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Is Operation Moshtarak for real?

By Shrinivasrao S. Sohoni

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The much hyped military operation in Helmand has seen the international forces give ample notice to the Taliban fighters to slip away and bide their time till it is time for US troops to return home

Kabul: Situated in southwest Afghanistan, with Nimroz and Farah Provinces to its west, Ghor and Daykundi to the north, Uruzgan and Kandahar to the east and Pakistan's Balochistan province to its south, Helmand is country's largest province - with an area of about 28,000 square miles and a population, mainly Pashtun, of about 1.2 millions. Irrigated by the river Helmand flowing across it from north-east to south west, and by the Bagha, Darvishan and Shamlan canal schemes and numerous traditional distributaries, Helmand in an earlier period had a flourishing rural economy based on agriculture, horticulture and fisheries. Today Poppy is Helmand's main crop and if the province were an independent country it would be the world's largest producer of opium and heroin. Helmand supplies an estimated 90% of heroin consumed in Europe. Helmand is a crucible in which Taliban is sustained by the evil nexus that exists between narcotics, terrorism, illicit arms and Wahabi Islam. This incendiary mix has trapped the people of the entire region in an unending cycle of conflict, backwardness and degradation.

The US-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) equipped with awesome weaponry has the appearance of a powerful 85,795-strong armed force from 43 countries, prominent contingents being from the US (47,085), UK (9500), Germany (4415), France(3750), Italy, (3150), Canada (2830), Holland (1940), Turkey (1755), Australia (1550) and Spain (1070).

However, after eight years of war, it is clear that the ISAF is far from suppressing the insurgency which intelligence analysts have assessed is growing and becoming more of a menace than ever before. In part, this failure is due to the disparate coordination and commitment in the 43 country contingents, and there being 43 different Rules of Engagement. The Turkish contingent e.g. is not to engage in active combat; Germans are to open fire only if attacked; and French avoid any risky movement.)

The main reason for failure is however the strategic, tactical, financial and logistic support that the Taliban enjoys from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the safe haven available in Pakistan, and the strategy adopted by Al Qaeda and the ISI: of indoctrination, infiltration and use of Improvised Explosive Devices, suicide bombing, and funding through the narcotics trade. Collateral casualties and damage caused by ISAF operations have also contributed to public anger and alienation and fuelled Taliban propaganda in a land where revenge is a binding matter of honor.

The base of the Taliban is in Pakistan - where the Pakistan security establishment supports Taliban recruitment, training, indoctrination, equipment, transport, operational guidance, ordnance, propaganda aid, medical cover and safe haven facility. The US is pouring billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan. Under the Kerry-Lugar Bill alone, Pakistan stands to get 7.5 billion USD i.e. Rs 300,000 crores. But even under severe pressure from US, Pakistan has refused to attack Taliban or Lashkar-e- Taiyaba - as these are its assets against Afghanistan on the one hand and India on the other. A clue to the Pakistani strategic thinking is in Pakistan's recently announced Education Policy 2010-2020 which declares full State support for madrassa education (funded mainly by Saudi Arabia) spreading Wahabi extreme fundamentalist Islam, the concept of global jihad and ambition for world domination through conquest.

US President Obama recently faced a severe defeat when the Democratic Party lost the bye election for the Senate seat for Massachusetts held for 52 years by Edward Kennedy. With elections to the US Congress due in October, and the US public increasingly dissatisfied with the war in Afghanistan, the political need has been sharply accentuated to project major improvement in the Afghanistan situation. The same need is felt by UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labor Party, reeling under scandals, which will face General Elections to Parliament in a few months. The military leaderships of the two countries with the largest contingents in ISAF have been directed to show results without further delay.

A three-prong strategy therefore has emerged: First : to scale up military force and deploy it against a key area of Taliban dominance, force Taliban to evacuate from the area, ISAF and Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) to occupy the space evacuated by the Taliban, Afghan Government to commence developmental administration with international assistance; Second: ISAF to enable expansion of ANA strength from 100130 to 171600 and organize necessary training and equipment to enable ANA and ANP to bear tasks of national security; and Third: to induce Taliban foot soldiers and middle level operatives through financial and non-financial incentives to give up arms and "reintegrate" with national life in Afghanistan.

The military offensive in Helmand, christened 'Operation Moshtarak' ('moshtarak' in Dari means 'together') - said to be the biggest operation since the first Gulf War- involves almost 15,000

ISAF and ANA personnel and artillery and air assault support focusing on Marjeh - the Helmand valley town not far from Lashkar Gah the provincial capital. This is preceded by massive publicity through radio, television, print media and airdropped leaflets addressing the people of the province. The humanitarian crisis in terms of displaced population is of course a matter of serious concern. It is however envisaged by the strategists that the notifications and military campaign will induce the Taliban to abandon the area. The objective is not to vanquish the Taliban but to compel them to opt for reconciliation. The hope is that Taliban forced to evict from their base in bitter winter conditions will have to choose between fighting or dispersing into the Registan desert or into the icy mountainous region or agreeing to be 'reintegrated'.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are expected to take the lead in promoting reintegration. These two countries are the father and the mother of the Taliban and have live contacts. Both would welcome Taliban absorption in the governance institutions of Afghanistan. The amounts of money available to this end are also not inconsequential. The postponement of elections to Parliament is a step in the direction of making reintegration more attractive.

If the outcomes desired by the strategists were indeed to result, these would be trumpeted as major achievements towards mitigation of the Afghan crisis and something that can be proclaimed before electoral audiences in the US and Great Britain ahead of the polls. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan would of course also have cause to celebrate.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the Taliban targeted by Op Moshtarak, given the ample notice they have, just slip away to other provinces in Afghanistan's insurgent southern region or to safe havens in Pakistan, and simply wait for the ISAF force to exit from Helmand and whichever province such an exercise is next tried out. 'Withdraw when the enemy attacks' is after all among the first principles of guerilla warfare - in which the Taliban are no novices. Meanwhile the poor rural folk of Helmand province displaced from their homes will face the wrath of Afghan winter and go through the humiliation of ISAF personnel searching homes and hearths. And when this is played out there is always a possibility of an ISI and Al Qaeda sponsored attempts to inflict retaliatory strikes in the Afghan capital and elsewhere.

The simple truth is that unless the international community comes around to realizing that the solution to the Afghanistan situation is in dealing firmly with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and acts on that basis with implacable firmness, the crisis will continue and aggravate.