

## US turns to the Taliban

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*Asia Times*, June 14, 2003

KARACHI - Such is the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, compounded by the return to the country of a large number of former Afghan communist refugees, that United States and Pakistani intelligence officials have met with Taliban leaders in an effort to devise a political solution to prevent the country from being further ripped apart.

According to a Pakistani jihadi leader who played a role in setting up the communication, the meeting took place recently between representatives of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and Taliban leaders at the Pakistan Air Force base of Samungli, near Quetta.

The source told *Asia Times Online* that four conditions were put to the Taliban before any form of reconciliation can take place that could potentially lead to them having a role in the Kabul government, whose present authority is in essence limited to the capital:

- \* Mullah Omar must be removed as supreme leader of the Taliban.

- \* All Pakistani, Arab and other foreign fighters currently engaged in operations against international troops in Afghanistan must be thrown out of the country.

- \* Any US or allied soldiers held captive must be released.

- \* Afghans currently living abroad, notably in the United States and England, must be given a part in the government - through being allowed to contest elections - even though many do not even speak their mother tongue, such as Dari or Pashtu.

Apparently, the Taliban refused the first condition point blank, but showed some flexibility on the other terms. As such, this first preliminary contact made little headway. It is not known whether there will be further meetings, but given the fact that the reason for staging the talks in the first place remains unchanged, more contact can be expected.

The channels for the contact have been set up by Taliban who defected when the government collapsed in Kabul, and fled to

Pakistan, where they were sheltered in ISI safe houses. Now these defectors, working with Pakistani jihadis who know how to approach the Taliban leadership, are acting as go-betweens.

The backdrop to the first meeting is an ever-increasing escalation in the guerrilla war being waged against foreign troops in Afghanistan. Small hit-and-run attacks are a daily feature in most parts of the country, while face-to-face skirmishes are common in the former Taliban stronghold around Kandahar in the south.

According to people familiar with Afghan resistance movements, the one that has emerged over the past year and a half since the fall of the Taliban is about four times as strong as the movement that opposed Soviet invaders for nearly a decade starting in 1979.

The key reason for this is that the previous Taliban government - which is dispersed almost intact in the country after capitulating to advancing Northern Alliance forces without a fight - is backed by the most powerful force in Afghanistan: clerics and religious students.

For centuries, these people were the most respected segment of Afghan society, and before 1979 they never participated in politics. On the contrary, their role was one of reconciliation in conflicts. During the Afghan resistance movement against the USSR, things changed, and clerics threw their weight behind the mujahideen struggle, but, with a few exceptions, such as Maulana Yunus Khalis, they were not in command.

With the withdrawal of the Soviets and the emergence of the Taliban in the early 1990s, though, the situation once again changed. The Taliban, taking advantage of the power struggles among bitterly divided militias in Kabul, consolidated themselves into an effective political movement led by clerics and in 1996 seized power in Kabul. A part of their success also lay in the fact that initially Afghans, especially Pashtuns who make up the majority of the country, were reluctant to take up the gun against clerics.

Now, in the renewed guerrilla war against foreign troops, it is the clerics who are calling the shots. For instance, Hafiz Rahim is the most respected cleric in the Kandahar region, and he commands all military operations from the sanctuary of the mountainous terrain.

The US forces have employed maximum air support and advanced technology in an attempt to curtail attacks, but without the help of local Afghan forces they are unable to track down Hafiz Rahim, who to date has targeted US convoys scores of times. The United States has admitted a few deaths, while the Taliban claim they have killed many more than the official numbers state. For funds, the Taliban use money looted from the central bank before they abandoned Kabul, estimated in excess of US\$110 million, in addition to money received from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

At the same time, famed warlord Gulbbudin Hekmatyar has joined the resistance after returning from exile in Iran. His Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) is the most organized force in Afghanistan, and its participation has added real muscle to the resistance. Many top slots in the Kabul administration are occupied by former HIA members who, although they were once anti-Taliban, are loyal to the Islamic cause and anti-US. Also, several provincial governors and top officials are former HIA commanders. They are suspect in the eyes of the Americans, but because of their huge political clout it is impossible to remove them.

With this groundswell of support - even if in places it is only passive - and with Kabul's influence restricted to the capital, the

Americans and their allies will remain vulnerable targets, let alone be in a position to restore any form of law and order. It is in situations like this, argue most experts on Afghanistan, that traditionally insurrections begin in the Afghan army against foreign administrators.

This is not the end of the problems. More than 2 million Afghan refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, have returned to Afghanistan from countries all over the world, including India, Russia, Cambodia, Malaysia, Zimbabwe and Central Asian countries. Many of them belonged to communist factions during and after the Soviet invasion, while a number of their counterparts remained and now hold positions in Kabul.

At present, Kabul is divided into two main factions. The first is pro-US, which is represented by the US and allied troops and those loyal to President Hamid Karzai. The second is pro-Russian and pro-Iranian, represented by Defense Minister General Qasim Fahim and his Northern Alliance forces. Although the camps are cooperating at present, they are silently building their support bases to make a grab for full power once the present interim administration runs its course, a process that is due to begin in October with a *loya jirga* (grand council).

In this respect, every returned or returning former "communist comrade" is important, for should the Northern Alliance faction develop sufficient critical mass, it would come as no surprise if its leaders openly forged an alliance with the resistance movement.

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