

## The next front

Following a rapid succession of victories, opposition Northern Alliance forces now control half of Afghanistan, including the capital, Kabul. But the real challenge forming a viable, broad-based government lies ahead...

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THE eight foreign ministers holed up inside the United Nations headquarters in New York on Nov. 12 were the ones supposed to be moving fast. Half a world away, troops of the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance were speeding toward the battle-scarred capital of Afghanistan in tanks and pickup trucks. The representatives of Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, China and the U.S. were struggling to find a formula for an interim government to place in Kabul before the rebels arrived. The message for the ministers from U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was "speed, speed, speed." But they couldn't move, literally, held captive by a security lockdown after a U.S. airliner smashed into a residential area in Queens nearby.

By the next day, Kabul had fallen. The ruling Taliban, softened up by weeks of bombing by the U.S., fled the capital, and opposition tanks rolled in, even though Washington had urged the Northern Alliance to keep out of Kabul until an interim government had been formed. The incoming troops were greeted by jubilant Kabul residents, who celebrated the occasion by playing music and shaving off their beards, activities that had been proscribed under the ultra-strict Islamic rule of the Taliban. As reports flowed in of local uprisings even in the Taliban's southern heartland, it looked like the



...and looking after the homeless

first major victory for the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism.

The hard part, however, is just beginning. Military developments have overtaken political events, making the situation in Afghanistan dangerously fluid. With the northern half of the country now held by the potentially unruly warlords of the Northern Alliance and the southern half still largely in Taliban hands,

Afghanistan is in danger of splitting down the middle and plunging deeper into civil war. At the heart of the crisis is the lack of a viable government that will satisfy all ethnic and tribal factions in Afghanistan, as well as the country's demanding neighbours. And as top-level diplomatic efforts intensify to put a "broad-based" government in place in Kabul, the man who trig-

gered the U.S.-led campaign in the first place Osama bin Laden remains elusive and threatens a guerrilla war from mountains in the south. The added danger is that his struggle could spill over into neighbouring Pakistan and threaten that country's already shaky political stability.

The swiftness of the Northern Alliance's advance on Kabul has thrown the U.S. and its allies into a quandary. The opposition success is good news for the coalition, but what next? The eight ministers in New York released a statement that the Afghan people should establish "a broad-based, multi-ethnic, politically balanced, freely chosen Afghan administration." The country's former king is likely to figure in any such equation. "Afghanistan needs an interim government, composed of the various ethnic groups, with a leadership council headed by former king Zahir Shah," says Pir Gailani, a former mujahideen leader now in Islamabad.

The big question is how to form such a government. Northern Alliance foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah got the ball rolling by announcing: "We invite all Afghan groups at this stage to come to Kabul to start negotiations about the future of Afghanistan." Easier said than done. Nation building is hindered by a lack of credible players. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the charismatic Northern Alliance commander who had fought the Soviets before he took on the Taliban, was slain just two days before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, allegedly by assassins sent by bin Laden. Fellow mujahideen war hero Abdul Haq, a member of the majority Pushtun ethnic group, was captured and executed by the Taliban two weeks ago during a mission to rally opposition forces in southern Afghanistan.

Even if key military and political leaders were found and brought together, that would only be half of the challenge. Afghanistan specialist Olivier Roy says the problem is not the lack of political will among the different parties. "All except the Taliban consider a broad-based government to be the solution," he says. "The problem is the sharing of power between the different ethnic and regional groups."

A potential sticking point is that the Northern Alliance is mainly composed of ethnic minorities Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras while most Afghans, including the Taliban, belong to the Pushtuns. The U.N. is

trying to form what has been dubbed a "southern alliance" of ethnic Pushtuns, to complement the Northern Alliance, but progress has been slow. With the Taliban being pushed south, some predict that Afghanistan will consolidate along ethnic lines. "There will be no peace as the fight between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban will continue," says former Pakistan army chief Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg. "Going into winter it now becomes a harder war, with the country divided on the basis of ethnicity."

Pakistan is watching these developments with growing concern. The country's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate helped create the Taliban in the mid-1990s, even supplying military advisers and intelligence officials. Many Taliban members were educated in Pakistan's militant madrassahs (Islamic schools), and some Pakistanis themselves have been joining the Taliban's cause. Now Islamabad has seen crowds in Kabul welcoming opposition troops with cries of "death to Pakistan." Pakistani fighters, as well as other foreign militants fighting for the Taliban, have been singled out for retaliation, with reports of hundreds killed in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

As part of the U.S.-led coalition, Islamabad is now technically opposed to the Taliban, but it remains suspicious of the enemy of its creation the Northern Alliance. It fears that the presence of northern ethnic minorities in any government may further dilute Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Little wonder that, as opposition troops were entering the capital, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf insisted that Kabul be maintained as a "demilitarized city," and called for a U.S. military force with Muslim participation to help maintain stability. Pakistan, Roy says, "is still angry over the disappearance of its influence and might try to sabotage any indigenous Afghan solution."

Pakistan has other worries, too. If the Taliban continues to get pushed southward or if it collapses altogether there is the danger of its militants coming over the border. "This is a nightmare scenario for Pakistan," says Rifaat Hussain, chairman of the defense and strategic studies department at Islamabad's Quaid-i-Azam University. "The Taliban retreat toward the Pakistan border will heighten pressure on Pakistan, with the danger of civil unrest." The fact that most Pakistanis living along the border are ethnic Pushtuns sympathetic to the Taliban makes the situation potentially even more explosive.

In the meantime, Osama bin Laden has two options hide in the mountains in southern Afghanistan and wage guerrilla warfare, or slip into Pakistan and perhaps escape to a third country. Either way, few are expecting a resolution anytime soon. "I don't think anybody is under the illusion that it will be easy to catch Osama bin Laden," says Rachel Bronson of the Washington-based Brookings Institution.

On the ground, though, the mood is more optimistic. The Northern Alliance has tried to bring some sort of normalcy to Kabul, installing gray-uniformed policemen to impose order. According to foreign minister Abdullah, the opposition's latest success is "a very good beginning of the end" for bin Laden and his terrorist network. The fall of Kabul is a battle won. The real struggle now is to bring the warlords together to manage the peace.

Courtesy: Asiaweek.

## Replacing the Taliban

As Taliban fighters continue to hold out in their last two strongholds, international efforts to forge a transitional coalition to govern Afghanistan are stuttering, but the hunt for Osama bin Laden is intensifying

THE Taliban are not beaten yet; not quite. In a matter of days the proportion of Afghanistan's territory under their sway has dwindled from more than 90% to perhaps less than 10%. Their fighters — those, that is, who have survived relentless American bombing — have mostly defected or disappeared into the hills. Others have retreated to two final redoubts: Kunduz in the north and Kandahar, the Taliban's traditional southern stronghold. But as this war draws to its close, international attention is turning to the task of avoiding another war, between rival Afghan factions, that have been united so far only by the fragile bond of their shared loathing of the Taliban.

There are still worries that the final rout of the Taliban may be a murderous affair. In Kunduz especially, where American bombers continue to pound Taliban positions, there are fears of a bloodbath. Hopes of avoiding one through a negotiated surrender are made harder by the presence of thousands of foreign fighters — Pakistanis and Arabs, but also, according to some accounts, Chechens, Uighurs from China and even Indonesians. They know that soldiers from the victorious Northern Alliance have been particularly brutal to captured foreigners.

To the relief of the Alliance's foreign partners, however, its soldiers have been relatively restrained since capturing Kabul, the national capital, on November 13th. Geoff Hoon, Britain's defence minister, has said that "by and large they seem to be behaving very responsibly." Many foreign governments — and ordinary Afghans — were alarmed when the Alliance broke its promise not to send its soldiers into Kabul until agreement had been reached on a transitional power-sharing regime. The Alliance claimed it had no choice but to renege on this pledge, if anarchy were to be prevented in the wake of the Taliban's precipitate withdrawal from the city.

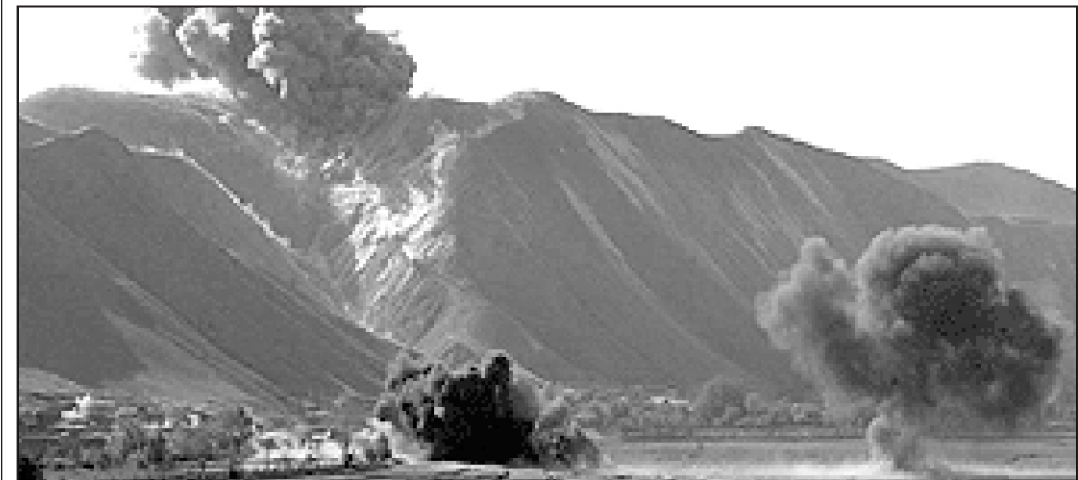
The Alliance, which largely represents members of

willing to contribute. Mr Rabbani has also expressed opposition to the idea, promoted by America among others, that Zahir Shah, an aged former king, who has spent nearly 30 years in exile, might play an important role as a unifying figurehead. Already, the Alliance is taking on some of the airs of a government-in-waiting. On November 19th, for example, it told the thousands of foreign journalists in Kabul that they should apply to it for visas.

But Mr Rabbani has agreed to send representatives to a meeting that is being arranged by the UN to decide on a transitional regime. Efforts to convene such a meeting have been underway for weeks, in discussions led by the "six-plus-two" group, of Afghanistan's six neighbours, together with Russia and America. But they were given a fresh impetus by the startling speed with which the Taliban regime collapsed. The UN's plan is that such a meeting would establish an interim ruling council, which would prepare for a traditional Afghan grand assembly, or Loya Jirga, of tribal elders. That in turn would form a transitional government, which would pave the way for elections in three years' time.

But arrangements for the talks remain bogged down over the most basic details: Where? When? Who should attend? The Alliance wanted the meeting to be held in Kabul, which was unacceptable to Pushtun factions. The UN had suggested the United Arab Emirates. But since that was one of just three countries to maintain diplomatic relations with the Taliban until the war, that was not seen as a sufficiently neutral venue.

Now the meeting seems likely to take place in the coming days in a European city, perhaps Vienna. The guest list is in a sense now writing itself, as battles and negotiated deals across Afghanistan result in local divisions of power among politicians, warlords and tribal leaders. But there are still those, such as the Pakistani government, who insist that "moderate" elements of the Taliban should also have a seat at the table. And the



Bombing in Kunduz

ethnic minorities — Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras — has a bad record of past atrocities. It is thus deeply feared by members of the largest ethnic group, the Pushtuns. It is also riven by its own ethnic and factional tensions. Some Alliance factions are furious with the Jamiat-i-Islami, the ethnic-Tajik party whose troops moved into the centre of Kabul, and whose leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, is still recognised internationally as Afghanistan's president.

Anxiety that Mr Rabbani, who returned to Kabul on November 17th, and his party might simply refuse to share power altogether has eased somewhat. Mr Rabbani has explicitly welcomed "the formation of a broad-based government". And, according to Colin Powell, America's secretary of state, the Alliance have "kept the bulk of their forces outside Kabul, which is what we hoped they would do." Britain has played down reports that the Alliance has objected to the presence of about 100 British troops, who are reconnoitring Bagram airport near Kabul, to ascertain its usefulness for future humanitarian and military operations. Britain has 6,000 soldiers on standby to go to Afghanistan, and has also denied that their deployment has been delayed by Alliance hostility. Mr Hoon has made a point of praising the Alliance for establishing a "very impressive degree of control".

Nevertheless, there are still fears that the Alliance's control may be rather too impressive. Some of its spokesmen have rejected the idea of a foreign peace-keeping force, which many Afghans and outsiders see as essential, and to which Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Turkey, have said they are

Alliance remains touchy about the role Zahir Shah will play at the talks. Mr Powell has now suggested it will be no more than ceremonial.

Hunt the terrorist

While America's diplomats worry about building the peace, its soldiers still have to prosecute their war aims. These were not, primarily, to topple the Taliban. They were to find Osama bin Laden and destroy his terrorist organisation, al-Qaeda. The victories in the ground war seem now to be yielding intelligence that is bringing those goals closer. Last week, the Pentagon said it had identified and bombed houses in both Kabul and Kandahar, leading to the death of some al-Qaeda leaders. The Taliban have confirmed America's most spectacular success, the killing of Mohammad Atef, a close henchman and in-law of Mr bin Laden, and al-Qaeda's top military strategist.

As for Mr bin Laden himself, Mr Powell has discounted rumours that he has managed to flee Afghanistan. According to some reports, America has narrowed the search down to an area of some 30 square miles in southern Afghanistan, where he has for some weeks been believed to be hiding, perhaps holed up in a cave. America has acknowledged that both CIA agents and elite special-combat units are in Afghanistan, working with anti-Taliban Afghans to find and kill al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Sooner or later, they hope, they will find someone who will lead them to Mr bin Laden.

Courtesy: The Economist of London.