

AFGHANISTAN | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

The security situation in Afghanistan has further deteriorated with the expansion of the Taliban insurgency in the southern and eastern parts of the country, continuing crime, the re-arming of former warlords and factional violence in the North.

Shortly after a pro-“amnesty bill” mass demonstration in Kabul on 23 February and the passing of the amnesty bill by the Afghan lower house on 10 March (see below), member of parliament Sayed Mustafa Kazimi announced the formation of a new multi-ethnic political party, the United National Front (UNF or *Jabhe-ye-Motahed-e-Milli*). Members of the UNF are drawn from the former Northern Alliance and communist parties, and include former Afghan President Rabbani, Uzbek factional leader Dostum, parliament speaker Younis Qanooni of the Panjiri faction and Mustafa Zahir, the grandson of the deposed King Mohammed Zahir Shah. In early April, President Karzai also publicly admitted that he and his government have been holding talks with the Taliban for some time. These talks were aimed at bringing the moderate Afghan Taliban (as opposed to foreign fighters or leaders such as Mullah Omar or Hiz-b-Islami’s Hekmatyar) into the national reconciliation process.

In light of increased Taliban activity in the South, Afghanistan’s neighbor, Pakistan has come under increasing pressure from the US and, to some extent, the Karzai government. Both the US and Afghanistan have accused Pakistan of providing a safe haven for Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in its bordering tribal belt – allegations that are routinely rejected by Pakistani officials. However, President Musharraf has taken a number of measures to appease its international ally, the US – e.g. the alleged arrest of Mullah Akhund, the former Taliban Defence Minister and deputy of Taliban Chief Mullah Omar.

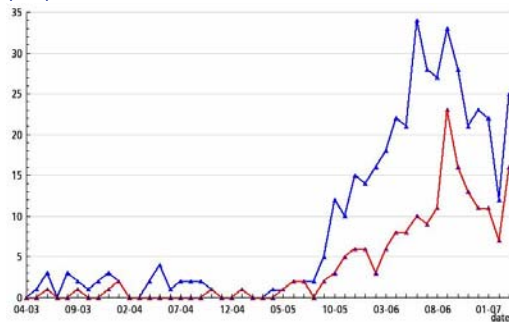
On 24 March the United Nations Security Council extended the mandate of UNAMA for another year.

SECURITY

The South, South West and East have seen daily clashes between the Taliban, Afghan security forces and international troops. At least 350 Afghans have been killed so far this year in roadside bombings and suicide attacks. Senior Taliban leaders have intensified “psychological warfare” and have on several occasions announced that

thousands of Taliban fighters were willing to go to war and strike with suicide bombings. A high-profile Taliban attack on the US Bagram Airport outside of Kabul on 27 February – during the presence of US Vice President Dick Cheney – is indicative of a well-organised Taliban network that has the ability to strike very quickly. Although Cheney’s life was never at stake in this attack, the bombing sent a strong message to international forces. While the international forces claim that the Taliban have increasingly shifted tactics from positional warfare and open engagement to asymmetric warfare such as (suicide) bombings (see graph), insurgents still overrun and temporarily control districts in the South. ISAF and troops under the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have adapted their strategy accordingly by making increasing use of targeted killings or arrests of leading Taliban figures.

Level of suicide bombings (red) and bombings in general (blue)



Source: FAST event data

NATO command officially shifted from the UK to the US at the beginning of February 2007. Against the backdrop of a looming Taliban offensive, NATO officials repeatedly called on the international community to strengthen the stretched ISAF forces in the insurgency-affected areas and to lift some of the caveats on their rules of engagement. Apart from the US and British, who announced troop reinforcements of several thousands, other NATO partners such as France or Spain refused further engagement. Germany, as a compromise, agreed to send six tornado jets – yet only for reconnaissance purposes. Many Western nations face increasing domestic criticism of their military involvement abroad, and Italian Prime Minister Prodi nearly lost his post in February over the vote for the extension of Italy’s troops’ presence of 1,950 in Afghanistan. Capitalizing on this domestic pressure, the Taliban kidnapped Swiss-Italian journalist Mastrogiacomo in March and only released him after an exchange of five imprisoned Taliban by the Karzai government. The deal was strongly criticised by other NATO countries. Mastrogiacomo’s Afghan interpreter, who was kidnapped at the same time, was executed on 8 April by the Taliban. The Karzai government’s unwillingness to prevent the killing of a co-national created a strong sense of betrayal amongst Afghans.

The peace deal struck in autumn 2006 between tribal elders and the British ISAF forces in Musa Qala, Helmand province became obsolete when Taliban fighters stormed the district capital on 2 February. Government attempts to recapture the city through the mediation of tribal elders have so far been unsuccessful. With the purpose of

demonstrating that it still has a grip on security in the South, NATO together with Afghan forces launched "Operation Achilles" on 6 March in four districts of the Helmand province to pre-empt the much talked-about Taliban spring offensive. The primary aim of this offensive, which involved over 5500 troops, was to secure the economically important Kajaki Dam – a major irrigation project benefiting over a million farmers in the South. Secondly, the offensive aimed at re-conquering Musa Qala, which is still in the hands of the Taliban. NATO portrayed the ongoing offensive as a success, although parts of northern Helmand remain under Taliban control. The offensive reportedly claimed the lives of dozens of Taliban; the number of civilian casualties remains unclear.

In March, a foreign employee of the German development organisation DWHH was killed in the northern province of Sari Pul. The province is not affected by the Taliban insurgency. However, Afghan co-workers were harassed for working for "infidels". The fact that only an international employee was killed, points to ideological motives.

In February the EU announced the launching of a training program for regular Afghan police. By mid-February, over 3000 auxiliary police officers were trained out of a projected 11,000.

SOCIAL

On 1 February, the Wolesi jirga (lower house) passed a controversial amnesty bill for former warlords and communist parties. Due to sharp criticism – particularly from the UN, minority parliamentarians and human rights groups – President Hamid Karzai made some amendments to the law before parliament adopted it with a strong majority on 10 March. The amnesty bill provides a general amnesty for political groups and belligerents who committed war crimes prior to the setting-up of the 2001 Interim Administration. Even though the "group amnesty" does not prevent victims of crimes from bringing individual members of these groups to justice, the weak judiciary and prevailing insecurity make prospects for actual prosecutions unrealistic.

Due to an imminent NATO attack attempting to recapture Musa Qala in Helmand, several thousand civilians fled the area, whilst in March floods and landslides in 19 provinces killed over 90 people. Poppy eradication drives in Helmand, Farah and Nangarhar led to local protests and violence (sometimes Taliban-backed), causing several deaths. Afghans have been increasingly alienated by numerous civilian casualties at the hands of international security forces, such as the killing of over 20 civilians in the Nangarhar (through excessive use of force) and Kapisa provinces on 4 and 5 March respectively. Moreover, due to endemic insecurity, ordinary Afghans in the South increasingly prefer the Taliban as the lesser evil to a non-existent state security and corrupt central government. The Taliban also recruit unemployed and frustrated youths by offering better pay than the Afghan security forces.

Taliban attacks on schools have dropped compared to previous months as schools are building local "defence committees" made up of community representatives. With the start of the academic year at the end of March, schools will open doors to over six million pupils.

ECONOMIC

According to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Tom Koenig, trade with partners has increased and inflation declined while poppy cultivation and the drug economy are growing. A record poppy harvest is expected for 2007, particularly in Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul and Nimroz. According to UNODC, opium cultivation in the central-northern part of the country, however, is decreasing. An assessment of the Asian Development Bank expects the overall GDP growth for the year 2006/2007 (ending 20 March) to reach only 8% in comparison to estimates of 12% by the IMF. Several key donors pledged additional aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction and strengthening of the security sector, such as the US (USD \$10.6 billion), the EU (EUR 600 million), Japan (USD \$6.7 million), India (USD \$100 million), Canada (USD \$172 million), the World Bank (USD \$25 million), and ADB (USD \$60 million).

OUTLOOK

The future prospects for Afghanistan are bleak. The security situation is expected to deteriorate with government personnel and security forces (national and international) being the primary targets of the Taliban. While expanding their area of operation, the Taliban will bring several districts under their temporary control. Even though the Taliban are unlikely to win this war militarily, they make psychological and tactical gains, e.g. through kidnappings. These highly publicized kidnappings negatively shape public opinion in the West about military engagement in Afghanistan. The successful exploitation of the Mastrogiacommo kidnapping by the Taliban increases the likelihood of further kidnappings, of which the latest kidnappings of 13 Afghans and two French aid workers are indicative. The deteriorating security situation combined with the higher risk of kidnappings, further limits the operational space of development organizations.

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