

Bush-Oliver North-Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) nexus.

The Taliban began to disassociate from the pillaging mujahideen groups in 1992, and in 1994 a group of *madrasa* teachers and students, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, the strongman of today's Taliban regime, formed the Taliban movement and seized control of Kandahar City. Since then, the Taliban, instead of seeking knowledge, has

sought control of Afghanistan, and by 1998 came to take control of virtually the entire country by force of arms.

Foreign Elements

The state with the closest and strongest links to Afghanistan historically is Pakistan, the launching ground for pushing the invading Soviet Army back from Afghanistan, in what President Ronald Reagan called the "rollback policy."

Two Taliban Victims: Women, and the Drought-Stricken

This Spring, a mild to severe drought swept the entire Near East, from Syria to Afghanistan, and then to South Asia, into southern Pakistan and western India.

The drought in Afghanistan was severe. Almost a decade of scanty rainfall had dried up the land, leaving no pasture for the cattle to graze. As a result, cattle and people in southern, northern, and central Afghanistan suffered deeply, and the suffering is far from over. Thousands of livestock, mostly sheep, are dead, and hundreds of thousands of Afghans have had to leave their homes and head toward Pakistan. The normally lush Arghandab Valley in the north, famous for its bountiful grapes, apricots, and pomegranates, has dried up. The livelihood of about 1 million people is under threat in Kandahar Province alone, following the drying up of the reservoir behind the Dahla Dam.

UN agencies estimate that 1.8 to 2 million of Afghanistan's 12 million people could be uprooted by drought. Already, there are 1.2 million refugees in Pakistan, while Iran has another 1.4 million. If the Winter rain comes, it will not come before November.

Food Shortages

Most of Afghanistan's crop is lost, and shallow wells are going dry in the cities. Afghanistan faces a record wheat shortfall of 1.1 million tons. Pakistan has promised a million tons of wheat, which is yet to arrive, and in all likelihood, the promise will not be fully met. The United States has delivered 40,000 tons of wheat, which is only a fraction of the amount the country needs now and in the coming days. UN aid agencies have asked donors for \$67.8 million in emergency money, but because of the Taliban regime, less than 15% of the requested money has come to Afghanistan.

The Taliban militia is preoccupied with completing its conquest of the country and enforcing a puritanical in-

terpretation of Islam both within the country and abroad. It is evident that Kabul is keen to blame others for the misery of the Afghans in the villages, but has shown little or no interest in alleviating the misery. Kabul sent some trucks and helicopters to the worst drought-affected areas to evacuate families, but has no food to distribute.

As soon as the Taliban took power in Kandahar in 1994, the regime began to impose Islamic laws. The first target was women, who were forced to put on *burqa* (a black veil that covers a woman from head to foot like a tent, with a slit-like opening to see). Female students were told to stay home and not attend school. Women were forcibly taken out of taxis in Kabul and other cities because they did not have their male relatives with them, or picked up on the streets because the authorities thought they were prostitutes.

Next came the edict in July 2000, barring women from working for relief agencies inside Afghanistan, because the Taliban rulers think that the women might be spies. Taliban spokesman Abdul Hakeem Mujahid told Associated Press that the former Soviet Union had trained 35,000 Afghan women as KGB agents.

The Vice and Virtue Ministry, under Mohammad Turabi, a disabled veteran of Afghanistan's war against the Soviet Union, has ordered residents of Kabul to paint their windows black to prevent passers-by from looking at the women within. Turabi demands that male relatives must accompany women when they are outside the home. His religious police roam the streets of Kabul enforcing the edicts.

Hanging in the balance is the future of some 28,000 war widows, who make a living working in World Food Program bakeries. If the edict barring women from working for relief agencies is not rescinded, women in Afghanistan will face harder times.

In Kabul, the Taliban's harsh treatment of women has resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of women and children beggars in the capital. One UN report says that thousands of children were seen scavenging the streets of Kabul, while in the war-destroyed ruins of the city, women in *burqa* with outstretched hands ask for alms.

—Ramtanu Maitra