the White House in less than eight months, Karzai has gathered the courage to blast Americans for mismanaging the war.

It is remarkable to mention that the conduct of war has also raised criticism by international organizations and even NATO members are evading reinforcing troops in Afghanistan.

The seven-year Afghan occupation by foreign troops has only resulted in increasing tension and Taliban violence while leading more Afghans to the lucrative opium business and hindering reconstruction. On April 18, a study by the US House of Representatives' Armed Services Committee found that US provincial reconstruction teams (PRT), a much publicized program for rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan, operate as ad hoc "pickup games" with no clear direction.

The government in Afghanistan is also saddened by the discovery that German intelligence spied on a minister. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier called on his Afghan counterpart Saturday to apologize and said those involved would be sacked or transferred.

German media revealed last week that the country's intelligence service illegally monitored the e-mails of Commerce Minister Mohammad Amin Farhang and a reporter for the German news weekly "Der Spiegel" for several months in 2006.

Presidential elections in Afghanistan will be held next year. Although Karzai has a short period to try to boost security and curb the violence, the next Afghan government will undoubtedly move on the development track only in view of evicting foreign troops and laying the foundations for national unity among Afghan tribes.

News In Brief

Turkmenistan, Afghanistan

Expand Ties

Turkmenistan and Afghanistan signed deals on energy, transport and culture Monday, days after agreeing with Pakistan and India to push forward a multi-billion-dollar gas pipeline.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai watched their ministers sign the deals and then inked their own on cementing bilateral ties, AFP said.

Power-poor Afghanistan wants to boost its electricity grid with imports from Turkmenistan, which has also announced plans to build a railway line into this country.

The leaders also discussed the gas transport project, an official said. The four nations involved signed an accord last week to take forward years-old plans to build the pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. It envisages that work will start in 2010 and be completed five years later, mines ministry spokesman Kohzaman Ulumi said.

Israeli MP Jailed For Corruption

An ultra-Orthodox member of Israel's parliament has been sentenced to 18 months in jail on corruption charges. Shlomo Benizri, a former government minister, was convicted earlier this month of a variety of offences, including accepting bribes, BBC reported.

After sentencing, Benizri, 48, a member of the Shas party, pleaded his innocence and said he was the victim of a "witch hunt". Benizri's spokesman said he will appeal against the ruling.

The court also fined Benizri 80,000 shekels. The MP insisted he was innocent during the trial, which lasted more than two years and saw about 200 witnesses called to testify.

He was charged with a variety of offences including accepting bribes from a contractor to cover the cost of furniture and home renovations.

According to court documents a contractor donated money to a Jewish seminary linked to Benizri, bought him furniture and an air conditioner and renovated his apartment. In return, Benizri intervened to help the contractor's business interests by passing on classified information and granting him valuable permits to bring foreign workers to Israel.



Armenia Welcomes Turkish Dialogue

Armenia is ready to start dialogue with Turkey on improving relations if Ankara does not set preconditions to talks, Armenia's new prime minister said on Sunday.

The two neighbors have no diplomatic links after Ankara severed ties in protest against Armenian control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region over which Armenia fought Turkey's ally Azerbaijan in a war in the early 1990s, Economic Times reported.

"I confirm the readiness of the government of Armenia to engage in constructive dialogue and establish relations without preconditions," the press office of the Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan said he wrote in a letter to Turkey.

An Armenian backed administration controls the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Armenia and Azerbaijan are still officially at war over the mountainous area.

Last week, Turkey's foreign minister said he had sent Armenia a letter calling for dialogue. Armenia is a mainly Christian state of around three million which lies on the edge of the Caucasus which hosts a pipeline pumping oil to Europe from Asia. Armenia also accuses Turkey of genocide during violence at the end of World War I.

US Contractors Involved Disturbing Data About Failed Iraqi Projects



Iraqi workers collect gold plates which once covered the dome of the destroyed historic shrine of the Shiite Imam Al-Askari in Samarra at the start of reconstruction work on February 5, 2008.

An audit of US-funded reconstruction projects for Iraq has found millions of dollars have been wasted because many schemes have never been completed.

The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction blamed delays, costs, poor performance and violence for failure to finish some 855 projects, BBC reported.

Many other projects had been falsely described as complete, found the audit of 47,321 reconstruction projects.

Iraq reconstruction has cost US taxpayers more than \$100 billion so far.

USAID, the body responsible for overseeing Iraqi reconstruction, has responded that the database used for the review was incomplete.

The audit by Senator Stuart Bowen found US officials had terminated at least 855 projects before completion.

Of this number, 112 were ended because of the contractors' poor performance.

Danielle Brian, executive director of the watchdog group Project on Government Oversight, said: "The report paints a depressing picture of money being poured into failed Iraq reconstruction projects."

"Contractors are killed, projects are blown up just before being completed, or the contractor just stops doing the work."

Last year, congressional investigators said as much as \$10 billion charged by US contractors

for Iraq reconstruction had been questionable.

Reconciliation Talks

Representatives from Iraq's main ethnic groups on Sunday wound up three days of talks in Finland where they studied reconciliation processes in Northern Ireland and South Africa, the organizers said.

"After three days of intense discussion the conferees adopted a set of principles for joint national action in addition to a set of implementation mechanisms with the aim of advancing national reconciliation in Iraq," the Finnish non-profit organization Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) said in a statement.

"Most importantly, they agreed that dialogue and negotiation was the primary means of resolving political disputes," it said.

According to AFP, thirty-six Iraqis took part in the closed-door seminar on "Divided Societies," in addition to representatives from the South African and Northern Irish peace processes.

"I am satisfied with the progress we have achieved in the difficult circumstances of our ongoing conflict and trust that we can achieve more in the coming months," Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, the chairman of the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) of the Iraqi National Assembly, said in the statement.

The Iraqis agreed to meet again within three months in Baghdad to finalize their work "and

refine the principles and mechanisms that would enable them to reach a national agreement."

Mass Graves Found

In a related news, Iraqi security forces found more than 100 bodies in two mass graves. Fifty bodies were found in a mass grave in central Iraq on Sunday, a military source in the area said.

Another team said it had discovered more than 50 bodies in a grave in Mahmudiya, a town 30 kilometers south of Baghdad, on April 17.

Violence Continues

Meanwhile, US and Iraqi troops killed 38 people in fierce clashes in Baghdad, including 22 who attacked a military checkpoint in a nearby area, the US military said Monday.

Fighters, apparently taking advantage of a sandstorm that blanketed the capital, attacked several checkpoints and hammered the US-protected Green Zone in the fiercest salvo in weeks on Sunday. The sandstorm had grounded the American aircraft that normally prowls for launching teams, AP reported.

On Monday morning, the insurgents lobbed more rockets or mortar shells toward the Green Zone, which houses the US embassy and much of the Iraqi government on the west side of the Tigris River. Alarms could be heard and the public address system in the area warned residents to take cover and stay away from windows.