

AFGHANISTAN

The crisis deepens

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ON September 11, the whole world saw how three aircraft destroyed the Twin Tower in New York and a portion of Pentagon in Washington. This was something happening in a Holly-

wood movie. People could not believe their eyes what was going on. Over 5,000 innocent people had died in this horrific attack. One of the most dangerous errors of our time is the belief that human beings are uniquely violent animals, barely restrained from committing atrocities on each other by the constraints of ethics, religion, and the state. To find out the reasons we need to look for the psychological reasons behind such attack. In this respect, the psychological reason was the anger against America.

Since September 11, India has made no secret of its annoyance that Washington's focus has been directed almost exclusively against Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden. The aftermath of the attack went on to blame Taliban, the people of Is-

lamic extremists in Afghanistan and President W. Bush of the USA gave an ultimatum to hand over Bin Laden. The United States started to build a form of coalition with other like-minded countries to start attack on Afghanistan namely "war on terrorism". Britain joined in this campaign

and sent their warships. US officials were seeking to build an internal coalition of Afghans opposed to the ruling Taliban movement as part of their pressure on the Taliban.

In the short run, according to a news analysis of the BBC, the American aim seemed to be to pile the pressure on the Taliban without, as yet, making their removal from power an explicit goal.

This was designed to achieve several things: -To rattle the Taliban psychologically -To encourage defections in Taliban ranks, and to give the Taliban one last chance to surrender the Saudi-born radical Islamist Osama Bin Laden.

It seemed unlikely that the

Taliban will hand Bin Laden over. But beyond these short-term aims, US officials were clearly looking ahead to what a post-Taliban Afghanistan might look like. They were considering how best they can help the coalition of anti-Taliban forces known as the Northern Alliance. They began to encourage the



Alliance's main regional allies, Russia and Iran, to do more. But the Northern Alliance has a credibility problem, for both political and military reasons. Its leaders believe they have a unique chance to get US backing in a new drive to topple the Taliban. The US increases political and military pressure on Taliban supporters. The Alliance lacks support from the country's dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns. There is much speculation about a role for the ex-king Zahir Shah - he is a Pashtun - but he is 86 and has no military faction at his command.

But the Taliban government in Afghanistan refused to hand over Bin Laden and called for Jihad. The Afghan crisis became acute with millions of innocent people who stared to leave the country to get safer place.

If we take look at Afghanistan's political history we see that foreigners have intervened in Afghan politics for too long and always with disastrous results. The country is awash with weapons and already in ruins. The UN efforts to find a political settlement, which were revived four years ago, need to be refocused on the search for a federal structure in which regions and ethnic groups will have greater autonomy. Hope of strong central government is so split and traumatised that it has become an illusion.

The reaction from the govern-

ments of the Asian countries started just after the suicide attack on September 11 and the Americans cannot afford to exclude Pakistan from any decision-making about Afghanistan's future. The Pakistanis have little choice but to accept the demise of their protégé

, the Taliban. But they will insist

on maintaining a future role in a country they regard as within their sphere of influence. From 8th October the US and UK started air attacks on Afghanistan. Targets included areas around the capital, the Taliban's home base of Kandahar, and Afghanistan's north, where an opposition Northern Alliance is battling the Taliban, the Islamic movement that controls nearly all of Afghanistan.

While India wholeheartedly supports the US joining the war on terrorism, there are worries whether general Musharraf will not extract a price from the US for his cooperation by getting Pakistani terrorism against India and the proxy war in Kashmir exempted from the definition of terrorism.

Instead, New Delhi has been keen to link the war on terrorism with its own internal battle in Kashmir against Islamist militants, who have been waging an insurgency for more than a decade. In Indonesia, there were demonstrations against US-led combined force in front of the US embassy. This was a part of response from the Islamic group of Indonesia although the position of the Indonesian government was in favour of the US attack.

Bangladesh as a strategically important country of the South Asia expressed her deep shock on September 11 attack in New York and

agreed to let the US coalition for using ground and air space and fueling facilities. Bangladesh gave her support to the world movements towards anti-terrorism. There were some demonstrations from different organizations protesting the USA and UK attack against the people of Afghanistan. The government said



that it was observing the situation. But according to analysts the new government will not move beyond the decision taken by the caretaker govt. The possible reason is that Bangladesh is committed to world peace and the USA and the UK are good friends of her both economically and politically. Many military strategists believe the Afghans would give a tough time to the US-led forces and they would prolong the war. Most probably, the longer the war, the more would be the sympathies of pro-Taliban forces, especially the Islamic radicals throughout the Muslim world. The launch of military attacks on Afghanistan will worsen the humanitarian crisis in the country and plans for air drops of aid will be "virtually useless" as an aid strategy, in northern Afghanistan finds a country with no infrastructure and a people who long to be rid of the loathed Taliban by whatever means. Aid agencies are increasingly concerned for the millions of Afghans left without food or medicine inside their own country. The landmine legacy in Afghanistan from over 20 years of war could take its toll on the humanitarian drive to feed millions of starving Afghans. This is a very crucial point. Opinion of the concerned Indian people in this crisis is that the forces of good must use all the power at their disposal to decimate the curse of terrorism for all times. Others see alter-

native solutions to terrorism. To some unfortunately it is the by-product of hunger, poverty, suppression and humiliation. Unless we fight these, terrorism will be on forever.

One of the issues is to say that it has become necessary to rethink about the attack on Afghan people

considering the fate of the poor innocent Afghan civilians. The solutions of such crisis need to be evaluating from various point of views. Because the continuation of such war may lead to some other extremist movement in this region as the sympathy toward the casualties will turn these groups against the West. The long-term effect of this war will be hard enough to cope up for the countries in this region. Only time can say what will happen in the lives of the people of this region as well as war-torn Afghanistan.

The author is a Research Associate at the Centre for Alternatives.

Quotes on military strikes

As military strikes begin against targets in Afghanistan, Western leaders and key figures in the region have been giving their reactions.

"In this conflict there is no neutral ground, there can be no peace in a world of terror... We did not ask for this mission but we will fulfil it."

US President George Bush

"They were given the choice of siding with justice, or siding with terror. They chose terror."

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair on Afghanistan's ruling Taliban

"These attacks, which have been launched regardless of the world public opinion, especially the Muslim nations, will damage the innocent and oppressed Afghans and are unacceptable."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman

"At this difficult, solemn and dramatic moment, all Europe stands steadfast with the United States and its coalition allies to pursue the fight against terrorism."

European Commission President Romano Prodi

"This is going to be a prolonged, sustained effort over several days."

US Pentagon official

"We are ready for jihad."

Rehmatullah Kakazada, the consul-general for Afghanistan's ruling Taliban

"America was hit by God in one of its softest spots. America is full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that." **Prime suspect Osama Bin Laden speaking in a film reported to have been made on Sunday**

"We support the Afghan people against the al-Qaeda, a foreign presence in their lands, and the Taliban regime that supports them."

Donald Rumsfeld, US Defence Secretary

"The struggle against terrorism is a complex and merciless fight that is taking place on many fronts."

French President Jacques Chirac

"The international community is united that the threat to international peace and security created by terrorist actions must be countered by all means - in accordance with the charter of the United Nations."

Russian Foreign Ministry

"Italy is on the side of the United States and of all those who are committed to the fight against terrorism."

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi

"It remains our hope that the US and allied action remains clearly targeted to achieve the aims identified by the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions."

Pakistan Foreign Ministry

"The coalition is simply seeking justice for the evil carried out." **UK Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith**

"Countries which value democracy and freedom must take action to defend democracy and freedom."

Scottish First Minister Henry McLeish

"I regret that this crisis could not have been resolved peacefully. But given the obstinacy of the Taliban Government there was no other option."

Charles Kennedy, UK Liberal Democrat leader

"We are not convinced that the due process of law has been followed or that the guilt for the terrible events of 11 September have been satisfactorily established."

A spokesman for the UK Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

Courtesy: BBC web site

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Questions and answers

TARIQ ALI

HOW can one analyse the evolution of Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion and the victory of the Taliban?

The PDPA (—the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan— AFghan Communist Party) which had a strong base in the army and air force carried out a coup d'etat in 1978, toppling the corrupt regime of Daoud. The people welcomed the change. The PDPA was initially popular. It pledged important social reforms and democracy. But the latter promise was never upheld even though important educational reforms were pushed through such as free education and schools for girls. In the cities girls and boys began to attend the same schools. Medical care was improved as well, but a bitter factional struggle led to the victory of a Pol-Pot faction led by Hafizullah Amin who embarked on a campaign massive repression. Meanwhile the United States decided to destabilise the regime by arming the ultra-religious tribes and using the Pakistan Army as a conduit to help the religious extremists. The Americans were laying a bear-trap and the Soviet leadership fell into it. They sent the Red Army to topple Amin and sustain the PDPA regime by force. This further exacerbated the crisis and the United States gave the call for a jihad against communism. The Pakistani military thought it would help the jihad if a Saudi prince came to lead the struggle, but volunteers from that quarter were not forthcoming. Instead the Saudi regime suggested Oussama Bin Laden to the CIA. He was approved, recruited, trained and sent to Afghanistan where he fought well. In one action Bin Laden led his men to attack a mixed school (boys and girls) and kill all the teachers. The US watched this approvingly. The rest is history. The Soviet Union was defeated and withdrew its forces in 1989. A civil war followed and a coalition government consisting of forces loyal to Iran, Tadjikistan and Pakistan came to power. Instability reigned. Then Pakistan hurled the Taliban (students) it had trained in special seminaries into the battle with open support from the Pakistan Army. Kabul was captured and gradually the regime extended its rule to the rest of the country. American think-

tanks till a few months ago were talking of using the Taliban to further destabilize the Central Asian Republics! Now the US and Pakistan are waging war to topple a regime they created. Who said that history had ceased to be ironical?

What is specific about the Islamism of the Taliban?

It is a virulent, sectarian, ultra-puritanical strain heavily influenced by Wahhabism—the official state religion of Saudi Arabia. It was Saudi religious instructors who trained the Taliban. They believe in a permanent jihad against infidels and other Muslims (especially the Shias). Bin Laden, too, is a staunch Wahhabi. They would like a return to what they imagine was Islam in the 7th century, during the leadership of Mohammed. What they don't understand is that Mohammed was a very flexible prophet-politician as Maxime Rodinson explains in his excellent biography.

What was the strategic aim of the United States in basing themselves on the most hard-line wing of the Islamic resistance to the USSR, and more generally groups such as that of Bin Laden in the Arab-Muslim world?

Throughout the Cold War the United States used Islam as a bulwark against communism and revolution. This occurred everywhere in the Islamic world, not just in South Asia. So we can say that the Islamism we witness is a product of imperialism and modernity.

The key to what will happen in the region is Pakistan. What sort of regime is it, what are its goals and what are the contradictions it faces?

It is a military regime, but not a vicious one like its predecessor. It is a regime which wants to supervise neo-liberalism in Pakistan. The Army, of course, is divided, but the exact strength of pro-Taliban currents inside the Army is a matter of dispute. It could be anything between 15–30 percent. The Islamists are very weak in Pakistani society as a whole. Its important to understand this fact. In successive elections, less people have voted for zealotry in Pakistan than in Israel. That's why the Pakistani Taliban decided to make 'entryism' inside the Army. If the United States spills too much blood in Afghanistan then the consequences could be

dire within the Pakistan Army in a year's time.

For the moment President Musharraf seems to want to line up alongside the US. Is it possible that Pakistan would be a logistical support to an American intervention against Afghanistan?

Pakistan has agreed to give logistical support. In fact the Pakistan Army is necessary for the whole operation. The United States planes and troops will be stationed in the Gwadar base in Baluchistan which they built during the Cold War. Don't forget that Pakistan was a cold war ally of the United States from 1954–1992. Both sides know each other well. The Pakistani elite is delighted that the country's debt (36 billion dollars) has been cancelled and more money has been pledged. In return for this they are prepared to see the Taliban defeated and disarmed. Trouble will begin if too many bearded men are killed. In my opinion one reason for the delay in action is that the Pakistan Army is trying to make sure that the Taliban do not resist the United States. The advice being given to the faithful is: shave your beards and keep your powder dry. The West will go away and then we'll see. Islamabad detests the Northern Alliance which it defeated via the Taliban when it took Kabul. I cannot stress enough that the Taliban is sustained on every level by Pakistan. What is switched on can also be switched off. The problem for Pakistan is that a wing of the Taliban defected to Bin Laden and his praetorian guard of Arab anarcho-Islamists. These guys will probably fight back whatever the odds.

If the conflict becomes regional what effects would this have on the situation in the region and the attitude of countries like India, China and Russia?

All three countries are delighted by the 'war against terrorism'. They are all Americans now! India wants to crush the opposition Kashmir. The Turkish military wants to a final solution to the 'Kurdish problem'. Putin has already destroyed Chechnya. China has the green light to do what it wants. So it suits them all, but a great deal depends on how this adventure ends.

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