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European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

Afghanistan: chaos central

http://mondediplo.com/2009/02/16talibans

A correspondent looks back at the deterioration across the country over the past four years: the resurgence of both the Taliban and the old corrupt elites, the failure of the occupation forces, and the worsening conditions of life for everybody else.

By Chris Sands

February 2009

As the summer of 2005 began its slow fade into autumn, a piece of newspaper wrapped around a kebab said Osama bin Laden had moved to Iraq. It seemed everyone had forgotten there was a war on here. American soldiers used those remaining days of sunshine to buy carpets in Kabul's Chicken Street bazaar, not caring when they were charged over the odds. Elsewhere, mercenaries downed cheap Russian vodka in phoney restaurants before wandering up a few stairs to sleep with Chinese prostitutes whose pimps bribed local government officials. The brothels were often in the same neighborhoods as the mansions that militia commanders were building themselves with CIA funds and drug money.

Back then, this beautiful city was the ideal place for a bit of post-conflict profiteering. Hastily-created NGOs continued to flood in, eager for a slice of the action. So did journalists determined to write about democracy, the suave English-speaking president and the local golf course. It was the calm before the storm. Victory had been declared and, while Afghans were starting to feel the weight of its baggage, the rest of the world was still having fun at their expense.

But the decadence and ignorance were never going to be allowed to last for long, and the Taliban knew their time was coming again. The warning signs were around for anyone who cared to look.

I'd been in Afghanistan less than a week when aid groups revealed that deteriorating security had put their projects under threat. They feared they had become targets for the insurgency. A little while afterwards, the governor of Maidan Wardak, a province bordering Kabul, told me all was okay there. Then the PR finished and he cut loose. A new generation of militants had

shown its face, he said. They were young men disillusioned with the occupation and some were trained in Pakistan. Trouble was also evident near the eastern city of Jalalabad, where a villager complained that his cousin had vanished since being arrested by the Americans roughly three years earlier. We talked in a dirt yard full of kids and I think they were the only ones who expected his return.

The south, though, was where the pieces of the jigsaw began to fit together. Kandahar is the spiritual heartland of the Taliban and in late 2005 the movement was again drawing strength from its birthplace. There, for the first time, I caught sight of a reality our politicians had made us believe did not exist.

A man working at the football stadium reminisced fondly about the old days when executions happened on the pitch. If capital punishment was still common, he said, the new government wouldn't be so crooked. This was something I would hear repeatedly, until eventually it was said by Afghans across the country. The police were the worst offenders, looking for bribes at every opportunity to supplement their low wages. Another Kandahari had joined the Taliban as a teenager in the 1990s. "At that time we were very happy," he said. "It was like we were very poor and had suddenly found a lot of money." Talibs are good people and they can never be beaten, he continued. Now they have no choice but to fight because otherwise the Americans will send them to Guantanamo Bay. Most importantly for the future, he revealed that a number of local religious clerics had just declared a jihad.

Insurgent attacks and violent crime were already a problem in Kandahar by then. It was like "living under a knife" said a 53-year-old in the city. Yet even as civilians died, the Taliban were rarely the subject of people's fury. Directly or indirectly, they blamed the government and its allies.

Taliban on the rise

In the spring of 2006 Kabul's imams decided to speak out against all this and more. Officials were lining their own pockets and alcohol was easily available, they said. They were also angry at the house raids conducted by foreign soldiers in rural areas and accused them of molesting women during the searches. Most said the time for jihad was approaching and one announced that armed resistance was now the answer.

So when rioters tore through the capital on 29 May, it was no big surprise. The spark for that particular day of unrest was a fatal traffic accident involving US troops, but the explosion had been primed long before. Protesters shouted "Death to America" and by the end of the anarchy at least 17 people had lost their lives. The situation was now ripe for the Taliban to harness national discontent and kick-start a major revolt, and this is exactly what they did.

When British troops had first arrived in Helmand that February, they had come ostensibly to allow reconstruction. The then defense minister John Reid said he would be "perfectly happy" if they did not have to fire a single shot. Instead, they soon found themselves bogged down in some of their worst fighting since the second world war, at times being drawn into hand-to-hand combat. Over 100 have died in the ensuing years.

The Taliban's remit also grew stronger in areas close to Kabul and two hours from the capital people were warning that the government might collapse. I couldn't find anyone in Ghazni who admitted to taking the insurgents' side: they usually said poverty and a lack of

reconstruction were causing people to rebel. Looking at the broken roads and crumbling homes, it wasn't hard to understand what they meant.

Not long before, police in one of the province's districts had tried to stop the Taliban's favorite mode of transport by banning the use of motorbikes. The militants responded by imposing travel restrictions on the whole of that area's population. At night they would go to mosques and tell worshippers not to drive to the provincial capital. "They say 'if you don't cooperate with us we will kill you'," was how one man described their tactics. "What would be the natural human response to that? Of course you will cooperate."

An emerging pattern

A pattern was emerging. The more the Taliban turned to violence, the more they came to be regarded as an omnipresent force that could not be stopped. The bloodshed made people long for the stability of the old regime, if not its repressive laws. Villagers across the south and east had gained almost nothing from the US-led invasion and, in fact, many had lost the little they previously had: good security. Among people in Logar, another of those sad provinces bordering Kabul, the anger was palpable. "Our biggest problem is with the foreigners – we just hate them. Our families, our children, our women – everyone hates them," said an elder. "Let's pretend I'm a young man," said someone else. "I have graduated from school but I can't go to university and there is no factory to work in. So how can I feed myself? I can just join the insurgents – it's easy."

The Taliban first rose up in 1994 when Afghanistan was controlled by warlords still high from the CIA support they had been receiving a few years earlier. A similar thing was happening again and the movement's original members were quick to see that.

Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil lost his father during the Soviet occupation and joined the Taliban, he said, "to give the country freedom". He went on to become Mullah Omar's spokesman and later his foreign minister. We talked on a freezing January morning in 2007 when Mutawakil was being kept under watch in Kabul. He knew his government had made mistakes, particularly in letting jihadis from across the world train and fight here. But he was adamant that the international community's decision to isolate the regime had only made it more extreme. "The interesting thing from that time, and lots of people are remembering this now, is the tight security," he said.

Kandahar was frightening that spring of 2007. The police were accused of carrying out kidnappings and robberies, and the scars of suicide bombings pockmarked the streets. There was a lot of anger, despair and black humor around. Residents expressed a grudging admiration for the old ways of the Taliban simply because the alternatives had come to appear so dire. To them, democracy meant virtual anarchy and, in the villages, a brutal occupation. "If I sit at a table with an American and he says he has brought us freedom, I will tell him he has fucked us," said a father-of-two. He had fled Kandahar during the Taliban government because he was against its restrictions on education. "But I was never worried about my family," he added. "Every single minute of the last three years I have been very worried."

Comments like this came thick and fast, mixed in with jokes. Some of the men insulted the president, Hamid Karzai, and his wife, laughing and swearing as they did so. A woman I met

was sure the city had been better under the Taliban. “If we did not have a full stomach we could at least get some food and go to sleep,” she said.

Slipping into chaos

On and on it went, a litany of complaints and stories that portrayed a nation slipping deep into chaos. A religious leader from the district of Panjwayi described how 18 of his relatives had been killed in an air strike. Then three Talibs from Helmand defended the insurgency as being a natural reaction to events. Basically, they felt they had nothing to lose.

Reports of civilians getting bombed from above came regular as clockwork that spring and summer. First some villagers or local officials would say innocent people were dead and the Nato or US-led coalition would deny it. Then all parties would agree civilian blood had been spilt, but argue over casualty figures. Hamid Karzai kept demanding that the carnage stop, but it never did.

In Kabul, a senator from Helmand said it was killing the entire country. He was among members of parliament’s upper chamber who had called for a ceasefire and negotiations with insurgent groups. They had also said a date should be set for the withdrawal of foreign forces. By then the parliament, supposedly the shining light of a new democracy, was actually a symbol of the Taliban’s resurgence. Police in riot gear stood watch and the building was falling to pieces, with paint flaking away and the walls starting to crack. Not only was there sympathy for the militants inside, there were also men whose viciousness had caused the movement to form in the first place. Most Afghans wanted the warlords brought to justice, but instead the international community had let them stand for election, and here they were showing off their power yet again.

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef knew the impact that was having. He used to serve as the Taliban’s ambassador to Pakistan and, after initially being sent to Guantanamo, he was another of the old guard now living under constant surveillance in Kabul. He refused to talk about his stint in US custody, but he was quick to highlight that men with blood on their hands were now the West’s great hope. “At the time of the Taliban if someone killed another person it was possible to capture him, send him to court, punish him and execute him. Today, if someone goes to a village and kills 100 people, tomorrow he is given more privileges by the government,” he told me. “The Americans and the world community brought the warlords to power. They are supporting them for their benefit against the Taliban, but they know these people are not liked.”

By summer 2007 the horror could not be ignored, even in Kabul. Suicide bombings were the main weapon of choice and they struck fear into Afghans like nothing else, having been unheard of during the Soviet occupation.

For all their rhetoric about fighting for freedom, justice and the Almighty, it was also obvious that some in the Taliban were willing to murder anyone to achieve their aim.

This was clear in the pieces of charred flesh and hair that lay scattered in the dust after a bus was blown up near a police headquarters in the city on 17 June. And it was evident amidst the smell of shit that filled Pul-e-Charkhi jail, where a prisoner was quick to declare his intentions. “I tell you, when I get out of here the first thing I will do is kill journalists and infidels,” he said. “I will kill journalists because they are all spies.”

‘For this I blame America’

As 2007 drew to an end, men who hated the Taliban were starting to resemble them. A former Northern Alliance commander from the province of Badakhshan summed it up nicely: “Now when any foreigner is killed every Afghan says ‘praise be to God’,” he told me. We were chatting at his home in an area of Kabul where the poor had been forced out so warlords and foreign contractors could move in. He owned a small house and, in front of that, a half-built mansion that he could not afford to finish off. Possibly, the only optimists left were the American ambassador and the locals who had the money to take long holidays in Dubai.

Afghanistan’s Sikh and Hindu community had been about 50,000 strong before 1992. Now it was down to 5,000. The exodus had been instigated by the Mujahideen, not the Taliban. With the same old faces back in power again, no one was happy. “The Taliban told us we had to do all our religious ceremonies in private, but they did not stop us from doing them. It was a government that was not recognized by the world, but it was better than now,” said a Sikh.

Even the section of society that should have benefited most from the US-led invasion was full of sorrow. Female MPs told me they felt ashamed for not being able to help their constituents. One said she was sure the time was approaching when she would be a prisoner in her own home again. “For all this I blame America. When the Russians were here the people picked up guns to fight them. Now people are picking up guns to fight the Americans,” she said. “Soon my daughter will finish school and then she wants to start private education,” said another. “But I cannot let her because I cannot give her a bodyguard.”

‘Everything is screwed up’

In January 2008 the streets were a bleak monochrome and the graveyards that dominate Kabul’s landscape gave me a glimpse of the future. I interviewed a judge at the Supreme Court who admitted what everyone already knew: certain people here are above the law. He was too scared to name names, but he described the control warlords have over his colleagues as “totally ordinary”. Barely had he spoken and the Taliban attacked a luxury hotel in the city. Foreigners were shocked. Afghans just shrugged.

Kandahar was so bad I felt sick before returning there in early spring. Luckily, a friend of mine reassured me that, as a Pashtun, he would offer unconditional protection. “Mullah Omar destroyed Afghanistan because of Osama bin Laden, but he didn’t give him up,” he said. A day later a Taliban commander from Helmand described how the resistance had struggled to find support in the early years. But after innocent people had been detained or killed the jihad had burst into life. Now even the Afghan army secretly gave them bullets and treated their wounded.

The story of the insurgency, though, no longer needed a great deal of traveling. In April I took the short drive from Kabul city to Paghman and all I found where the offices of Zafar Radio used to be was a pile of burnt trash. Masked men had torched the premises for being “un-Islamic”.

In the summer, it got worse. I met an Afghan American who said that “everything is screwed up”. Then on 7 July, a car bomber attacked the Indian embassy. The huge explosion left corpses scattered around and the wounded dazed and bloodied. By the next morning people

were venting their anger at the government, saying it was unable to provide security. When Barack Obama arrived during his presidential campaign, optimism was hard to find. In an area of the capital where Hamid Karzai had narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in the spring, a qualified doctor sold samosas from a roadside stall because it was the only job he could get. “The politics will not change,” he said.

2008 was the grimmest year since the invasion. On the seventh anniversary of 9/11, the annual death toll for US troops here had reached new heights: the 113 killed up to September were two more than for the whole of 2007.

Civilians are paying a heavier price. Caught between a rapidly developing insurgency and an occupation force over-reliant on air strikes, they are dropping like flies: according to the UN, 1,445 were killed from January to August 2008 alone.

The Taliban’s strength is growing on Kabul’s doorstep, in the provinces of Maidan Wardak and Logar. The main highway south is a turkey shoot that no one sensible travels along. In the east of the country, the rebels have taken new ground as they move freely across the border. In the north, warlords are reasserting their dominance – raping and beheading at will. The violence affects us all. Kabul is a claustrophobic, paranoid place. Rockets occasionally land in the streets, ugly concrete barriers have appeared and Afghans kidnap each other for ransom. Last autumn, on a bright October morning, a British aid worker was murdered in a part of the city regarded as safe.

More foreign troops are due to be sent. But they risk the kind of backlash experienced by the Soviets, and the long-term aim is unclear. After all these years, there are no firm ideas about the way forward. For now the bitter cold has brought the usual lull. But how much more violence will come this spring?