

AFGHANISTAN

Still waiting to be rescued

The former king will return this month to a troubled but hopeful Afghanistan. As the US fights on the round and warlords battle each other and jockey for power, concern is mounting that the West is failing to provide what's needed to ensure the future stability of Afghanistan. **Ahmed Rashid** writes from Kabul

ON MARCH 21, former King Zahir Shah will arrive in Kabul to a mammoth public welcome after nearly 30 years in exile from Afghanistan. His arrival will kick off intense politicking as tribes and ethnic groups prepare to select their representatives for a loya jirga, or grand tribal council, through indirect elections in June. The last genuine loya jirga was held in 1964.

The loya jirga will choose a new head of state and transitional government for two years and establish the mechanisms to write a new constitution and hold elections in 2004, after 24 years of war.

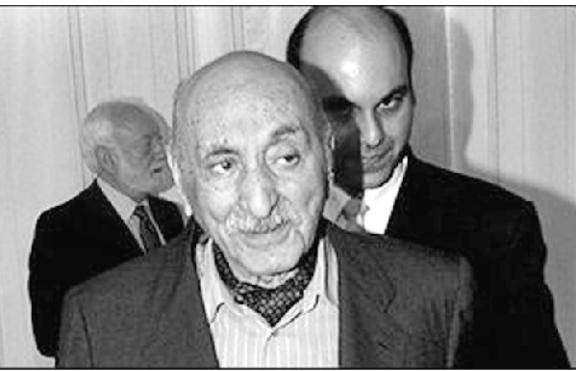
However, this vital political process is still fraught with danger. United States troops and their Afghan allies are still battling a redoubt of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters holed up in the snow-clad mountains south of Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. Hundreds of people have been killed in the U.S. ground offensive-the largest yet in the war against terrorism. Warlordism is still rampant in several parts of the country: In the north there have been skirmishes between warlords, and a pogrom against the Pashtun minority. And there are severe ethnic strains in the cabinet of the interim government.

But Kabul today is abuzz with activity and awash with potential. The streets are full of life; there is great excitement now as 1.7 million children prepare to return to school on March 23 under a Unicef programme. Interim government leader Hamid Karzai is deluged with visitors, from ethnic tribesman to Western businessmen, all trying to position themselves as the country is rebuilt.

But despite the gold-rush spirit, there is little money in Afghanistan, and little security. As the country tries to end warlordism and enters the first of several critical stages in the political process to establish a new government with a wider popular consensus, there is mounting concern among the Afghan interim government and international peacekeepers on the ground that the West is failing to address critical issues on which the success of the political process and the future stability of Afghanistan depend.

The ISAF has been generally well-received in Kabul. When British soldiers patrolling the streets stop their armoured vehicles for a moment, there is an instant traffic jam as hordes of well-wishers including women in blue burqas and laughing children crowd around them. The ISAF has been the most visible sign so far of the international community's commitment to help stabilize war-torn Afghanistan. "Naturally there have been moments of wild optimism and deep frustration, but it's a real privilege to be a part of this," McColl says.

But the 4,800 troops drawn from 19 nations that make up the ISAF are limited to Kabul. The vacuum created by the lack of an international presence outside the capital is encouraging Iran and Russia to support different warlord armies. International reluctance to expand the ISAF has in turn made it difficult to disarm warlords and move towards the establish-



ment of a national army. "It is clear that if funding is not made available for the central government to build a new army, the warlords will refuse to demobilize and disarm their men," says a Western ambassador in Kabul.

At present, the warlords see the army of interim Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim, which controls Kabul and northeastern Afghanistan, as just another ethnic faction. Fahim, the successor to the anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmad Shah Masud, commands a largely Tajik army, which helped the U.S. defeat the Taliban, but which warlords from other ethnic groups deeply resent.

Masud hailed from the Panjshir valley north of Kabul and belonged to the Jamiat-e-Islami party. Fahim is one of three Panjshiri leaders in the government, alongside Interior Minister Yunis Qanuni and Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who now wield enormous power in Kabul. This troika has been accused by ministers from other ethnic groups of stuffing ministries, the army and the police with Panjshiris.

On the ground, there is a different reality. Fahim's commander in the north, Gen. Mohammed Atta, has been trying to regain territory and influence from Uzbek and Hazara warlords, which has led to several serious clashes. The non-Pashtun groups have launched a vicious campaign to oust the minority Pashtun population from their villages in the north because of the latter's alliance with the Taliban.

Other Panjshiri commanders are attempting to buy influence among Pashtuns south of Kabul, including installing as commanders in Wardak province those Pashtuns who are known for their loyalty to the Jamiat-e-Islami's bitter rival, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar, who was in exile in Iran, is now rumoured to be in Afghanistan.

At the March 5 meeting, Fahim urged the warlords to stow their heavy weapons in depots under their own control until the loya jirga, and then, in a second stage after June, to agree to hand them over to the Defence Ministry. Although the warlords verbally agreed, implementation is unlikely so long as they still

feel threatened by Fahim.

The ultimate prize is political: Every group is trying to position itself to exert the maximum influence in the loya jirga. Many of these tensions could be reduced if the international community expands the ISAF outside Kabul and funds a new, multi-ethnic army monitored by the ISAF and the United Nations. Only such firm international action would place the necessary pressure on Fahim and the warlords to behave.

But with limited funding and support, the ISAF is already facing increasing demands due to poor security outside Kabul. Royalists are demanding that the ISAF protect Zahir Shah when he returns to Kabul and travels to Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif in April. The Loya Jirga Commission, which will set rules and approve candidates for the council, is demanding ISAF protection for its large public meetings in Kabul and elsewhere.

Even before the ISAF is expanded, its position in Kabul must be resolved. The UN Security Council mandate for Britain to lead the ISAF expires in mid-April. Britain has declined to renew its leadership role, while several European countries who were initially expected to take on that task have now backed out, leaving Turkey as the only lead nation. Many Afghans are nervous about Turkey taking on the leadership role, because in the past Turkey has been involved in supporting Uzbek warlord Dostum and they fear that Turkish troops will not be as impartial as the British.

The Turks have their own concerns, which they are discussing in continuing meetings with the U.S. and Britain, McColl says. Turkey seeks funding from Western nations, and wants continued U.S. air cover for its forces.

The expansion of the ISAF to other cities is now supported by the UN and by British, American and French generals in Kabul, but not by their governments. Karzai has been touring Western nations urging the world to meet this demand. Western governments have so far failed to agree to an expansion, because it could be an expensive and risky operation, and because European nations are waiting for the U.S. to take the lead, while the Bush administration remains divided on the issue. The UN Special Representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, disagrees.

On a positive note, despite the failure of the international community on several counts and the rising ethnic tensions, no warlord or group is prepared to take on the government or attack Kabul. With Zahir Shah set to return, the festival of Nauroz due to start, and the return to a sense of normalcy with children going back to school, Afghans are still optimistic that the loya jirga will be held on time, and that it will usher in a new political relationship between the factions.

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After six month, has anything changed in Asia?

RALPH A. COSSA

"EVERYTHING has changed!" This has become a familiar mantra in the six months since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

But, while the way Americans look at the world may have changed fundamentally, the basic issues confronting American decision-makers in Asia, for the most part, remain unchanged.

Even the "everything has changed" slogan appears in need of modification.

A Chinese commentator may have said it best: "9-11 may have changed everything for Americans, but not for Asians."

What has changed things for us is the way America responded to 9-11." Washington's "either you're with us or against us" approach has caused even those who traditionally have not been very sympathetic toward the U.S. to appear supportive (or at least to maintain a lower profile).

But, a look at the prevailing regional concerns six months after September 11th reveals more similarities than differences.

Japan True, Japan has become much more involved in international security affairs over the past six months, in East Timor as well as in the Indian Ocean.

But, Japan's desire to become a more "normal" nation precedes 9-11; Prime Minister Koizumi had pledged last spring that Japan would become a more equal partner to the U.S., while decrying the unrealistic nature of many of Japan's self-imposed constraints.

If nothing else, however, 9-11 provided Koizumi with the incentive and political cover to move ahead more rapidly than planned.

The largest issue between Tokyo and Washington - Japan's inability to make the fundamental reforms necessary to revive its increasingly sick economy - remains essentially unchanged, however.

While Bush signaled early on that he would not resort to the twin failed tactics of the Clinton administration - Japan bashing and Japan passing - his administration has been equally unsuccessful in convincing Japan to finally get its economic house in order.

In addition, many contentious Okinawa basing issues remain unresolved, despite an aura of enhanced security cooperation in the wake of Bush's Tokyo visit last month.

While a desire to be on the right side of the war on terrorism may have also helped to temper Chinese and Korean (North and South) criticism of Japanese naval deployments in support of Afghanistan

operations, their long-standing concerns about Japanese remilitarization have, if anything, been strengthened.

The war on terrorism may have further strengthened the already close bonds between the Bush and Koizumi administrations, but has not brought Japan any closer together with its neighbors.

Korea

One could argue that the biggest change has been on the Korean Peninsula, at least in the wake of President Bush's branding of North Korea as part of the infamous "axis of evil." But, Pyongyang had been steadfastly rejecting offers by Washington to hold talks "any time, any place, without preconditions" well before 9-11 or the State of the Union branding.

Nor can North Korea's decision, in October 2001, once again to call a halt to North-South high-level dialogue and family exchange visits be convincingly tied to 9-11.

(Pyongyang tried to blame security conditions in the South for the October breakdown but those same conditions existed in late September when earlier high-level meetings were held and a decision to resume family exchanges was made.) In truth, September 11 provided an opportunity for Pyongyang to improve relations with Washington; one that Pyongyang choose not to seize, content instead with business as usual.

The major strains in U.S.-ROK relations also predated 9-11; they date back to ROK President Kim Dae-jung's poorly-handled March 2001 visit to Washington.

The "axis" comment underscored the problem, it didn't create it.

To his credit, President Bush did a good job in toning down his comments regarding North Korea and, more importantly, in reaffirming his support for President Kim when the two met last month in Seoul.

But Bush's visit quickly became a page two story, with any goodwill created in Seoul seemingly wiped out by speed-skating judges in Salt Lake City. Much work remains to be done here.

China

On a more positive note, Sino-U.S.

relations have improved dramatically in the past six months, but this was already in the cards following Secretary of State Powell's July 2001 visit to Beijing.

The decision to pursue a "cooperative, constructive" relationship was already there.

This is not to demean the significant amount of 9-11 related cooperation that has taken place: greater political cooperation in international forums like the Chinese-hosted Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting last October, apparently unprecedented intelligence sharing, a willingness to play "honest broker" with North Korea, and a greater coincidence of views regarding nuclear South Asia.

But, President Bush's visit to Beijing last month, as pleasant as it was, showed little coincidence of view or greater willingness to cooperate on non-proliferation or missile-related issues - each insists the other must take the first step on non-proliferation and the Chinese continue to see missile defense as universally bad but offensive missiles as an internal decision not subject to debate.

There was also a clear Chinese reluctance to discuss cooperation on fighting terrorism beyond the Afghanistan campaign.

Much to Taiwan's relief, Chinese support for the anti-terrorism campaign has also not resulted in any tempering of Bush's commitment to Taiwan's security.

And, in Bush's much-heralded address to the Chinese people, he underscored just how far apart both nations remain on issues relating to human rights and religious freedom.

So, while everything may have changed in the eyes of some Americans, another old saying may still have equal relevance; namely, "that the more things change, the more they remain the same."

Korea Times.

DAVID PLOTT in Bangkok

WHEN PRIME MINISTER Thaksin Shinawatra addressed the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok last June, ably articulating his government's policies and fielding questions in English, foreign reporters were impressed and commented how much more at ease with the media he seemed than his predecessor, Chuan Leekpai. But with Thaksin's apparent support for moves to expel two foreign journalists, he is unlikely to be so well-received again.

As Thai authorities weighed an expulsion order facing the REVIEW's Bangkok Bureau Chief Shawn Crispin and correspondent Rodney Tasker, the government blocked distribution of the March 2 issue of the Economist magazine due to an article mentioning the Thai monarchy, and moved to silence popular local radio programming that offered trenchant political commentary. On March 4 the Defence Ministry ordered Nation Multimedia Group to cut its political programmes after it aired an interview with a senior opposition figure. (Radio frequencies in Thailand are controlled by the armed forces.)

Although the expulsion order was celebrated by some politicians and protesters as a demonstration of national sovereignty, the wider issue soon became the perceived threat to Thailand's much-vaunted freedom of the press.

The latest moves are part of a pattern of interference in media freedom that began soon after Thaksin came to power in January 2001. Members of the Thai Senate, which plays a watchdog role, have compiled a list of 12 incidents of warnings or closures in the print media, television and radio since Thaksin took office. The United States State Department, in its annual human-rights report on Thailand, cites 14 incidents of police warnings to publications in 2001.

The opposition feels hamstrung on the issue. Media watchdogs say that press freedom has not been a popular issue in a country where a severe economic downturn has focused middle-class concerns on financial survival. What's more, with Thaksin's unassailable majority in the 500-seat parliament, says a spokesman from the opposition Democrat Party, "it doesn't matter what we do. Our voice doesn't hurt him that much." It is also difficult to get Thaksin to respond to criticism,

the spokesman says, because "the prime minister never attends parliamentary question time."

Now, as the Chart Pattana party joins Thaksin's coalition, the prime minister commands enough seats in parliament to amend the country's reformist constitution.

The worry in wider business circles is whether Thaksin's grip on power signals a hard lurch to the right for Thailand and the tarnishing of its image as a liberal, open society. A recent decision by the California Public Employees Retirement System, one of the largest pension funds in the U.S., to pull out of investment in Thailand was based in part on concerns for press freedom.

Many of the politicians and demonstrators who have protested at the coverage of Thailand have done so on nationalistic grounds. In a March 1 editorial, the Bangkok Post criticized government officials who launched "jingoistic tirades

against anyone who dares to hold a different opinion." Asked to comment on the issue of press freedom, government spokesman Yongyut Tiypairat said: "To maintain a free and enlightened society, the government ought to listen to the media's advice and we expect, in return, that the media are minding the government's concerns as well."

The storm erupted in the wake of several articles in the REVIEW that were critical of the government's policies and performance. The notices of expulsion, issued by the police in late February, cited the January 10 issue of the FarEastern Economic Review, which reported tensions between Thaksin and the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

The procedure the police are following is not familiar to the foreign media in Thailand, which are accustomed to being informed of official concern about coverage through the Foreign Ministry and the public relations department. But in this

instance, just as the government has used the Ministry of Defence to stifle critical radio programming, the government appears to have used the police both as a buffer and battering ram, introducing a new and troubling mechanism of media censorship.

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