



Afghanistan:

MONTHLY REVIEW

March 2007

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Security

Civilians have again become victims of suicide attacks targeted at international forces or personnel, or at the police. The specific incidents include the following:

- On 8th March, five civilians were wounded, including three children, when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives near an ISAF convoy to the west of Kandahar.
- On 11th March, one policeman was killed and three others were wounded when a suicide bomber attacked a joint ISAF/Afghan security forces convoy in Bala Buluk District in the western province of Farah.
- On 13th March, at least three people were killed and eight were injured when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives as he was being searched after crossing into Afghanistan from Pakistan at Spin Boldak, to the south of Kandahar.
- On 14th March, four people were killed and 35 wounded, 12 of them critically, when a suicide bomber, who was on foot, detonated his explosives near a police convoy in the eastern city of Khost. Most of the casualties were shopkeepers and pedestrians.
- On 17th March, a child was killed and two members of its family were injured when a suicide bomber rammed his vehicle into an ISAF convoy on the main highway to the west of Kandahar. An ISAF soldier was also wounded.
- On 19th March, a number of people were injured, one of them seriously, when a suicide bomber drove a car at high speed into a convoy of US embassy officials in Kabul.
- On 23rd March, a child was injured when a suicide car bomb exploded near an ISAF convoy on the Jalalabad to Torkham highway.
- On 27th March, four policemen and two civilians were killed when a suicide bomber dressed in army uniform detonated his explosives when he was being searched at the entrance to the police headquarters in Lashkar Gah.
- On 28th March, at least four civilians were killed and 12 wounded when a suicide bomber on a motor cycle detonated his explosives near the main market in Kabul. It is thought that a senior intelligence official, who was among the wounded, was the target.

International forces and the police have also been targeted through the following attacks:

- On 1st March, three civilians were killed and 48 wounded, including 10 children, when a roadside bomb exploded in the provincial capital of Farah, in western

Afghanistan. The bomb attack, which occurred near a school, was said to have been targeted at a passing police vehicle. Two police officers were also wounded.

- On 3rd March, two civilians were killed and 16 others injured, two of them critically, when a roadside bomb fixed on a bicycle exploded in the western city of Herat, on a road normally used by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan National Security Forces convoys.
- On 10th March, eight policemen were killed and two were injured when their patrol was ambushed in Arghistan District in the southern province of Kandahar.
- On 12th March, ten policemen were killed when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb as they were travelling to the district of Bakwa in Farah Province. The head of security for the district was among those killed.
- On 23rd March, two policemen were killed and four injured when a police post was attacked near Tirin Kot, the administrative capital of Uruzgan Province in southern Afghanistan.
- On 27th March, two policemen were killed and two abducted after a police post was attacked to the north of the city of Kandahar.

Those associated with the Afghan Government or with the international presence have remained highly vulnerable. Abductions, followed by murders, represent a highly disturbing aspect of recent incidents. The specific examples include the following:

- On 6th March, an Italian journalist and two Afghan facilitators were detained by the Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, in Nad Ali District of Helmand. One of the facilitators was beheaded on 12th April. The other continued to be held at the end of March, with the Taliban setting specific conditions for his release. The journalist was released on 19th April, following controversial negotiations.
- On 8th March, a German aid worker, employed by German Agro Action, was shot dead in the northern province of Sar-i-Pul after the vehicles in which he and four Afghan colleagues were travelling were stopped by armed men. It would appear that the killing was politically motivated.
- On 14th March, a district chief was killed and another injured, along with a policeman, when a convoy carrying officials in the northern province of Faryab was attacked.
- On 18th March, the head of the government revenue department in the western city of Herat was shot dead at his home. A local factory owner commented that many firms had left the city because of the deteriorating security situation.

- On 23rd March, ten private Afghan security guards and four drivers were killed when a convoy delivering supplies to international forces was ambushed in southern Afghanistan
- On 26th March, the head of the women's prison in Lashkar Gah was seized by two men on motorcycles as she left her home. Her body was found a short time later, outside the town. She had been shot.
- On 27th March, an Afghan doctor, three nurses and a driver employed by the Ministry of Health were kidnapped by armed men in the southern province of Kandahar. A Taliban spokesman issued specific conditions for their release.
- On the same day, a Pakistani engineer working in the northern province of Balkh was shot dead, and two Afghan colleagues were wounded, by armed men on a motor cycle.

Human rights

On 4th March, US marines opened fire on civilian cars and pedestrians on the main Jalalabad to Torkham highway, killing at least eight people and injuring a further 34. This followed a suicide attack, in which explosives were detonated from a minivan as the US convoy approached. As the convoy sped away, shots were fired indiscriminately, according to some accounts, over, at least, a six-mile stretch. The US military stated that they were fired at immediately after the suicide attack and that some of those killed or injured might have been hit by the shots fired at them. However, this has been questioned in some reports

The incident, which took place 30 km from the Pakistan border, provoked an angry response. Hundreds of people blocked the road and threw rocks at police. They also shouted "Death to America. Death to Karzai".

On the following day, President Karzai issued a statement in which he condemned the actions of the US troops.

The unit of US Special Operations forces which was responsible has since been withdrawn from Afghanistan, although the individuals directly involved have remained to help in investigations. A spokesman for the US military commented: "The relationship you have with the local people while conducting counterinsurgency operations is very important and, because the perceptions damaged that, its probably degraded the unit's ability to fulfil those kinds of missions".

Further anger was generated by an air strike, also on 4th March, in the north-eastern province of Kapisa in which five women, four children and an old man were killed. This air strike followed a rocket attack on a US base.

In response to the two incidents, students in Jalalabad protested on 6th March, calling for a withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, who were referred to as the “invading forces”.

The reputation of the international military is also affected by continuing incidents in which civilians are killed when they fail to respond to warning shots by international forces if they are thought to represent a threat. In one such incident, on 22nd March, a boy was killed in Kabul when his father’s vehicle was felt to be too close to an ISAF convoy.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has called on the US and Afghan Governments to create a legal framework to regulate US-led military activities in the country. AIHRC commented that Afghanistan’s Constitution and the six international human rights treaties that the country is signatory to are too vague to regulate multilateral military engagements in the country.

Notwithstanding concerns in Afghanistan over the human rights record of the US military, the US State Department has commented on human rights in Afghanistan in its annual report for 2006 on the global human rights situation. It notes the impact of the insurgency and also refers to the responsibility of the Afghan Government for human rights abuses. It thus states: “There continued to be instances in which security and factional forces committed extra-judicial killings and torture”. It also comments: “The law prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention. However, both remained serious problems”.

President Karzai referred a revised version of the draft amnesty bill to the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of Parliament) at the beginning of the month, to include a provision which recognises the rights of victims to seek justice against alleged war criminals. This was passed by the Wolesi Jirga on 10th March.

Counter-insurgency

On 6th March, 4,500 ISAF troops and 1,000 members of the Afghan National Security Forces were said to have launched a major offensive, aimed to secure northern Helmand Province. A key element in the strategy is to provide sufficient security for the Kajaki hydro-electric dam to operate. The strategy also involves the empowerment of “village elders to take charge of their communities.”

However, any consideration of the potential success of this offensive has to be set against reports from a number of sources which suggest that the Taliban have seized a number of districts in Helmand. It was thus reported by Adnkronos International on 5th March that the Taliban had claimed to have taken control of Nawzad District in Helmand Province. The Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) noted, on 27th March, that, according to its sources, the Governor of Helmand acknowledged that several districts of Helmand were held by the Taliban. IWPR also stated that government officials in Lashkar Gah were receiving warning letters, threatening that, if they did not leave their jobs, the consequences would be serious.

The success of this and other operations by international forces will also be affected by the climate of opinion in the country and, therefore, by the willingness of the population to lend support to the Taliban. Pajhwok Afghan News reported on 8th March that the arrest, by US and Afghan forces, of three religious leaders in Chaparhar District in the eastern province of Nangarhar had provoked a demonstration in which hundreds of protestors chanted anti-US and anti-government slogans. A rumour was also in circulation that international forces had desecrated the holy Quran. Whether or not this was well founded, the perception that this had happened will have further alienated the population only days after the incident in the same province in which US forces had killed and injured a significant number of civilians. The paper commented that this was the sixth operation by US forces in the District over a period of a few months.

It is less clear whether the strength of the insurgency will be affected by a development reported by Associated Press on 8th March. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hisb-e-Islami, was said to have advised them that he was open to talks with President Karzai, following a split with the Taliban, and to have added that his forces, which have largely been fighting against US forces in Kunar, were only mounting restricted operations. However, AFP reported on 10th March that a “purported spokesman” for Hekmatyar had denied that there was a split with the Taliban, had stressed that Hisb-e-Islami forces would continue to fight and had also insisted that there could be no talks with President Karzai while US troops remained in Afghanistan. If it is, indeed, the case that Hekmatyar is willing to engage in dialogue with the Afghan President, this would be significant in so far as it might strengthen Pakistan’s influence within the corridors of power in Afghanistan. However, it is not clear whether such a dialogue would reduce the scale of the insurgency, given the number of variables involved. It is also not clear that the pre-conditions that Hekmatyar has set for talks to take place would make it possible for them to be held. President Karzai’s spokesman responded, on 12th March, that “our doors are open to any group and individual who give[s] up violence and shows respect” for the Afghan Constitution.

The ability of international forces to bring stability to southern Afghanistan will also not be helped by growing indications of instability in Pakistan. In an interview with Reuters on 17th March, Benazir Bhutto, the former President of Pakistan, expressed her concern over the growing power of the Taliban in the tribal areas and, in connection with this, the difficulties that President Musharraf faced in seeking to suppress elements of the Pakistani security forces that remained sympathetic to the Taliban. She also commented that the current judicial crisis, in which people have taken to the streets in large numbers over the removal of Pakistan’s Chief Justice, could spiral out of control.

President Musharraf has also faced criticism over his decision to host a conference of the foreign ministers of Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in late February to discuss the situation in Palestine and West Asia. His failure to invite Iran has provoked comment that the conference was convened at the instigation of the US. If tensions do further increase in the region over the Iran nuclear issue, President Musharraf may find himself under growing pressure from radical elements within Pakistan, and therefore unrest, over his apparent willingness to cooperate with the US over Iran.

Serious account needs to be taken of a recent comment by General Hamid Gul, the former head of Pakistan's intelligence service, that President Musharraf might have been prevailed upon to permit the use of Pakistan territory and facilities to support any US military action against Iran. General Gul played a key role in supporting the Taliban during their period in power in Afghanistan and can be regarded as representing a significant body of radical opinion. If the US were to intervene militarily in Iran, the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan could be expected to build on popular anger over what would inevitably be seen as a further manifestation of a US crusade against the Islamic world. Such an intervention would risk destabilising Pakistan and would further increase public support for the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Progress is bringing tribal elders together to debate how best to address the security situation, following agreement reached between Presidents Bush, Musharraf and Karzai in September, remains extremely slow. At the first joint meeting of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Jirga Commission, held on 12th and 13th March, it was agreed that a further meeting would be convened from 8th-11th April at which dates would be determined for Jirgas to be held on both sides of the border.

The primary purpose of this initiative is to encourage tribal elders on both sides of the border to take responsibility for their own security and to distance themselves from radical elements. This principle underpinned an agreement reached in September 2006 by the Pakistan Government in North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. A similar agreement was signed on 29th March between the Pakistan Government and tribal leaders in the Bajaur Agency of FATA, under which they will sever ties with foreign militants operating from the region.

It is not clear whether a recent wave of fighting between international Islamic radicals resident in the tribal areas and elements of the Taliban, in combination with tribal elders, could be regarded as an outcome of this policy. It may also be the case that it is a manifestation of reported tensions between the Taliban and international radicals over whether they should focus their efforts exclusively on international forces in Afghanistan and not dilute them by simultaneous terrorist activity within Pakistan.

The US Government announced on 11th March that an additional 3,500 US troops would be sent to Afghanistan, bringing the total in the country to 27,000. This was said to be "part of the effort to speed up the training and expand the size of the Afghan forces."

On 8th March, Italy's lower house of parliament voted to maintain Italy's forces in Afghanistan. The Italian Senate also voted in favour when it met on 28th March. The Government of Romano Prodi almost fell over this issue in late February.

The German Government advised on 12th March that it took seriously threats made by two Islamist groups, to attack Germany and to execute two German hostages being held in Iraq, if Germany did not withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. It insisted, however, that it would maintain its military presence in Afghanistan.

Drugs

In a briefing given to the UN, on 21st March, by the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, he stated that there is a notable decrease in poppy cultivation in the northern provinces of Afghanistan but that the anticipated increase in the south will largely offset any positive gains against overall opium production in Afghanistan.

Humanitarian developments

Heavy rain, combined with high levels of snow melt led to severe flooding and mudslides over the second half of March, resulting in casualties and also in loss of homes and livelihoods. The Afghan Government, the World Food Programme and others have done what they could to provide emergency assistance but have, in some areas, been constrained by adverse security or damage to access routes. The Afghan Government, together with UNAMA, have provided for 20,000 people while WFP has distributed 350,000 tonnes of food to its warehouses around the country. The specific episodes include the following:

- 16 people were killed and 25 were injured in an avalanche in the central province of Ghor.
- Five people died in flash floods in the north-western province of Badghis. The Provincial Development Council reported that people in many parts of the province had lost everything and were facing serious difficulties accessing shelter, food, medicine and potable water.
- 30 people were reported to have been killed in flash floods in Uruzgan. 1,000 people also had to be evacuated from villages as the Helmand River rose.
- 10 people were killed by avalanches in Panjao District of Bamyan, in the central highlands.
- 13 died in the Salang Pass over the Hindu Kush mountains.
- Flooding in the south-western province of Nimroz killed six people and damaged or destroyed homes in about 49 villages.
- At least 12 people were killed and 12 more wounded when their houses were buried by avalanches in northern Badakshan province.

The European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) announced on 14th March that it had allocated 18 million euros to support the reintegration of refugees from Pakistan and Iran, and of internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning to their areas of origin. The funding, which is also intended to benefit the wider communities to which they are

returning, will cover projects relating to water supply, sanitation, food security, shelter, nutrition and hygiene education.

UNICEF has reported that six million children were enrolled in schools at the start of the new academic year on 24th March. Two million of these were girls. However, there are significant variations within the country, with enrolment rates for girls in Kabul and Herat reaching as high as 50%, as compared with extremely low rates in the southern provinces of Uruzgan and Zabul, where more than 90% of girls do not attend school.

Refugees

UNHCR advised on 29th March that there had been an acceleration in the number of Afghans returning from Pakistan over the previous weeks. This was attributed, in part, to an increase in the cash grant paid to each returnee, from \$30 to \$100. A further factor cited was that those who had not registered with the Pakistan Government were given until 15th April to return, if they were to benefit from UNHCR's assistance package. More than 38,000 had returned since the Voluntary Repatriation Programme restarted on 1st March.

Over 2.1 million Afghans were registered between October 2006 and February 2007 and issued with Proof of Registration Cards valid for three years. The Afghan Embassy in Islamabad estimated that about 400,000 had not registered.

Bird flu

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) announced on 8th March that the H5N1 strain of bird flu had been confirmed in six additional areas in Nangarhar, Kunar and Kabul Provinces. Further cases were reported on 28th March in Kabul and Kandahar. The Government has responded by disinfecting and quarantining affected areas and slaughtering poultry in the vicinity. It has also undertaken a vaccination campaign in the provinces concerned. The first cases were reported in March and April 2006 but there was no further incidence of the virus until four cases were confirmed in Nangarhar and Kunar in February 2007. There have been no reported infections of humans.

Economic developments

The Asian Development Bank has given an assessment of the Afghan economy through Asian Development Outlook 2007. It notes that overall GDP growth for the financial year ending on 20th March 2007 is expected to reach only 8%, well below the 12% anticipated in the IMF Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility programme. However, growth for FY2007 and FY2008 is expected to reach double figures again, assuming that the agricultural sector continues to recover from the most recent drought. Growth prospects for the medium term hinge on the security situation. Inflation in the 2006 calendar year is said to have declined to a little less than 4%, aided by a decline in energy prices and rents in the capital. Exports are only rising slowly and the trade deficit was \$2.6 billion in FY2005. However, the current account should remain "close to balance due to grants".

Progress in reforming public administration is said to remain slow. However, the capacity of the Afghan Government to implement the development budget is stated to have increased from 43% in FY2005 to around 55-60% in FY2006. Government revenues have increased by 500% since FY2003 but are still very low. An increase of 15-20% is expected in the coming year. A fall in customs revenues over the second half of last year was partly offset by higher revenues from taxes on income, profits and business receipts.

The assessment comments that an estimated 80-90% of economic activity is in the informal sector because of “political uncertainty, the lack of the rule of law, inefficient business registration procedures and the tax regime”. It adds that ‘entrepreneurs in the informal sector typically remain small, avoiding investments in productive assets or technology that would enable them to achieve economies of scale or to move into higher value-added activities’.

In conclusion, the assessment states: “Despite impressive growth and a solid track record of macroeconomic policy and structural reforms, the country still faces substantial challenges. The current reconstruction-related drivers of growth will neither sustain growth, create employment nor reduce poverty over the medium term”.

The British Geological Survey (BGS) has reported on work that it has undertaken, alongside the Afghanistan Geological Survey, to scan, digitise and re-interpret data produced by Russian geologists during the late 1970s and 1980s on the Aynak Copper Deposit, which is 35 km south of Kabul. The BGS, with help from the World Bank, also helped the Afghan Ministry of Mines to prepare a new Mining Law in 2005, to enable it to manage an emerging mining industry. Tenders were invited, in late 2006, for the Aynak Copper Deposit and expressions of interest have been received from companies in Australia, Canada, China, India, Kazakhstan, Russia and the US.

The US company, Bearing Point of McLean has been awarded a \$218.6 million contract by USAID to train government officials in budget preparation and disbursement, inter-agency coordination and human resources. Bearing Point has been working in Afghanistan since 2002 to help rebuild the banking system and also the capacity of a few ministries. The new project will extend this process to a wider group of ministries.

It was announced on 1st March that Iran had agreed to provide 50 more scholarships to Afghans to enable them to complete their higher education studies there. 600 students are currently using the scholarships. Iran has also donated \$800,000 to Kabul University’s dentistry faculty.

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