

AFGHANISTAN | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

Apart from the threat of the on-going Taliban insurgency, the Karzai government and his Western-backed cabinet face increasing opposition from various fronts, such as the parliament and members of recently formed alliances (e.g. the United National Front [UNF]), which include warlords from the former Northern Alliance. At the beginning of June, the Supreme Court backed President Karzai and ruled that the ousting of Foreign Minister Rangeen Dadfar Spanta by the lower house in May was unconstitutional. However, the speaker of the lower house and member of the UNF, Muhammad Younus Qanuni, refuses to heed the Supreme Court's ruling and maintains that the lower house's non-confidence vote and the dismissal of the foreign minister were irrevocable.

On 10 June, in what seems to be a demonstration of power, the Taliban challenged President Hamid Karzai by firing rockets towards him in the Ghazni province; no one was injured in the attack. At the end of July, in another attempt to undermine the Karzai administration, Taliban insurgents kidnapped and killed four judges from the Paktika province, accusing them of collaborating with the government. This incident occurred a few weeks after an international conference on the rule of law in Afghanistan was held in Rome on 2 and 3 July, where international donors pledged US\$360 million for the training of judges, the construction of new prisons and other measures to strengthen the judicial system over the next four years. The judicial system is considered to be frail and plagued by corruption, thus constituting an obstacle to meaningful security sector reform. At the same time, the state judiciary is being challenged by parallel judicial structures established by the Taliban; numerous alleged criminals were publicly tried by Taliban courts and subsequently hanged.

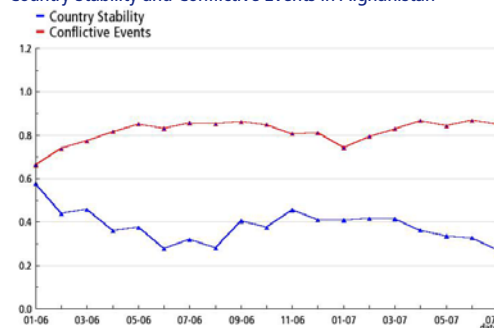
Concerning its relations with neighboring countries, the government has refuted US and NATO allegations that Iran might be involved in supplying arms to the Taliban in Afghanistan and has emphasized its good relations with Iran. Verbal hostility between Pakistani and Afghan officials appears to have diminished in the past weeks, possibly because of Pakistan's various internal problems (see FAST Updates on Pakistan). At the beginning of June, the Pakistani and Afghan tribal jirga commissions agreed on an agenda and terms of reference for the future proceedings of the joint peace jirga; the first jirga meeting will be held in Kabul in August.

Afghanistan's former king and "father of the nation," Mohammed Zahir Shah died on 23 July at the age of 92 in Kabul. Three days of national mourning were imposed by the government to honor the death of the popular former ruler of Afghanistan.

SECURITY

The security situation and country stability in Afghanistan are deteriorating (see graph). Afghan security forces and international forces continued positional warfare and direct combat with the Taliban in Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Ghazni and other provinces in the south, east and west. In these clashes, numerous Taliban insurgents – and high numbers of civilians – were reportedly killed. Conflicting views on these incidents are virulent as all parties involved try to advance their point of view. Apart from traditional open engagement with

Country Stability and Conflictive Events in Afghanistan



Source: FAST event data

Afghan and international forces, the Taliban continue "asymmetric warfare" in the form of roadside and suicide bombings, primarily targeting Afghan police/security forces, government officials and international troops. 95 suicide attacks were reportedly conducted in 2007 until the end of July, compared to 51 in the respective period in 2006. The deadliest Taliban attack in the reporting period was the detonation of a bomb on a bus full of police instructors in Kabul on 17 June, which killed at least 35 people. The geographic scope of Taliban activities has also widened with an increased Taliban presence being observed in the Badghis province.

The major battle between international forces, the Afghan government and the Taliban, however, appears to be fought in the media. Reports of high numbers of Taliban insurgents or civilian fatalities at the hands of international troops are used by either side to legitimize their actions and to tarnish the image of the opponent. Reports of unprecedented numbers of civilians killed by international forces in the month of June (source: Associated Press) not only enraged the Afghan public and de-legitimized

Karzai's government but also led to domestic debates in various countries providing troops to ISAF/NATO against the engagement in Afghanistan. Despite several public commitments to lower civilian casualties by NATO officials and announcements of using smaller bombs, the international forces have yet to succeed in minimizing civilian casualties. This will remain difficult as long as international forces heavily rely on aerial attacks to make up for their weak presence on the ground.

The Taliban continue to use kidnappings of Afghans and internationals as a bargaining chip to demand the withdrawal of international troops, the release of Taliban prisoners, for ransom and to fuel public disagreement with the military engagement in Afghanistan in various ISAF countries. On 7 June, the Taliban released four Afghan

medical workers kidnapped in spring in exchange for the body of the recently killed Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah; a fifth hostage had been beheaded by the Taliban shortly before the "prisoner exchange" deal was struck. On 18 July, two German engineers and their five Afghan colleagues working with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were kidnapped in the Wardak province – later, the Taliban started raising demands for the release of these Germans. While one of the two Germans was later found dead (he was shot dead after he collapsed out of exhaustion), the other one remains in Taliban captivity. On 19 July, the Taliban also kidnapped 23 Korean aid workers (18 women) in the Ghazni province. They are demanding the release of Taliban prisoners and the withdrawal of around 200 Korean troops serving with the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) (Korea had planned to pull out its troops at the end of the year). Two male Korean hostages were killed by the Taliban in the course of negotiations between Taliban insurgents and Afghan and Korean government officials. In negotiations with kidnapers, the Karzai government is left with limited choices after it was heavily criticized by the US and other countries for the release of Taliban prisoners in exchange for Swiss-Italian journalist Mastrogiacomo in March. With the kidnapping of 23 Koreans, the Taliban have gained unprecedented coverage and attention in the media, which is another example of their successful use of psychological warfare, which empowers them way beyond their military might. However, even the Taliban have an interest in reaching a breakthrough in the Korean hostage negotiations, since killing them all would discredit them in the eyes of the Afghan public.

Outside of major cities, the security environment in the reconstruction work of international NGOs/development organizations is becoming increasingly volatile as the threat of kidnapping is mounting. On 28 July, unidentified gunmen killed an Afghan employee of the International Rescue Committee and his driver in the Logar province. Other national employees of International NGOs (INGOs) are becoming victims of Taliban kidnappings. In response to the threat of kidnapping, on 2 August the Ministry of Interior ordered that foreign aid workers were not allowed to leave Kabul without permission and without an armed escort. The deteriorating security situation and the travel restrictions imposed by the ministry have prompted several INGOs to pull out or to suspend some of their activities. This will ultimately lead to an additional slowing down of the reconstruction process – a development that will only play into the hands of the Taliban.

The newly elected French president Sarkozy has announced that France does not intend to pull out its 1000 troops in Afghanistan in the near future; the newly elected British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also did not announce a change in Britain's policy towards Afghanistan.

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC

Since June, tensions between the nomadic Pashtun Kochis and Hazara settlers in the Behsood district (Wardak province) over the use of grazing land escalated and resulted in several deaths and the displacement of hundreds of Hazaras, a mainly shia-muslim ethnic minority. A ceasefire brokered by the UN on 15 July brought the situation under control – although only in the short-term. The nomadic Kochis, who live on animal husbandry, have clashed with Hazaras for several years now and a true solution to the conflict over scarce resources between settled and nomadic groups has yet to be found.

The Iranian drive to expel illegal Afghan immigrants from an area bordering Afghanistan, which started in April, has slowed down in June after around 160,000 Afghans returned to the Farah and Nimroz provinces. The returnees, who are often young and have weak prospects for employment, make easy recruits for the Taliban who have reassembled in the northwest. Pakistan has also decided to repatriate all its Afghan refugees by 2009.

Preliminary figures provided by US officials suggest that the poppy harvest this year even surpasses the one of last year, with the Helmand province being the major contributor. Many Afghan farmers rely on poppy cultivation for their livelihoods. But the drug production and trafficking also nurture the insurgency (the Taliban tax poppy trade), fund illegal armed groups, foster corruption and erode the legitimate economy. Moreover, due to the growing poppy cultivation, drug addiction amongst Afghans has increased.

According to a statement by the Ministry of Education in June, there has been an increase in the number of students/teachers killed and schools burned down in the past 13 months. Nonetheless, the number of schools built and children enrolled in school is still higher than in 2001.

Floods in Panjshiri and other eastern provinces at the end of June have caused several dozens of deaths.

OUTLOOK

The security situation in Afghanistan will remain unstable since the Taliban increase their area of operation and step up the use of terror tactics. Fighting is expected to intensify as the poppy harvest is over. Last year, the number of security incidents increased significantly in September/October. Kidnappings of Afghans and internationals are likely to continue, not only by the Taliban but also by criminal elements seeking to obtain ransom. The Taliban will still emerge as winners if they can exchange hostages for Taliban prisoners or for the withdrawal of international troops, which only encourages them to continue with further kidnappings. This would entail severe consequences for the reconstruction process as aid agencies would have to restrict movement of their staff even further.

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