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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Afghanistan: Asia's Congo

By Sanjeev Miglani

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For many in the West, Afghanistan and Iraq have much in common. Both are Islamic countries whose nasty regimes were kicked out by the U.S. after September 11 2001; in both places, the Americans, British and others stayed and spent huge amounts of money on nobody's quite sure what; and both were examples of 'evil', back when that was a cornerstone of foreign policy thinking.

But Afghanistan isn't just another Iraq. In many respects, it's much more like another country beloved of the international community: Democratic Republic of Congo.

In both, violence is so common that it's practically background noise, and only spectacular outrages win international attention. Armed rebel groups continue to roam the east of Congo at will, while the latest United Nations figures, to nobody's great surprise, showed the number of civilians killed in the Afghan war rose again last year.

Many Afghans and foreigners fear that, come the end-2014 exit of the 100,000-plus foreign combat troops who, after more than a decade, are still fighting to keep the Taliban at bay, attacks will grow even more frequent, and civil war is always on the table as a possible outcome.

Both countries suffer from extreme border insecurity and outside interference, in Afghanistan most notably from Pakistan. The Afghan government has suggested Pakistan's spy network backs the insurgents who blow people up in its cities, plant bombs along its roads and shoot its soldiers, a charge which is an article of faith among most Afghans.

Pakistan strongly denies the allegations, but a fence-mending visit to Kabul in early February by Pakistani foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar was totally overshadowed by a leaked U.S. military report which repeated the claim, and many Afghans believe there will be no peace in their country until Pakistan ceases meddling.

Domestically, thievery and disorder is the order of the day, from the pettiest official to the upper echelons of the administration. Transparency watchdogs rate both countries as among the most corrupt in the world, and regard among the public for their governments is pitifully low.

Allegations of vote-rigging — hardly a new phenomenon in central Africa — surrounded President Joseph Kabila's re-election late last year, while scandals like the 2010 Kabulbank collapse, in which senior Afghan officials among others pocketed almost half a billion dollars in undocumented loans, undermine domestic and foreign support for the political classes.

Public trust in the security forces is also fragile where it exists at all: according to a recent survey, only two in ten Afghans think their policemen can uphold law and order.

The army, despite the best efforts of willing Western soldiers, is dragged down by Afghan soldiers shooting their foreign comrades-in-arms; in Congo, the police and army have been accused of sex crimes and other atrocities.

Governments in Kabul and Kinshasa alike talk about natural resources as the magic solution that's going to employ their legions of jobless people, and bring cash into state coffers that would be near-empty without foreign aid.

Afghanistan, one of the most recent beneficiaries of Chinese investment in minerals, will have to be careful how it manages exploitation of its iron and copper: in Congo, many mineral deposits still finance nobody but the armed gangs who control them, and the corrupt officials who allow it to happen.

All these things common to Congo and Afghanistan feed into a general perception that the state does not serve the people but is instead a mechanism for enriching officials, and that the country, even when not actually at war, is ungovernable.

Diplomats and the international community at large insist the transition to full Afghan responsibility for security does not mean foreign abandonment post-2014, and that the global commitment to a secure, sovereign, well-governed Afghanistan is undiminished.

The voters back home aren't interested though, and when 'austerity' is the watchword in a Europe that can barely pay for its local excesses, let alone those in other parts of the world, appetite for engagement is shrivelling daily: in January, France said it wanted to get its boys out by the end of 2013, a year ahead of schedule. Privately, some foreigners posted in Kabul say Afghanistan is neither worth the blood that's been spilt nor the cash spent, and that its problems are so great and so many that whatever is done will not be enough.

This echoes a line of thinking about Congo that began with Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and has taken root in literature, perception and ultimately policy: that the place is so broken, so bad, that fixing it is impossible.

There are vast differences between the two of course, but trends in Afghanistan suggest that the country it is becoming could end up looking even more like Congo than it does now. Without the river.