

For a Loya Jirga

M B NAQVI writes from Islamabad

SEVERAL odd developments in Afghanistan have taken place, with the US proclaiming it is still at war and not all the objectives of which have yet been achieved. For it the last pockets where Taliban are still holding out in the south and east of the country and the remnants of Al-Qaeda, Osama himself and Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders have not yet been arrested or killed. Hence its current political and diplomatic positions.

To understand what is happening and what impends, the man to watch is Northern Alliance Chief and head of the government that controls Kabul. He is in Kabul and claims to be in control. The US has been cooperating and coordinating its war with him. The Russians and Indians recognise him as the rightful President of Afghanistan. Mr. Rabbani feels he holds the key to Afghanistan's future. He spoke like a ruler who wants to guard his own power. He virtually shot down the idea of an interim 200-member Council and a 20 strong Cabinet thrown up by the UN-sponsored Bonn Conference.

The background was interesting. The Bonn Conference was facing snags. Ominously, one Pushtoon commander walked out in protest against insufficient representation of Pushtoons who claim to be at least 60 per cent of population. The inspiration for the Conference was two-fold: the UN representatives (who appear to implicitly believe in the mythology the Afghans weave about themselves) and the Afghan diaspora. The 'mythology' is all about the unique Afghan way of making consensus through Jirgas and major life and death issues for the state are decided through Loya Jirga (the grand assembly of elders).

Well, a heresy is now abroad. The heresy is based on experience and reasoning. Too many LJs have been called

over recent decades and Afghans have gone through bewildering experiences, many acquiring vested interests in the process. Even otherwise, the LJ generally endorses the positions or decisions taken by those who chose its members, paid for their expenses and hospitality, perhaps a little more for buying support. The whole institution has been repeatedly abused. Now, traditionally it used to comprise officially recognised (and paid) Maliks or elders and a few religious persons (Pirs) -- all malleable stuff ready to do what the top authority wanted them to.

Now, the task for LJ would be to select a top authority-to-be out of so many competing and powerful individuals. That is totally uncharted sea for either this conference in Bonn or the LJ it envisages; the agreement so far are purely verbal; none of them is likely to agree on all actual names for the LJ, Interim Council or the government that is supposedly on the anvil.

Besides, the Bonn conclave comprised the Afghan diaspora, including King Zahir Shah. Even if it achieves the near impossible of arriving at a consensus, how or who will implement them on the ground in Afghanistan is the question. Inside that country there is a foreign-supported government in Kabul and most of the country is actually being governed by innumerable commanders, powerful local lords with some soldiery of their own and who are extorting money inside a district or province and from those traders who want to transit their goods through their territory. Neither these de facto governors are impressed by anything said or done in Bonn or anywhere else nor does the largely notional government of President Rabbani is likely to heed anyone who has not been inside Afghanistan for perhaps several decades.

Rabbani has some 'generals' with him with troops, nominally acting for him and he is on the ground in Kabul, the

traditional capital. Even Pakistan is forced to tacitly recognise and welcome him. Rabbani, sure of his support, rejected UN ideas of international peace keepers (except for very restricted purposes) or an interim government made by outsiders (and that includes Afghanistan diaspora) or a nominated Parliament or King Zahir Shah to replace him. Not that the diaspora can ever be decisive or even of one view. Pakistani observers were quite pessimistic about the chances of Bonn moot either producing consensual results or these proving effective inside Afghanistan.

Meantime there is the US military command shooing off the British and French ground troops from Afghan territory. Only a few days ago it was 'surprised' by the sudden arrival of Russian troops, despite being meant for humanitarian purposes and despite the supposedly growing friendly ties between Russia and the US. The US is preparing to stay, in terms of ground troops, for a long time in Afghanistan for a variety of reasons -- and apparently does not want even its allies to mess around there. There is much significance in this.

Two nations that are the odd men out insofar as Afghanistan is concerned, have just met in Islamabad and promise to coordinate their Afghan policies. Both have the longest borders with Afghanistan on either side of it and claim to have interests in that country. And yet neither is being consulted or is likely to be, despite the much-bruited Pakistan-US alliance. It looks the US does not wish to brook any outside interference in Afghanistan at all and wants to call all the shots there itself insofar as the questions of who rules Afghanistan and who provides security there is concerned. Not even the UN is being countenanced.

Naqvi is a noted columnist in Pakistan.

You may now enjoy yourselves

Life's little pleasures return to Kabul after the Taliban's flight

AHMED RASHID

THE citizens of Kabul are having a ball, savouring the simple pleasures denied them during five-years of straitjacket existence under the ultra puritanical Taliban. Much of the multi-ethnic city of 1.2 million people looks a mess--the Taliban never cleared the rubble of the civil war that preceded their 1995 capture of the city--and the electricity and water supplies are patchy. The poorest, with nowhere else to go, are forced to live among the ruins. But the air is full of music and laughter--both clearly hated by the killjoy Taliban leaders.

The streets are also teeming with unaccompanied women for the first time in years. Prisoners in their own homes for so long, they once more shop in crowded bazaars and excitedly rediscover a city off limits under Taliban rule. Girls, barely a month ago barred from receiving an education, are excitedly waiting for schools to reopen. And while most women still shelter nervously behind the head-to-toe burqa, many are starting to show their defiance by negotiating the muddy pavements in high heels and white socks--one of the quirky things banned by the Taliban's radical religious police, apparently on the grounds that they would arouse young men. And with the return of television, after a five-year break, have come female announcers sporting headscarves.

Shops are doing a roaring trade selling TV satellite receiving dishes, made from flattened Coca Cola cans, for those not content with the three hours of daily local programming. Cinemas are also back up and running Indian movies. The press to get tickets is phenomenal, with many resorting to the black market to secure a prized seat.

The male population is celebrating too. Boys fly once-banned kites without fear of reprimand, while their elder male relatives pack into busy restaurants, once the preserve of the hated Arab supporters of suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, or sit down at a



kerbside barber's to get rid of their hated beards--another senseless Taliban rule. The obligatory turbans have also been shed.

The end of Taliban rule has also drawn hundreds of journalists to the city, which means lucrative employment for taxi drivers and those with language skills. But most people have little money to feed themselves, even though food is in abundance. The World Food Programme has shipped 2,000 tons of wheat into the city since November 1 in a bid to keep prices down. It gives free wheat to the neediest. Nobody is starving but malnutrition is everywhere. And while Kabul is an island of stability, under the watchful eye of some 4,000 United Front troops, those travelling into the capital by road from neighbouring provinces still face danger from Taliban bandits and their foreign friends. There's been little looting or revenge attacks in the city. Many people still feel it's too good to be true, but the city--which is under a night curfew--is quickly adjusting to freedom.

Courtesy: Far Eastern Economic Review.

A jigsaw puzzle called Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, equations are changing so fast that it is difficult to guess who stands where, says B. Muralidhar Reddy.

AS THE U.S.-backed Afghan groups struggle in Bonn under U.N. aegis to reach an understanding on an immediate political setup to fill the vacuum in Kabul, the military establishment in Islamabad is trying its best to adjust to the new realities in its neighbourhood.

The impact of the developments in Afghanistan, from the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif to the Northern Alliance's march into Kabul, is so profound for Pakistan that it is a stupendous task for the Musharraf Government to emerge relatively unscathed.

Therefore, it is only natural that the priority for Islamabad is to establish contact with the "wannabe" rulers in Kabul. This is no mean task considering that Islamabad has always dismissed the Northern Alliance as a bunch of opportunistic warlords eating out of the hands of its enemies within and outside the region. Why, before the Taliban gave way, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman admitted that the last contact between Islamabad and the Northern Alliance was over a year ago! What complicates the task is the deep antagonism of the Northern Alliance towards Pakistani rulers. Pakistan had put all its eggs in the Taliban basket.

But, as they say, you can choose your friends but not your neighbours. With the collapse of the Taliban, Pakistan now has little option but to make up to the Northern Alliance, at least a section of it. Already, there are feverish efforts by the military Government to re-connect with the Northern Alliance and make some kind of a return to the Afghan chessboard. The first signs were evident when the President, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, informed his Cabinet colleagues at their weekly meeting that the whole international community was now working on

Islamabad's two-decades-old agenda in Afghanistan - the formation of a 'broad-based and multi-ethnic' Government, if not long term then at least interim. The diplomatic community was amused at the 180-degree turn of the Pakistani establishment vis-a-vis Afghanistan. But the simple truth is that Gen. Musharraf had little option. Though perhaps he could have been a little less brazen.

Then came his assertion during an hour-long interview on State-run Pakistan Television (PTV): "Pakistan has nothing to worry on account of the Northern Alliance". He argued that after all the Alliance leaders had always been part and parcel of Afghan society and polity.

Even as Gen. Musharraf was preparing the people of Pakistan for the harsh realities in Afghanistan, his managers were quietly working behind the scenes to establish contacts with the Northern Alliance. It was out in the open when an official delegation went calling on the 'acting President' of Afghanistan, Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani, in Dubai, last week.

Prof. Rabbani, on his part, went out of his way to assure Pakistan that he had no illwill against its rulers and he was eagerly looking forward to an early meeting with Gen. Musharraf. The Pakistan Foreign Office promptly welcomed this desire of Prof. Rabbani but took care to describe him as 'former President'.

Prof. Rabbani's visit to Dubai, when there is chaos and turmoil all over Afghanistan and various factions are engaged in an intense power struggle, has raised eyebrows. The Professor, who was President in the U.N.'s book and for most of the world even in the glorious days of the Taliban, is clearly sending out a signal: he intends to cling on to power in

Kabul as long as possible.

His initial statement that the U.N.-sponsored Bonn conference had little significance beyond symbolism did not go unnoticed. The U.S. almost chided him for the statement and within days the State Department was addressing him as the 'former President'. Thereby hangs a tale.

Another story is that of the tussle between the U.S. and other major powers such as Russia and Iran on the future of Afghanistan. If reports in a section of the press are to be believed, Russia and Iran are backing Prof. Rabbani in his bid to stay on. On the other hand, having driven out the Taliban after a bloody war, America cannot be expected to give up easily. The Bush Administration seems to be backing the former King, Zahir Shah. Before the collapse of the Taliban, Islamabad gave an impression of endorsing the candidature of the former King. But the equations are changing so fast that it is difficult to guess who stands where. Efforts are also on by Iran and Pakistan to patch up and adopt a common approach. Iran has very close contacts with the Northern Alliance and can help Islamabad establish an equation with it.

There have been a number of visits by Iranian leaders to Pakistan in recent days. Gen. Musharraf also made it a point to stop over in Teheran on his way to New York. Last weekend, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mr. Kamal Kharrazi, was in Islamabad and met Gen. Musharraf.

The stakes for Teheran and Islamabad are very high. Both share long borders with Afghanistan and between them host five million refugees. But despite a number of parleys, serious differences persist. For instance, Pakistan favours deployment of a

multinational Muslim force in Afghanistan to ensure the safety of the transitional Government and all ethnic groups. But Teheran is opposed to the idea.

Pakistan is reaching out to Iran even as its relations with the U.S. have become strained in the post-Taliban scenario. The newly set up press centre of the U.S. coalition forces in Islamabad is also proving to be a daily source of embarrassment for the Pakistan Government. Invariably, the coalition spokesman ends up contradicting one statement or the other of the Pakistan Foreign Office.

Gen. Musharraf is in for tough times on the domestic front in the coming days and weeks.

The noises being made by the jihadi forces and their daily advertising of their military escapades in Kashmir can only be expected to add to his woes. Sooner than later, the U.S.-led coalition could be expected to focus its attention on these forces and Pakistan.

Pashtuns who dominate the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan are not happy over the turn of events in Afghanistan and the approach of the military Government.

There is a feeling of betrayal. If the arrangements for power-sharing in Afghanistan do not work out, it is bound to impact on Pakistan's internal situation. Plus there is a real danger of the Taliban using the border areas of Pakistan for staging guerilla warfare.

Gen. Musharraf has hinted at tough action against 'extremist elements' within Pakistan. But the trouble is these elements swear by the Kashmir cause. And he has been describing the developments in Kashmir as an 'indigenous freedom struggle'.

By arrangement with The Hindu of India

Rebuilding Afghanistan

SYED MUHAMMAD TEHSIN

AFTER twenty-three years of devastation and mayhem in Afghanistan one would have thought that the focus would be on the poverty, instability and efforts for reconstruction of the devastated land but that has not happened. The attention instead has been focused on the destruction of the alleged Al-Qaeda terrorist network and the dismantling of the extremist Taliban regime.

In the huge land mass just north of Afghanistan lie buried inestimable reserves of vital energy resources, e.g., gas and oil. Their value to sagging American and European economies and burgeoning Asian economies is immense. The developed world of USA, Europe and Japan has experienced in recent years, persistent economic recession and downsides. Whereas the vast resources in the Middle East

had for long fuelled the engines of world economy, the knowledge of their impending depletion and the growing political instability of the volatile region has made the United States policy makers increasingly wary of dependence on the Middle Eastern energy reserves.

The situation has now worsened further with Arab frustration hitting new heights due to Israeli disregard of what was, at best, a compromise settlement on the part of the Arabs in the shape of the Oslo accords, and the growing Israeli atrocities against Palestinian people both in economic and political terms.

With the political costs of continuing American reliance on the Middle Eastern energy resources getting unaffordable with rising levels of violence in the region and simultaneous intransigence and rigidity with uncompromising stances on both sides, it was about time that American policy makers

had set out to search for greener pastures. The resource rich and economically starved Central Asian states flanked by a friendly Russia and enjoying direct access to the major sea lanes through Pak-Afghan route is the best option for a grand policy shift in the perpetual quest for energy.

A re-alignment of American priorities on such a scale, however, also calls for a huge undertaking and commitment of uplift of the key states lying astride the new energy passages.

The most important state in this context would be Afghanistan. It has suffered immensely over the past century due to colonial conspiracies, foreign occupation, internecine warfare and a back breaking drought. Afghanistan needs a new start. It needs to be given a chance to rebuild and develop.

The first and most important task for rebuilding Afghanistan has

began under the UN aegis in Bonn. It is only the first step but it is crucial in the process to set the ball rolling for the formation of a forward looking and representative government in Kabul committed to rebuilding Afghanistan and looking after Afghan interests by pursuing a policy of friendliness and goodwill with all its immediate neighbours. Such a government would also possess the vision to join hands with the international community for the eradication of terrorism and extremism.

Although fear has been expressed by various quarters regarding the role and requisite amount of Pushtun representation in the emerging political dispensation in Afghanistan, it must be apparent from a cursory look at the Afghan mosaic of ethnic and linguistic groupings that a government sans the single largest ethnic group of the Pushtuns cannot succeed in the formation of a credible authority structure in Kabul. More so when the Tajiks and Uzbek minorities are concentrated in peripheral regions and Pushtuns inhabit the central and sprawling region that includes major cities and an overwhelming percentage of the population in the capital city of Kabul. The root of the fear of sidelining of the Pushtuns lies in the apprehensions about the installation of an anti-Pakistan government in Kabul. It would be much better to declare this fact openly and clearly instead of confusing it with the ethnic contours of Afghan society.

It has been Pakistan's experience in the past that Pushtun governments in Kabul attempted to inflict as much harm to the solidarity and ideological foundations of Pakistan as any other government in the region. From the refusal to accept Pakistan's entry into the UN to a consistent barrage of irredentist propaganda launched from Kabul during the reign of King Zahir Shah that greatly increased during the rule of Prince Daud, Pakistan has always had to rely on friends and well-wishers without expecting whole-hearted support from any one ethnic group en bloc.

Pakistan has a legitimate interest in the form and nature of the government that comes into being in Afghanistan. Pakistan is the country that has been affected most by the unfortunate calamities that befell its next door neighbour. Due to the deep ties of kinship and ethnic affinity Pakistan could not remain immune from the troubles of the Afghans and as a result its own society was badly damaged. Pakistan paid the price in the shape of Kalashnikov and heroin culture and some three million refugees that put a huge strain on the socio-economic structures in the country.

It would be perfectly understandable, however, for Pakistan to lay bare its preferences for the sake of its crucial security interests. It is well-known that the ascendant Northern Alliance has enjoyed close ties with arch enemy India in recent times, and India has been aiding the disparate motley of groupings both morally and materially to wage war against the fallen Taliban regime.

The suggestion that such a government can be tolerated with the provision of substantial political autonomy to the provinces would only result in further conflict and possible disintegration of the traumatised state.

As the next step after solving the political puzzle in Kabul through the Bonn process and its continuation through similar measures, the stage would be set for the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan. The last two decades have left the country virtually in shambles and a massive reconstruction effort would be required to make it viable so as to enable it to sustain the political process and absorb its émigré population.

Due to reasons of proximity, close economic linkages and hosting a huge Afghan refugee population, Pakistan has to emerge as a major player in the process of rebuilding the country. Pakistan possesses multifarious resources for providing the technical and technological help for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

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