

AFGHANISTAN | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

The situation in Afghanistan remains unstable and insecure. Following its formation in March, the heterogeneous United National Front (UNF; *Jabhe-ye-Motahed-e-Milli*) has announced its major demands: a change from the presidential to a parliamentary system, proportional voting in elections, election of provincial governors, coordination of activities of foreign troops and Afghan security forces (thus “legalizing” their presence), recognition of the Durand Line, and talks with armed groups (e.g. moderate Taliban). All these demands would serve to strengthen the power of diverse members of the UNF (leading warlords, communists, the King’s grandson) vis-à-vis the Karzai government. Interestingly, the vice president is also a member of the UNF and thus both in government and the opposition. President Karzai accused neighboring countries (e.g. Russia, Central Asian states and Iran) of having a hand in the formation of the UNF. He also rejects the UNF’s idea of a parliamentary or federal system, saying this might fuel ethnic and linguistic division. On 28 May, nine people died after Afghan police opened fire on demonstrators in Shiberghan in the Jowzjan province. The demonstrators who are supporters of the Uzbek factional leader and member of the UNF, Gen. Rashid Dostum, were demanding the resignation of the Pashtun governor, accusing him of trafficking and clandestine links with Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami. This incident provides further evidence that some warlords are attempting to (re)gain influence and power.

On 12 May, the Lower House dismissed Foreign Minister Spanta over his inability to persuade Iran to stop repatriating large numbers of Afghan migrants (see below). Hamid Karzai – who sees his regime increasingly being attacked by opposition groups – has referred the case of Spanta’s dismissal to the Supreme Court for a final ruling. On 10 May, Afghanistan’s Lower House had already dismissed the refugee minister, arguing he was not doing enough to assist the large number of refugees flooding into western Afghanistan. On 8 May, the Upper House, which is dominated by Karzai appointees, passed a bill calling on the government to hold dialog with Afghan Taliban and prohibiting international troops from engaging in fighting unless under attack. The bill is probably part of Karzai’s attempt to assuage public opinion over numerous killings of civilians at the hands of international forces (see below) and is based on a realization that the Taliban might not be defeated militarily. It can also be seen as an endeavor to split the Taliban movement. The US is strictly against talks with the Taliban, while the UN and some Western nations have argued in favor of such talks.

In the past months, the media has come under increasing pressure from the Taliban and the government. Upon the order of Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet, who felt misquoted in a news clip, police raided the office of the private TV station Tolo TV on 17 April, manhandled the staff and arrested three persons. On 23 May, the Lower House also approved the amended draft media law; the major change concerns the appointment of the head and members of the supreme media commission by election. In the past, the media commission was made up of independent journalists etc. rather than government officials, although it was headed by the Information and Culture Minister. The new media law is viewed by some as an attempt by the government to bring the media under tighter control.

On 13 May, the Taliban’s top tier military commander, Mullah Dadullah, was killed along with his brother Mullah Shah Mansoor and two other commanders in clashes with international (reportedly British) and Afghan forces in the Helmand province. Although Dadullah’s death is unlikely to break the Taliban command structure, it is a moral blow to the movement. Soon after his death, Dadullah was replaced by his younger brother, Mullah Bakht Mohammed alias Dadullah Mansoor. The death of Mullah Dadullah might empower Taliban commanders like Haqqani and Saifullah Mansoor who have their powerbase in southeastern rather than southern Afghanistan.

On 4 May, Karzai announced that about 700 elders, politicians and others from Afghanistan and Pakistan will be meeting on 1 August for a traditional jirga on Taliban insurgency. Apart from this, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains tense. On 19 April, Afghan and Pakistani security forces clashed along the border of the Paktia province and South Waziristan in Pakistan, where Pakistan has started building a fence to curb cross-border Taliban activity. Even a meeting of the two nations in Turkey on 29 and 30 April – resulting in the adoption of the Ankara Declaration and the establishment of a mechanism to address issues of concern – failed to prevent new border clashes in the Paktia province on 13 and 14 May, which killed at least 12 people. One ISAF/NATO and one Pakistani soldier were killed and several others wounded in these clashes. They were fired at by unknown assailants after they held peace talks near Teri Mangal in Pakistan with ISAF/NATO, Afghan and Pakistani representatives. The exact circumstances of all these clashes and particularly which side initiated the fighting, remain unclear. ISAF/NATO has, however, called on Pakistan to fully investigate the incident of 14 May, which killed one ISAF/NATO soldier, claiming that the shooter was wearing a Pakistan Frontier Corps uniform. On 17 May, Afghan and Pakistani forces exchanged fire again in the border area of Khyber agency, Pakistan, injuring two Afghan soldiers.

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC

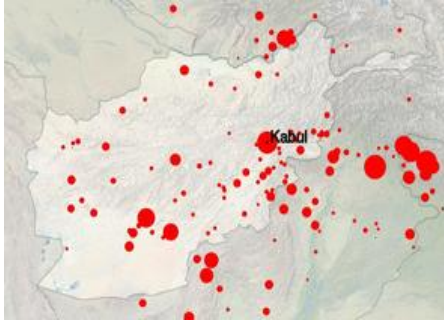
At the same time as Pakistan has intensified repatriation of Afghan refugees, Iran has started repatriating large numbers of Afghans living illegally in its territory. Iran started expelling the migrants on 21 April, intending to send back half of the approximately one million illegal migrants in the first phase. By the end of May, more than 85,000 Afghans have been repatriated from Iran and many of them live under precarious conditions in western Afghanistan. The exact motives of Iran’s repatriation scheme are not clear; while some argue that it has economic

reasons, others claim that Iran is intending to destabilize Afghanistan. Remittances sent home from Afghans working abroad are an important means of livelihood in most parts of rural Afghanistan.

In April, the World Bank and the IMF announced that based on an initial assessment and subject to some conditions Afghanistan was eligible for assistance under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Moreover, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCBM) found during a meeting on 1 May that progress on the implementation of the Afghanistan Compact was satisfactory. From 3-4 April, Afghanistan attended for the first time as an official member a summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Delhi.

SECURITY

Risk map of conflictive events in Afghanistan, April to May 2007



Source: FAST event data

“Operation Achilles” by NATO and Afghan security forces in the Helmand province in the south has continued. The operation primarily aims at re-establishing government control in this poppy-rich area. The Taliban and NATO/Afghan troops have engaged in traditional, positional warfare in various districts in the Helmand (e.g. under the British-led operation “Silicon” in Sangin), Zabul, Kapisa, Kandahar and Ghazni provinces. Apart from reports of large numbers of insurgents being killed, it is difficult to assess to what extent NATO and the Afghan security forces have managed to re-capture territory from the Taliban. Some Taliban withdrawal in these areas might be due to the fact that poppy is being harvested in April – and not because of a military victory by international forces. The international forces’ supremacy on the battlefield seems to primarily depend on air strikes – which inherently carry the risk of higher casualties among the civilian population. The Taliban, on the other hand, have continued “psychological warfare” (suicide bombing, ambushes, roadside bombs) primarily in urban areas, often targeting Afghan security forces, government officials and international troops. Frequently civilians die in these attacks. The Taliban, moreover, seek to divert international troops engaged in the south by attacking them in the more peaceful north. On 19 May, a suicide bomber killed nine persons, including three German soldiers in a crowded market in Kunduz. On 23 May, a Finnish soldier was killed in a blast in the Faryab province. Such attacks – coupled with kidnappings - fuel domestic demands in the targeted countries for withdrawal of their troops. It is not a coincidence, that these targeted countries are often in the process of re-evaluating their engagement in Afghanistan (e.g. the French during the presidential elections, the Italians prior to the prolongation of its troop presence in Afghanistan, etc.). (For places of violent encounters see risk map)

The two French aid workers kidnapped by the Taliban in the Nimroz province at the beginning of April were released by the Taliban on 28 April and 11 May respectively. It is not clear what the exact circumstances of their release were; in earlier statements, the Taliban had made their release conditional upon the withdrawal of French troops and the release of imprisoned militants. The three kidnapped Afghan colleagues of the French aid workers were also released on 27 May, while the fate of five Afghan medical staff kidnapped on 27 March still remains uncertain (although one person has reportedly been executed). On 17 April, five people traveling in a UN vehicle were killed in a roadside bombing in Kandahar; four of the five dead were Nepalese. On 8 May, another local employee of UNHCR was shot dead by unknown men in Kandahar.

The killings of numerous civilians by international forces, such as in Herat (49 civilians killed on 27 and 29 April; source: UN), Helmand, Nangarhar, Kandahar and other places have sparked popular protest in several parts of the country. The high death toll among civilians was also criticized by Karzai, the UN and even NATO/ISAF when the deaths were caused by the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The civilian deaths not only fuel resentment against international troops but also further undermine the credibility of the Karzai government. Thousands of civilians have also been displaced due to the fighting between the Taliban and international/national forces in war-torn areas. According to Associated Press counts, 1800 people have been killed in insurgency related violence so far this year, including 135 civilians killed each by international forces and the Taliban. According to UN figures, 320-380 civilians have been killed by the Taliban and government/international forces in the first four months of 2007. Compared to the figures of Human Rights Watch from last year, these new figures suggest an increase in civilian casualties of around 40%. In a statement on 29 May, Taliban chief Mullah Omar called for the establishment of an independent body to investigate civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

A few nations pledged to increase their troops in Afghanistan: Australia (from 550 to around 1000 until next year), Denmark (up to 600), Poland (additional 1000 troops), Bulgaria (up to 400) and, surprisingly, Italy (another 145 soldiers). Many other countries have resisted calls for troop reinforcements.

OUTLOOK

The situation in Afghanistan is expected to deteriorate. Apart from continued military engagement by both the Taliban and international/national forces, the real struggle seems to evolve around the perception of which side is winning within the ordinary population, and which side can create an air of legitimacy and power – a struggle the Taliban are handling very skillfully and presently, with more success than the internationals. The creation of the UNF – as brittle as it might be - is indicative of the former Northern Alliance member’s endeavors to secure power in their respective areas of control in a post-Karzai Afghanistan. Relations with Pakistan will remain tense and new fighting along the border might erupt.

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