

AFGHANISTAN | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

The general situation in Afghanistan remains unstable. The usually strained relationship with Pakistan has seen a temporary relaxation thanks to the joint peace jirga which was held in Kabul from 9-12 August. The peace jirga – an initiative built on a traditional Afghan conflict resolution mechanism – brought together around 650 participants from the Pashtun community living along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The Pakistani and Afghan delegations were comprised of government officials, retired bureaucrats, tribal elders and politicians. However, important actors from the Pashtun community, such as tribal elders from Pakistan's Waziristan area and pro-Taliban leaders of Pakistan's religious parties (e.g. the JUI-F) boycotted the event. Moreover, the Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami were not invited. Nevertheless, Afghan and Pakistani officials described the peace jirga as a success. President Musharraf – who failed to attend the opening session of the jirga – in his closing speech on 12 August, made an unexpected turn-around by admitting that Afghan militants received support from Pakistani soil. Musharraf's acknowledgement of Pakistan's role in the conflict in Afghanistan paved the way for the adoption of the final resolution of the peace jirga. The peace jirga declaration, among others, provides for the establishment of a small jirga made up of 25 participants from each country, mandated to hold a peace dialogue with the opposition (e.g. the Taliban). Following the peace jirga, Hamid Karzai renewed his offer for talks to the Taliban on 9 September. While the Taliban initially responded positively, a Taliban spokesman later made talks conditional upon a withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

The idea of seeking a negotiated settlement with the Taliban appears to have gained ground in Afghanistan and now even seems to be backed by the US, which could be explained by a possible military attack of the US in Iran. If the weakened President Karzai intends to win the presidential elections in 2009 he might indeed require Pashtun and Taliban backing to outweigh the growing opposition from former factional leaders of the Northern Alliance. However, some regional powers like Iran, India, Russia and China – and Central Asian states – would not be pleased to see the Taliban back in power, and, coupled with that, increased Pakistani influence in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Iran, however, might seek some rapprochement with its former enemy, the Taliban, in light of the current US threats. Despite an anti-Iranian campaign by the US that includes allegations of Iranian involvement in the insurgency in Afghanistan (through the supply of Iranian and Chinese weapons, etc.) the Karzai administration continuously stresses its good relations with Iran. Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited Kabul for the first time in the middle of August. At the end of his visit, the two governments signed various agreements to strengthen mutual cooperation. Apart from its Western allies, Afghanistan also sought to strengthen its ties with regional partners and organisations. On 15 August, President Karzai appeared as a special guest at the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Kyrgyzstan. The SCO groups China, Russia and the four Central Asian States Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia have observer status in the organization.

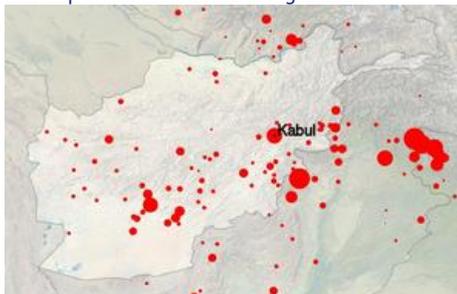
As a positive step in the fight against corruption, the Attorney General Abdul Jabbar Sabbit has ordered the arrest of a senior official in the Interior Ministry, Sakhi Ahmad Bayani, director of administrative affairs, on charges of embezzlement on 15 August; the Interior Ministry is particularly notorious for its corrupt leadership.

SECURITY

The poor security situation has not changed. The Taliban insurgency against national and international troops of ISAF/NATO and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in the south, east and west continues (see map), claiming many lives, particularly from among the police force (according to Afghan officials, 500 police officers died since March). Fighting was particularly intense in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Amidst unverifiable media reports it is difficult to assess to what extent the national/international forces or the Taliban have managed to claim additional territory. The number of civilian casualties at the hands of international troops (primarily from aerial strikes) – but also the Taliban (through suicide attacks, etc.) continue to be high. According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission 168 civilians died in August alone, 16% more than in the previous month. Suicide bombings – a very effective means of warfare employed by the Taliban – have also seen a marked increase since 2005 and reached a new peak this year. Within the reporting time, the most deadly occurred on September 29th when a suicide bomber detonated himself amid soldiers of the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) in Kabul, killing 30 and injuring many more. According to a recent UN report, around 80% of the victims of suicide bombings are civilians. A majority of the suicide attacks also appear to be committed by non-Afghans. The Taliban insurgency is not expected to diminish during the holy months of Ramadan which started in September.

A German national kidnapped by an unknown group on 18 July remains in captivity. During an attempt to pick up the German hostage, four Red Cross workers (including two foreigners) were seized in Wardak province but released a few days later without any demands raised. The 19 remaining of the 23 Korean hostages (two sick Korean

Risk Map of Conflictive Events in Afghanistan



Source: FAST event data

women had been released on 11 August and two male Koreans had been killed) – who had been kidnapped by the Taliban as part of their psychological warfare on 19 July – were finally released on 29 and 30 August, after the Korean delegation and the Taliban had managed to broker an agreement. According to this agreement, the Korean government agreed to withdraw all its Christian missionaries from Afghanistan and, in accordance with previous commitments, to pull out its troops by the end of the year. Although the Korean government denies the payment of ransom, it is unlikely the Taliban would have let the Koreans go with only such minor Korean concessions. Given the positive yield from the kidnappings, hostage taking is likely to continue in the future – not only from the Taliban but also from other groups seeking to profit from such activities. The Taliban and ordinary criminals also abducted and killed several Afghan nationals involved in demining – thereby undermining efforts to free the country from mines. According to a statement by the Interior Ministry on 5 September around 860 civilians have been killed or injured by mines and improvised explosive devices since January 2007.

On 15 August, a bomb blast in Kabul killed three German policemen. These attacks have to be seen against the backdrop of declining popular support of Germany's military engagement in Afghanistan (nearly 70% of the Germans reportedly question the effectiveness of the military efforts in Afghanistan) and a parliamentary vote on the extension of the mandate of Germany's 3000-strong troops due in October. Similar controversial debates about the military engagement in Afghanistan are taking place in the Netherlands (the 1,665-strong troops' mandate expires in one year) and Canada (mandate expires in 2009), both of which have troops in the troubled south. At the same time, Japan's logistical support of the international troops in Afghanistan is also not guaranteed beyond November 2007. On 19 September, the UN Security Council extended the ISAF/NATO mission by another year.

Apart from the Taliban insurgency, the Northern provinces face insecurity and lawlessness at the hands of (former) commanders and drug traffickers. The Karzai administration – which partly includes former factional leaders – is too weak to challenge these leaders and to hold them accountable.

The European Union's efforts to train the Afghan police are only slowly taking pace, although the 160-strong police assistance mission has been in the country since June. At the end of August, the US, the UN and the EU have agreed with the Afghan government to improve coordination (through the setting up of an International Police Coordination Board Secretariat) and to adopt common standards in building up the police force. This is an important step in strengthening the weak and corrupt police force.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime the area under poppy cultivation has risen by 17% since last year (to 193,000 hectares) whilst the poppy harvest has gone up by 34% (to 8,200 tons) since 2006. Afghanistan is now producing 95% of the world's opium. The positive news is that in the center and north of Afghanistan, where the government has increased its authority and presence, opium cultivation is diminishing and the number of opium-free provinces has gone up from six to thirteen. However, the opposite trend was observed in southern Afghanistan, where 80% of opium poppies were grown in a handful of highly instable provinces along the border with Pakistan. Helmand province, where the Taliban have a strong presence, accounts for nearly half of the country's poppy production. Moreover, the UN found that most opium is processed into heroine within the country. What is interesting and seems to contradict common perceptions is that poppy cultivation is not primarily related to poverty. The fertile Helmand province is only half as poor as the provinces in the centre and north. The UN thus states that rather than poverty, government control is inversely related to opium production. However, the decline in poppy cultivation in the north has to be taken with a pinch of salt, as poppy cultivation has been more and more replaced by cannabis, which yields increasing profits on the market.

Some of the 200,000 illegal Afghan immigrants expelled from Iran since April still live under difficult conditions in the western part of Afghanistan. Given the precarious situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan has postponed the closure of its largest refugee camp (Jalozai camp which hosts around 100,000 people) until March 2008. According to UN estimates, around 80,000 persons have been displaced by insecurity in the south, southwest and east in the past three years – often living under very difficult conditions at IDP camps. Moreover, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in September warned that nearly half of the country was now affected by the Taliban insurgency, and that Afghanistan was clearly shifting from a "development" to an emergency scenario. Moreover, prevailing insecurity, kidnappings (e.g. the latest killings and abductions of foreign employees of a Bangladeshi NGO) and restricted mobility often makes it difficult for aid organizations to access the people most in need.

OUTLOOK

The situation in Afghanistan is not expected to improve significantly in the coming months. The booming drug economy has led to criticism of the Karzai government's anti-drugs policy, particularly from the US. A new US poppy eradication strategy thus foresees tougher measures including aerial spraying. If the Afghan government decides to adopt this strategy the country is likely to slide into further instability, with insecurity rising and farmers deprived of their livelihoods likely to join hands with the Taliban. A US-led war in Iran – which as of yet is rather unlikely – would severely destabilize not only Afghanistan but the entire region.

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