

Anti-U.S. Taliban Ready to Strike

by Ramtanu Maitra

The death of Afghanistan's Minister for Mines and Industries, Juma Muhammad Muhammadi, in an air crash on Feb. 24 off Pakistan's coast after taking off from Karachi, typifies the problems that beset the Afghan transition government under President Hamid Karzai. It also warns of the inability of the United States troops and allied forces to restore security in Afghanistan.

Juma Muhammad Muhammadi, a World Bank official and an American citizen, is the third high-ranking minister killed in the last year since the U.S.-backed Karzai government took control of Kabul after the withdrawal of the Taliban forces from the Afghan capital. In February 2002, Karzai's Tourism Minister, Abdul Rehman, was assassinated at Kabul airport. In July, Haji Abdul Qadir, the Vice President, was shot dead in an ambush in Kabul.

A Likely Assassination

There are concerns that assassins might have killed the minister. On Feb. 22, Muhammed Muhammadi had held talks in Islamabad on a multibillion-dollar gas pipeline project that would link Turkmenistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan. At the meeting, ministers and officials from the three countries had agreed to invite India to participate in the \$2.5 billion gas line project, despite New Delhi's hostile relations with Islamabad. Muhammadi, who was keen to develop and modernize the mining industry of his war-ravaged country, was travelling to see the mining techniques and the technology being employed by the Chinese.

It has been reported that the crash took place on a clear day. This was second crash in Pakistan in less than a week. On Feb. 21, a Pakistan Air Force Fokker F-27 turboprop carrying Air Chief Marshal Mushaf Ali Mir, his wife, and several senior officials crashed on a hill 30 kilometers from the north-western town of Kohat. The Air Chief's death was attributed to the low visibility caused by stormy weather.

The deaths of the three senior Afghan Cabinet ministers have not been the only indications that no pro-American leader is any longer safe in Afghanistan. President Karzai, who survived an assassination attempt in the city of Kandahar last Summer, has surrounded himself with U.S. Special Forces personnel, who provide the innermost core of his personal security. There is no doubt that seething anger within the ethnic Pashtoon community, who felt humiliated by the U.S. over-lordship in the process of driving out the Taliban,

is growing, and Washington has no real will to soothe their nerves.

On Feb. 17, the United Nations warned its staff in Afghanistan to beware of terrorists who might try to kidnap them, a UN source told the media. The warning from UN security officials said that "Arab groups" or supporters of former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—a vocal opponent of the government—could try to kidnap the staffers in Kabul on Feb. 19, a UN official told the press. The warning was lifted later, but it shows the security situation now in Afghanistan.

Similar worries have been expressed by the German troops who have taken over the leadership of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) from Turkey since mid-February. According to the German news weekly *Der Spiegel* of Feb. 17, the United States "has practically ceased" its efforts to capture Osama bin Laden, ostensibly the number-one enemy vis-à-vis the 9/11 attack on the United States, and redeployed "all Special Forces units" for an attack on Iraq. *Der Spiegel* claims the U.S. decision has left the German Special Forces practically alone in Afghanistan.

In fact, since the Karzai government took over the reins of Afghanistan—helped by the same pro-Iraq war crowd within the U.S. Defense Department—Afghanistan has remained divided. The United States, depending heavily on Pakistan, sought control over the Pashtoon land which borders Pakistan to the east, and the adjacent major cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Khost. The tragedy is that the U.S. and allied troops have not succeeded in mustering control over any city other than Kabul, and the Pakistani support to gain control of the Pashtoon land remains as elusive as ever.

Internecine Warfare

The security situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has deteriorated sharply. President Karzai on Feb. 23 urged his compatriots to help U.S. soldiers track down suspected terrorists in southern Afghanistan. He asked U.S. forces to take extra precautions to avoid civilian casualties, and to take "special care" before launching their operations to be sure their intelligence is correct. Karzai made the remarks to a group of village elders from the southern Baghran district of Helmand province, the scene of U.S. air and ground assaults on suspected Taliban hideouts in the mountainous area in mid-February, a statement from his office said. The elders had come to the capital to complain about alleged deaths of several civilians in the assault. The U.S. military said it could not confirm any civilian casualties and that the fighting took place away from populated areas. Meanwhile, reports are pouring in daily about attacks on U.S. and ISAF installations. On Feb. 26, more than a dozen rockets rained down on the main American Bagram air base, north of Kabul.

Iranian radio reported on Feb. 24 that two Afghan warlords are now involved in a full-scale war against each other in the Faryab province bordering Iran. The fighting began

after an Afghan Interior Ministry delegation arrived to replace Gov. Mohammad Saleh Zari. Hindukosh news agency cited Gen. Abdul Sabur, an official from the Mazar-e Sharif military corps—which is allied with Jamiat-e Islami—as saying forces loyal to Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum initiated the battle when they attacked troops led by Abdul Rasul, a commander loyal to Jamiat-e Islami. Sabur said the fighting ended on Feb. 23. Zari is believed to be loyal to Dostum. In late January, five people were reported killed and an undisclosed number injured in fighting that took place between rival commanders in Faryab province.

Two recent events indicate that Washington may find it increasingly difficult to rely on Islamabad on terrorism issues. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported on Feb. 10, 2003 that a new group of terrorists, calling itself Tanzim al-Fatah Afghanistan, has begun to operate from Chaman, Pakistan, on behalf of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, against the U.S. and allied forces based in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan. The group has published a document, in the form of an Islamic *fatwa* (legal opinion), calling upon the believers not to cooperate with the U.S. and ISAF troops. The edict said, “Muslims who help the United States and Britain in killing thousands of Taliban and Arab mujahideen [al-Qaeda, ostensibly] do not remain Muslims any more, and their murder is allowed.” The report indicates that the document might have been issued under the guidance of Hekmatyar (see *Profile*), who had earlier called for a full-fledged *jihād* against the American forces in Afghanistan.

On Feb. 17, a message, allegedly signed by the Taliban supremo Mullah Mohammad Omar—who has escaped the American dragnet in Afghanistan along with bin Laden—was circulated along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It said that 1,600 “prominent scholars” from Afghanistan have “unanimously” stated that it is the duty of every Muslim to wage *jihād* against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and warned that if anyone “helps the aggressive infidels and joins their ranks under any name or task, that person deserves execution,” the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press reported. The message ordered all Afghans who cannot participate in the *jihād*, to separate themselves from U.S. forces in Afghanistan and from President Karzai.

Concern Expressed Around the Region

The Americans, on the other hand, want to convey to the world that the situation is well under control and that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are on the run. But unlike earlier, when the Pentagon was keen on conveying the image of its “total victory,” the mood is somewhat different now. According to Col. Roger King, the U.S. military spokesman at the Bagram air base outside Kabul, there are “probably several hundred” Taliban and al-Qaeda forces around Afghanistan and “maybe a larger number” over the border with Pakistan.

Washington claims that one of the major successes of its diplomacy in Afghanistan is in getting the Germans and the

Netherlands to take over leadership of the ISAF from Turkey on Feb. 10. However, it is a matter of conjecture how long this good luck will hold. Both Germany and the Netherlands said on Feb. 21 they might pull their troops out of the ISAF, if tensions in Iraq spark anti-Western sentiment, RFE/RL reported. German Defense Minister Peter Struck said his country might withdraw its forces if a war in Iraq escalates tensions in Kabul. Joining him was Dutch Foreign Ministry spokesman Bart Jochems, who said his country also has plans to withdraw its troops if anti-Western sentiment threatens troops in Kabul, where the ISAF operates.

Two other major nations, India and Russia, that are directly involved in sorting out the Afghan imbroglio, have expressed concern over the resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and are willing to render all-round support to the Karzai government to prevent a comeback of the extremist forces. “We cannot but feel concerned that forces bent on destabilization are still active inside and outside Afghanistan,” Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said after two and a half hours of talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, in Moscow on Feb. 21. “It would be a great tragedy for Afghanistan and the international community if extremist forces came back to power in that country. Russia and India have done a lot to ensure that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are removed from power and we intend to continue our cooperation with other countries to support the Karzai government in its efforts to stabilize the situation in the country.”

Opium and Politics

Despite the growing animosity among Afghans against the Americans and other foreign troops, Washington is pressing on with its old concept of exercising pressure and handing out money. Vis-à-vis Pakistan, the American policy is a replica of that for dealing with the Pashtoon warlords in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan.

Following the ouster of the Taliban from Kabul, Americans were given Washington’s promises of an Afghanistan which would be free of narcotics—not overnight, but over a period of time. But on the ground, the situation is entirely different. This year Afghanistan will have a bumper poppy crop. This Winter Afghanistan has experienced rain and snow; it is expected that even the farmers who could not grow poppy last year because the land was parched, would grow poppy again this year. President Karzai is expected to request they not grow poppy, but such a request would not go far.

More important, what the Americans must know is that the use of poppy money to build a “loyal militia” in favor of the United States is back in vogue in the country. This was the way Afghans, and criminals from Arabia and Maghreb countries, were co-opted by the U.S. intelligence services to fight the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Americans looked aside then, and now it is happening again. The game is to use these poppy-money-rich Afghan warlords to fight the Taliban and

al-Qaeda. In essence, U.S. intelligence is again involved with the drug cartel, to make Afghanistan the largest poppy-growing country in the world.

However, the failure of Washington's policies will not be acknowledged. Instead, what will be seen is the lowering of the boom on Pakistan. The Feb. 24 *Washington Post's* lead editorial blamed Pakistan's President Gen. Pervez Musharraf for not curbing the terrorists who are hurting America's and President Karzai's interest in Afghanistan. President Musharraf, who has received billions of American dollars since 9/11 for providing help to the absurd U.S. policy in Afghanistan, is now again accused of harboring terrorists. The editorial was used to issue a stern warning that if Pakistan does not support the United States in the impending war against Iraq, President Musharraf would be removed. U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), who belongs to the pro-India camp, has already demanded sanctions against Pakistan.

Profile

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar: U.S.'s New Terrorist

On Feb. 19, the U.S. government announced that because of his terrorist activity, the United States is designating Gulbuddin Hekmatyar as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224.

Meet America's Former Best Friend

Soon after 9/11, the greatest evil that trod this Earth was Osama bin Laden, a former friend and collaborator of the United States. In those days, dozens of press briefings were held by U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to tell the American people how the U.S. dragnet was going to ensnare this evil Yemeni-Saudi. All that has been forgotten, but the situation in Afghanistan has not changed much. What was needed was another bogeyman, and who could better fit the description than Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the bearded engineer from Kabul University who did much to humble the Russians at a time when that was what the United States wanted?

But, Hekmatyar, like bin Laden, has worn many turbans over the years. He is a Pashtoon warlord, former Afghan prime minister, a fundamentalist religious fanatic, and a homicidal thug. Washington liked him a lot once, but does not like him any more. The largest battle in Afghanistan in recent months, in the mountains near Spin Boldak on Jan. 27, pitted U.S. forces against guerrillas "most closely aligned with the Hezb-i-Islami movement, which is Hekmatyar's military arm," according to U.S. military spokesman Col. Roger King,

the Feb. 10 Pakistani *Daily Times* reported. The death of nine minibus passengers in an explosion near Kandahar on Jan. 31, was also attributed to Hezb-i-Islami. It has been widely alleged that Hekmatyar, who has been sighted in six Afghan provinces in the last three months, has linked up with the Taliban supremo Mullah Mohammad Omar and remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the Feb. 9 *Boston Globe* reported. This is plausible, although one must also note a history of sour relations between the Taliban and the warlord.

Hekmatyar was not always on the wrong side. During the 1980s, he received fully 90% of the CIA-supplied funds doled out via Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) to the mujahideen Islamic warriors, according to Ahmed Rashid, author of *Taliban*. These funds amounted to some \$500 million per year throughout the 1980s, matched by equal sums from other enthusiastic mujahideen patrons acting in close cooperation with the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Closest CIA Cooperation

Hekmatyar became a star following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. Hezb-i-Islami played a leading role in the Islamic *jihad* against the pro-Soviet regime, and so naturally, Hekmatyar went on the U.S. payroll. Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, convicted of responsibility for the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1995, helped the CIA establish contacts with Hekmatyar. Meanwhile the latter's forces in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan continued a *jihad* against the Maoists, who were also playing a significant role in the anti-Soviet resistance. Hekmatyar wanted to ensure that the opposition was thoroughly religious and anti-communist in character. So in November 1986, in Peshawar, Pakistan, Hezb-i-Islami forces assassinated Dr. Faiz Ahmad, founder and leader of the Maoist Afghanistan Liberation Organization, and ten other key ALO members.

The next year, according to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA, a secular, anti-fundamentalist organization rooted in the Maoist movement), Hezb-i-Islami was complicit in the assassination of RAWA founder Meena in Quetta, Pakistan. But to the CIA, everything about Hekmatyar was kosher. So close was his CIA cooperation that he even, at their request, launched rocket attacks from Afghanistan against the Soviet republic of Tajikistan in 1987, Rashid wrote.

In June 1993, following the mujahideen victory over the last government installed by the Soviets, Hekmatyar became Prime Minister of Afghanistan, serving under the new President, Burhanuddin Rabbani. But he broke with the government in the Fall, and in January 1994, in alliance with Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum (the warlord who presently controls much of northern Afghanistan), laid siege to Kabul. In two months, 4,000 residents of Kabul (which had been an island of stability and prosperity during the pro-Soviet period) were killed, 21,000 were injured, and 200,000 were forced to flee the city.