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A New Way Forward in Afghanistan: A Request for Change in U.S. Policy

*by Dr. Sima Samar**

INTRODUCTION

DEPOSE THE TALIBAN. RESTORE FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY. PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS. The United States has always presented its military intervention in Afghanistan in these simple terms. After the quick ousting of the Taliban, the signing of the Bonn Agreement brought hope for pluralistic government and human dignity. Seven years into Operation Enduring Freedom, however, promises made by the United States and the international community to the people of Afghanistan remain largely unfulfilled.

The demands of the Afghan people were not very high; they included basic notions of human security and freedom to exercise basic human rights. Several strategic mistakes have undercut the achievement of these goals. U.S.-led forces succeeded in removing the Taliban but failed to eradicate it before diverting attention to Iraq. Relying on warlords who have no commitment to democracy to maintain order, U.S. policy over-emphasized military power at the expense of nation and state building, economic growth, and social development.

On March 26, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama unveiled his foreign policy plan in Afghanistan. The plan, which centers around a troop surge, includes military and civil society training, making deals with certain groups of insurgents, and financial aid to Pakistan. In its implementation, the plan must not only deal with the effects of the security vacuum but take a more holistic approach in addressing the causes of the lack of security. A troop surge would provide short term security gains but will result in little enduring change unless complemented with a "development surge." The United States must reframe its security goals to encompass the overall human security threat of poverty, and any political solution must promote basic human rights and equality.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since 1978, three distinct phases have marked the conflicts in Afghanistan, and U.S. policy mistakes during each phase continue to haunt Afghanistan. The first phase started in 1978 with a bloody, top-down revolution, and continued through the occupation by the Soviet Union in December 1979. The Soviet occupation resulted in a decade and a half of forced disappearances, displacement of civilians, mass killings, and political oppression by the ruling pro-Soviet forces. When the United States and other western forces chose to support the Afghans' fight against the Soviet invasion, they chose the most backward and conservative groups as proxy fighters against the communist regime.



Head of community development council in a village in Afghanistan.

Subsequently, these groups became increasingly uncontrollable and transformed into the biggest problem of Afghan society.

The 1992 collapse of the Soviet-backed regime of Dr. Mohammad Najibullah prompted the second phase. The United States and western countries lost interest in Afghanistan after the end of the cold war. Most of the military factions who fought the Soviet troops and the pro-Soviet government consolidated their hold on power and began fighting amongst each other. The warring factions used ethnicity as a divisive weapon and sparked another round of serious human rights violations. Ignoring such human rights abuses was the second phase's strategic mistake.

The third phase began in 1994 with the emergence of the Taliban in Kandahar. The Afghan people were weary of pervasive lawlessness and of the intense fighting among Mujahideen groups; the Taliban attracted civilians with the promise of security provided by confiscating weapons from the various rival political groups. As soon as the Taliban gained control

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of most parts of Afghanistan, they became more violent and more restrictive of people's basic freedoms. Although every Afghan citizen suffered under the Taliban regime, its primary victims were women and ethnic and religious minorities. During the Taliban regime, the West's apathy completely isolated Afghanistan, turning it into a safe haven for terrorists and into the world's biggest opium producer. Although the proxy war in Afghanistan was won against the communists, it degenerated into a bloody civil war. Not until after the attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 ("9/11") did the world focus again on the situation in Afghanistan and realize that it had become al-Qaeda's playground.

IMPROVING SECURITY

Currently, Afghan civilians are sandwiched between international forces and the Taliban. The high numbers of civilian casualties produced by international action makes it difficult for Afghans to recognize the friendly purposes of the international forces; the Taliban and other insurgent groups use this confusion as leverage to manipulate civilians. In conducting military operations, therefore, both international forces and the Afghan government must adhere to international humanitarian and human rights laws and minimize civilian casualties. The troops must show the Afghan people that the international forces will protect and restore safety and security.

The security strategy needs to become more organized and comprehensive. Differences of strategy among the international community tend to impact the country negatively. The various Provincial Reconstruction Teams should coordinate with each other and learn from each others' successes and failures. Additionally, the international community should avoid viewing security in Afghanistan as an isolated problem. A regional solution is required, especially one that includes neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. President Obama's plan is encouraging because it emphasizes cooperation with Pakistan, but progress in Pakistan requires resolution of the conflict in the Kashmir region between Pakistan and India. The continuation of ethnic and religious conflict in Kashmir provides a focus around which Islamic extremists can rally and radicalism can grow. The United States and the international community should engage Afghanistan's neighbors with a united approach.

It is cheaper and more sustainable to train and fund Afghan security forces than to have a continued NATO presence, and President Obama has pledged additional resources to do so. Maximizing the effectiveness of those resources requires learning from past mistakes and examining the shortcomings of the current domestic security apparatus. Traditionally, local police are underequipped, ill-resourced, and underpaid. Remedying these shortcomings should be the cornerstone for establishing a committed and professional Afghan National Police Force ("ANP"). Mechanisms should be implemented to closely monitor the ANP and the Afghan National Army ("ANA") to hold them accountable for their actions. Quick fixes should be avoided, and structural support ought not be directed towards tribal militia or Afghan National Auxiliary police. Similarly, the creation of an Iraqi-style militia should be avoided because recent history has shown that militias do not protect the state. Militia member loyalties lie, not with the constitution of Afghanistan, but with the militia commanders who supply income and employment. Creating tribal militias also sparks more ethnic tension



Courtesy of Michal Przedlacki

Boys selling bread in a Northern Afghan village.

and undermines important peace-building initiatives such as the Disarmament, Demilitarization, and Reintegration process ("DDR") and the Disband Illegally Armed Groups program ("DIAG"); both programs transform former soldiers in post-conflict regions into civilians.

Achieving lasting peace requires a political solution, but political solutions should not be limited solely to negotiation with Taliban and opposition groups. Working with opposition groups should not overshadow efforts to enhance the capacity and capability of the existing institutions that are based on good governance, rule of law, and human rights. Any political negotiation with anti-government elements should not compromise accountability, justice, and human rights principles, and the victims of human rights violations should not be victimized for political gains again and again.

FIGHTING POVERTY

Merely addressing the obvious signs of the lack of security are insufficient to effectuate enduring change. A "development surge" must complement the troop surge, and the concept of security must incorporate overall "human security" and address the issue of poverty. Fighting poverty requires the rebuilding of Afghanistan's physical and social institutions. Such reconstruction efforts require an increase in development aid and its wise allocation.

A comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy for the reduction of poverty will reduce the ability of terrorist organizations to recruit young Afghans and Muslims. We cannot reduce poverty without investing in education, the primary tool for changing the mentality of a society. One of the reasons the war in Afghanistan has been so long and violent is the population's lack of education. All levels of education need support, including scholarships for higher education. Greater access to education is especially important for young girls. Education builds the nation's human capacity for reconstructing Afghanistan's institutions. Health care must be another focus of the multi-dimensional strategy. Without access to health care, especially reproductive care and birth control, poverty reduction is not possible.

The Afghan government needs to increase its own capacity to utilize international aid and development assistance and enhance

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its commitment to carry out the reforms necessary for upholding good governance, rule of law, human rights, and justice. The government should concentrate on creating job opportunities for youths and ensuring fair distribution of development projects. Over the past seven years, most development money was allocated toward the southern provinces where the majority of violence and drug production occurred; very little was distributed toward more secure regions that do not produce opium. The government needs to shift to allocation policies that reward good behavior and build the capacity of stable regions that shelter persons displaced by ongoing war and conflict in other regions.

BUILDING LEGITIMACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

Establishing a credible, functioning, and responsive government did not receive enough attention over the last seven years. The Afghan government needs strong political will—and United States support—to fight corruption and promote accountability and justice. Free and fair elections and protecting the rights of women and minority groups are necessary elements to achieving legitimacy in government.

Promoting democracy through the mechanism of free and fair elections is essential to solving the problems of countries in conflict like Afghanistan. The only way to guarantee the sustainability of state institutions is to build the necessary confidence in our political system. The people of Afghanistan must buy into the ideas of democracy and power sharing in order for them to support and protect their elected government. As the August 2009 presidential and 2010 parliamentary elections approach, every possible effort should be made to ensure they are transparent, free, fair, and on time.

The election protection effort must incorporate security and transparency at every stage of the process. Enhanced security is necessary to create an environment that enables participation in the political process by all Afghans. Fraud and nepotism must be rooted out of the entire process, from voter registration to election day. Election officials should not allow culture and religion to undermine the integrity of the voting process. In some areas, residents claimed they did not want photographs taken of their women, and election officials allowed male members of the family to register lists of female names. Those male family members then voted on behalf of the female family members. This both prevented women from exercising their human rights as citizens and created an opportunity for mass voter fraud, as officials never confirmed the existence of the registered names. Elections

alone do not guarantee democracy anywhere, especially if they are not genuine and free.

I believe that increasing the people’s support for the government will minimize the power of anti-government groups. Political solutions should not marginalize the rights of the people for the expedience of integrating abusive power-holders. Nor should human rights principles be sidelined. As the Afghan government becomes a more assertive advocate of human rights and good governance, it will increase the likelihood of ending the culture of impunity and of replacing the law of force with the force of law.

Sustaining and promoting human rights is necessary for achieving peace, stability, development, and security. The protection and promotion of human rights, women’s rights, and gender equality is an unconditional state responsibility. Unfortunately, neither the Afghan government nor the international community took the rights-based approach seriously in the past seven years.

Any public policy that truly intends to achieve peace in Afghanistan should have human rights and women’s rights at its center. An important ingredient of peace is justice. Without justice, the peace-building process will be incomplete and unsustainable. The government should cut ties with well-known human rights violators and warlords. The culture of impunity must end immediately, and everyone should be held accountable for their actions. The reform of the judiciary system can help build confidence among the Afghan people in the capabilities of the government and international community. The Afghan and U.S. governments need a more comprehensive strategy for promoting human rights, especially women’s rights, in Afghanistan. Tradition, culture, and religion are no excuse for failing to promote women’s rights and women’s political participation in the country.

CONCLUSION

President Obama pledged additional troops and resources in order to foster security and development in Afghanistan. Security cannot be reached without development, however, and development cannot be sustained without security. Neither security nor development is possible without respect for human rights and the full participation of women. U.S. policy in Afghanistan must endorse these rights-based values and not allow deference to traditional culture and religion to excuse failures to protect human rights and women’s rights.

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