

# Noose tightens on Osama

ERIC S. MARGOLIS

OSAMA bin Laden has survived at least ten assassination attempts mounted by the Soviets, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. But now, after the rapid retreat of Taliban forces and fall of Kabul to the Russian-backed Northern Alliance, the noose is tightening around the world's most wanted man.

Taliban's retreat was inevitable. Its 30,000, lightly-armed tribal fighters spread over a Texas-sized nation could not withstand massive US air attacks and Northern Alliance Tajik and Uzbek troops freshly supplied by Russia with tanks, armoured vehicles, and artillery.

Taliban's deftly executed surprise retreat wrong-footed the US. Washington didn't want the Alliance to occupy Kabul before it could cobble together a government of its own choosing. Taliban's retreat that opened the way for the Northern Alliance to seize Kabul was a nasty Parthian shaft that hit Pakistan in the eye - revenge for Islamabad abandoning Taliban.

The Northern Alliance is a proxy for Russia. Its two military leaders are Gen. Rashid Dostam, a brutal communist warlord who slaughtered 30,000 civilians in the 1990s, and Gen. Faheem, a senior officer of Khad, the former Afghan communist secret police, an arm of the Soviet KGB. Khad tortured and murdered thousands of Afghans.

To Washington's embarrassment, the Alliance also controls Afghanistan's opium and heroin exports. Taliban, a religious movement, had shut down the drug trade. Bush's war against terrorism has plainly taken priority over the war on drugs.

Handing northern Afghanistan and Kabul over to the Russians appears

the price the US had to pay for Moscow's support in the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Having ousted the Russians from Afghanistan in the 1980s, Washington has now invited them back in. So far, Vladimir Putin is the big winner in the Afghan mess.

Mullah Omar, Taliban's leader, ordered his men to retreat into Pushtun territory in southwest Afghanistan, and into neighbouring Northwest Frontier Province. In this wild region, the birthplace of Taliban, heavily-armed Pushtun tribesmen are a law unto themselves.

Taliban says it will now wage guerilla war from the NWFP and from the central Hindukush mountains north of Kandahar. The Taliban believe guerilla fighting will allow them to finally engage US troops hunting for Osama at more equal odds. The US military plan for Afghanistan is on schedule, though its political agenda certainly is not.

The overthrow of the Taliban regime has opened the way for the US special forces to hunt down bin Laden, who is believed to be hiding in cave complexes north of Kandahar that he helped build during the jihad against the Soviets. It is essential for the US to capture bin Laden or at least recover his body. If he somehow escapes, or is buried alive in a cave, the US will be unable to proclaim victory and will have to face charges that it tore apart Afghanistan, killed large numbers of civilians, and created tens of thousands of refugees, for nothing.

Last week, pro-Taliban sources reported Osama vowed he will not be taken alive, a position perfectly in keeping with his record as a courageous fighter against the Soviets and a 'mujahid', ready to become 'shaheed', for his faith.

The \$25 million dollar reward being offered by the US for Osama bin

Laden will certainly tempt local tribesmen and even some Taliban leaders to hand him over to the Americans. Sudden betrayal and double-dealing are the norm in Afghanistan. Pakistan government would also reap huge additional rewards from the US by handing over bin Laden.

Last week, President George Bush authorized closed military tribunals for the first time since World War II. They are clearly designed to avoid bin Laden and his associates, if captured, standing trial in open courts where they could defend themselves and win sympathy in the Third World. These courts are sure to hand down death sentences.

There is still a remote chance the elusive Osama could escape. He may slip across the border into the Northwest Frontier and be hidden by friendly Pashtun tribesmen. There is much sympathy for Taliban and Osama in Pakistan. Some Islamist officers of Pakistan's army or intelligence service might aid Osama's escape. But it will be very difficult for the world's most notorious man to change his appearance. Bin Laden is over 6 foot 4, gaunt, and, currently, the world's most famous face.

There are very few places where Osama could hide. Nations like Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria or Indonesia would be unable to withstand American pressure to hand him over. Osama and Iraq's Saddam Hussein are bitter enemies. Libya is lying low. Iran and the Central Asian states are his bitter enemies. China is hostile. Wherever he might find refuge, he is almost certain to be sold to the US for cash or political favours.

The day Osama openly declared a one-man war against the US over Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, this Arab Don Quixote signed his own death warrant.

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# The Afghan conflict and Chinese concerns

SONIKA GUPTA

CHINA'S reserved participation in the "global coalition" against terrorism has been criticized by the Western media. However, its response is no different from that of the more forthcoming members of the coalition. China interprets the situation in terms of its own national interests, as do Britain and France. Though a more effusive Chinese support would be welcomed by the Western coalition partners, it would not alter the ground situation in Afghanistan. India's precipitous offer of blanket support to the US policy in Afghanistan is a case in point. It did little more than betray a lack of political and diplomatic sophistication in dealing with the situation. China has two major concerns regarding the current conflict in Afghanistan. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Tang Jiaxuan, mentioned these concerns in his speech at the recently concluded General Assembly session in New York. Firstly, China raised the issue of terrorism in Xinjiang as part of the global problem of terrorism. When world opinion firmly turned against political violence, China began to talk about the low intensity conflict waged by the Uighur separatist groups in Xinjiang. Earlier, the Chinese government had referred to the situation in Xinjiang as a domestic affair and did not invite or welcome attention on it. Tang Jiaxuan identified his government's efforts to curb the movement for East Turkestan as "an important aspect of the international fight against terrorism." For the first time, Beijing has released a list of the separatist groups operating in Xinjiang, alleging that they have links with the Al Qaeda.

The Foreign Minister also mentioned China's ratification of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, concluded by the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Significantly, this agreement brackets separatism and terrorism, obliterating the difference between political and violent campaigns for secession or self determination. China's stand on this issue has not found favor, especially with the US. In his visit to China during the APEC summit, the US President made it clear that countries should not use the global campaign against terror to suppress minorities.

Secondly, Tang Jiaxuan pointed out that "the objective of democratized international relations is far from being realized." After the US-led military intervention in Kosovo and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, China had expressed deep concern over the unilateralism practiced by the US in resolving international conflicts. Though China supports counter-strikes against terrorists, it qualifies its stand by stressing the need for the UN to play a central role. This may be interpreted as China's opposition to US hegemony, but it has wider implications for international relations. Bypassing the UN in both the Kosovo and the Afghan campaigns, the US has set a dangerous precedent of intervention in 'trouble spots' around the world based on its own understanding of the conflict. The military support of the NATO to both these US-led campaigns renders the role of the UN irrelevant in major international conflicts. The UN is the apex body of all its member states and its underlying principles of equality and consensus need to be strengthened. India, as the largest democracy, should have kept this in mind and insisted on the UN playing a central role in the fight against terrorism.

Chinese concerns stem from apprehensions about intervention and support to "splittist" elements within China, specifically in Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. Tang Jiaxuan reiterated the Chinese national objective "to accomplish the grand cause of national reunification." While calling for international cooperation to deal with terrorism, he mentioned the Shanghai Five and the ASEAN Regional Forum and China's role in these organizations towards combating terrorism. At both these fora China is a dominant player. Therefore China has distinguished very clearly between international cooperation that might lead to interference in its national objectives and those multilateral agreements with states that tacitly recognize its dominant position and work towards common objectives.

Though the issue of cross border support to separatist groups in Xinjiang is an unresolved issue between China and Pakistan, China has displayed ample evidence of further strengthening its ties with Pakistan. China and Pakistan are both opposed to a Northern Alliance dominated government, and are reportedly working on a joint regional strategy to ensure the installation of a 'broad based' government in Kabul.

# A man, a plan, Afghanistan

It won't be easy for the many Afghan factions to form a new government, even with the help of the UN's Lakhdar Brahimi. But without progress, all alliances could sink back into war

AHMED RASHID in Islamabad

AS UNITED NATIONS officials negotiated with Afghan warlords and commanders to arrange an urgent conference which could help establish a transitional government in Kabul, predictions of the outcome all seemed to include the Islamic invocation inshallah—God willing. The most optimistic goal: to transport some 25 Afghan leaders to Berlin—where talks are scheduled to begin on November 26—closest them with UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and his deputy Francesco Vendrell, and hammer out an agreement on how to proceed. Inshallah.

In fact, everyone is going to need some help from God. Despite their conquest of northern Afghanistan and the capital Kabul, the United Front, also known as the Northern Alliance, faces rivalries in its own ranks and with other groups. The ethnic Pashtuns in the south have largely liberated themselves from the Taliban, but as far as coherent leadership in the south is concerned the entire region is hopelessly fragmented. Meanwhile, as United States forces search for Osama bin Laden, the Taliban hard core is still holding out in Kandahar in the south and Kunduz in the north, near the Tajikistan border.

The challenge to the international community is to form a government in Kabul before all potentially constructive alliances dissolve into murderous civil war. The UN envoy Vendrell has started the process, arriving in the capital on November 17 and plunging into meetings with the United Front. Vendrell launched a successful effort to convince them

to withdraw their demand that the conference should be held in Kabul, under their auspices—a demand that had already been rejected by the southern Pashtuns. The United Front is made up predominantly of ethnic groups who inhabit northern Afghanistan—Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara—and only a few Pashtuns from the south.

"We have made it clear to everyone that territorial control or further conquest does not legitimize any faction's right to claim to rule over Afghanistan," says Vendrell. "Everyone has to work together to build a new, broad-based, multi-ethnic government."

The UN plans to call five groups to Berlin: the United Front, former King Zahir Shah, who heads the Rome peace process; the pro-Iranian Afghan émigrés who support the Iranian-backed Cyprus process; the pro-king Pashtun movement Loya Pakhtia; and the Pakistan-backed Peshawar process, composed of émigré Pashtuns and headed by the moderate religious leader Pir Sayed Gailani. Brahimi says all groups must include Afghan women and émigré technocrats.

The United Front, who have conquered half the country, are reluctant to be seen as equal partners with the other groups, who neither hold territory nor have any physical presence inside Afghanistan. Nor does the UN know which of the myriad Pashtun commanders in the south can be represented in the conference.

At the same time, tensions between ethnic groups and the commanders who represent them make the United Front both fragile

and volatile, especially now that the primary factor uniting them in the past—a need to dislodge the Taliban—no longer has such influence.

The northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and six provinces were captured by three United Front commanders, who are still at loggerheads over how to run the city. UN aid officials who want to begin humanitarian relief in northern Afghanistan say they are still unable to enter Mazar-e-Sharif from Uzbekistan because of the lack of security in the city.

In the nearby city of Kunduz, as the REVIEW went to press the Taliban were under siege and their leaders were negotiating surrender—most likely at the expense of the thousands of non-Afghans fighting with them.

In western Afghanistan, United Front commander Gen. Ismael Khan has set up unified control over three provinces and is the acknowledged leader of the region. But he has differences with United Front leaders in Kabul. Last week Khan's forces advanced towards Kandahar but halted halfway, at Dilaram: Khan, a Persian-speaking native of Herat, was persuaded by U.S. special forces and other United Front leaders to allow Kandahar to fall to anti-Taliban Pushtun forces in order to avoid ethnic friction. But Khan told reporters in Herat on November 19 that "if the terrorists don't leave Kandahar, we will have to push them out."

Kabul has been occupied mainly by the Tajik faction of the United Front, which is loyal to the vision of their late leader, Ahmad Shah Masud, who was assassinated in

September. Masud created the most disciplined and organized military force in the country. Because Masud encouraged a younger generation of educated and competent Afghans to emerge under his shadow, his is the only faction whose strategy is run by politicians rather than warlords.

Who is in power in Kabul? Three Tajik leaders have replaced Masud: Interior Minister Younis Qanuni, who is now organizing Kabul's security; the urbane English-speaking Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah; and the army chief, Gen. Mohammed Fahim. Together with a fourth leader, the Shia Gen. Sayed Husain Anwari, they make up the most moderate and accommodating faction of the United Front. All four stress they are committed to a broad-based government.

However they face several internal challenges. The first and trickiest comes from their own nominal leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is recognized by the UN as the president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The faction tried their best to keep Rabbani from coming to Kabul, fearing he would declare himself president and destroy their hopes of reaching a compromise with the Pashtuns in establishing a new government.

Rabbani came anyway, and has not ruled himself out as a possible leader despite the urging of moderate United Front leaders. Instead, he appears to be playing a waiting game. If the conference collapses, Rabbani—who has the support of Russia and Iran—could force the moderates to declare him president.

The other challenge to the moderates occupying Kabul comes from

# Another fall of Kabul

HUMERA NIAZI

THE fall of Kabul to the Northern Alliance is an extremely fast movement of events. A total contrast to the previous "no-success" posture, despite round-the-clock bombing by the US-led alliance. The ability of the Taliban to offer resistance may have created the element of surprise, which then may have led to delayed action. In the process it has created a dangerous situation. The Afghan crisis, at this point of time, is most unpredictable and it creates a fluid situation. Presently the most important question is, what

is going to happen with the takeover of the Northern Alliance; which means the situation on the ground with each passing day. This is also difficult to understand, since it is a contradiction of the "open-city" status earlier agreed by the US. It was not to bolster a Pakistan request, but to face the realities. While dealing with Afghanistan, it is not quite possible, not to have knowledge of what happened there. Just a few days before Kabul fell, bombing was tremendously intensified, which seemed an effort "to get the job done", before Ramadan, because it was felt a prolonged operation during it did not

bode well, in terms of world opinion. Such media developments do have the potential of changing events. The media coverage may have caused a halt in the bombing, making space for talks. With the advent of the holy month and winter round the corner, things could have been a bit different. But coming back to the extremely heavy bombardment, was it not expected that Kabul would be overcome after it? And such a possibility made it vital for a contingency plan to ensure that there would be no vacuum at Kabul.

It was stated in the press (if that is authentic), that there was a disclosure by the United Front Ambassador to the UN that the Americans had told the Alliance to enter Kabul. It is hoped the international community would act fast in its commitment to demilitarize Kabul and put in place a multinational force. It must act with its understanding of the recent history of the Alliance of which the west is well aware. A sample western media source: "It remains a fact that from 1992 to 1996, the Northern Alliance was a symbol of massacre, systematic rape and pillage. Which is why we-

and I include the US State Department welcomed the Taliban when they arrived in Kabul. The Northern Alliance left the city in 1996 with 50,000 dead behind it".

The western media has tried to portray what is happening since the fall of Kabul. BBC stated that non-combatants were killed, there being a visible revenge aspect. Also the track record of the Alliance serves as an eye opener. What is happening or will happen with their presence in Kabul (even if not for long) is not clearly known.

There have reportedly been summary executions of those Taliban who put down their arms (noncombatants) at Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul. This is contrary to international humanitarian law and the Geneva conventions. And persons indulging in these practices should not be allowed to participate in the future Afghan government. In fact, such future killings should be prevented.

It seems after Kunduz, Kandahar too would either fall or a negotiated settlement would take place, possibly, and that too very soon. It seems this is the most important issue

presently requiring action. On the question of Kandahar which could be given to Pashtun local commanders, Hamid Karzai (a pro-royalist former deputy foreign minister), states he is in contact with local commanders. Also stating that the Taliban are still in control of Kandahar and he hopes they would leave it without bloodshed or fighting, as they left Kabul. War ravaged Afghanistan presents a situation at the crossroads. A country without a government, with a lot of the people going to the borders, its future is to be decided at the Bonn conference, which has started. High-tech bombardment still continues, predictable bloodshed in the winter and hunger are to come. Well, the Afghans do not have 'daisy-cutters' or cluster bombs, but a Reuters report mentioned about the wrath of the Afghan people. That is something to be afraid of, and probably all that is left with them. It is hoped that peace will come soon to Afghanistan. And if the 'holier-than-thou' objectives are achieved—then it fits in to say, 'have a nice day.'

Courtesy: Far Eastern Economic Review.

Courtesy: IPCS website  
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