

MMU: Military Report: Mexico, Pakistan at Risk of 'Rapid and Sudden Collapse', 15 January 2009

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FEATURE STORY

Military Report: Mexico, Pakistan at Risk of 'Rapid and Sudden Collapse'

FOXNews

Wednesday, January 14, 2009

Mexico and Pakistan are at risk of a "rapid and sudden collapse," according to a recent report from the U.S. Joint Forces Command.

The assessment comes as President-elect Barack Obama prepares to tackle international challenges including the conflict in Gaza, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and tensions between India and Pakistan.

"In terms of worst-case scenarios for the Joint Force and indeed the world, two large and important states bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse: Pakistan and Mexico," the report says.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Joint Forces Command said the latest assessment was likely written before the Mumbai attacks which further inflamed tensions in South Asia.

The Joint Operating Environment report, meant to examine worldwide security trends, says Pakistan, in the event of such a rapid collapse, would be susceptible to a "violent and bloody civil and sectarian war" made more dangerous by concerns over the country's nuclear arsenal.

The report says that "perfect storm of uncertainty" by itself might require U.S. engagement.

The report says a collapse in Mexico seems less likely, but noted that the government infrastructure is "under sustained assault and pressure" from drug cartels and gangs. A collapse within the United States' southern neighbor would also "demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone."

Obama met earlier this week with Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

Joint Forces spokeswoman Kathleen Jabs told FOXNews.com the purpose of the assessment is not necessarily to predict future crises with 100 percent certainty, but to start a dialogue among world leaders by "looking at the trends."

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BUSINESS

Hard Hit Quraqul Rawhide Industry Seen Recovering

Written by <http://www.quqnoos.com/>

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Afghan sheep skin industry seeks modernization

The Afghan Export Agency said that in the past six years this home grown industry is recovering and last year Quraqul sheep rawhide exports abroad generated 40 million dollars in sales.

Currently, Quraqul sheep rawhide ranks as the third ranked export product from Afghanistan.

Some Quraqul sheep ranchers believe the price of Quraqul rawhides will be increase due to the drought in the country.

Although Afghanistan is rated as having some of the highest quality sheep rawhides in the world market, the sector lacks sufficient processing facilities for the skins and therefore is not as competitive in international sales as many producers would wish.

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NATION

Government is Unable to Transfer Power to Kabul

Written by <http://www.quqnoos.com/>

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Power promised by Uzbekistan's government could not be transferred to Kabul

Due to technical problems, 40 mega watts worth of electrical power promised by Uzbekistan's government could not be transferred to Kabul.

Afghanistan's finance minister had signed a 220 mega watts electricity agreement with the government of Uzbekistan, of which 40 megawatts was specified for Kabul city, but Kabul citizens still spend their nights with no electricity.

Lack of electricity is a major problem for Kabul residents.

Therefore the ministry of finance and the ministry of water and energy signed a new 70 megawatts power agreement with Uzbekistan.

It is hoped that the new power will reach Kabul as soon as possible.

Head of the electricity department in Balkh, Muhammad Nasir, said unless studies are not completed over the transference of high voltage electricity to Kabul, it will not be possible to activate this electricity.

Uzbekistan's government sold one kilowatt of electricity for four cents before, but in the last agreement, it raised the price to six cents.

Reports also say that the Afghan government has signed a new contract with the government of Uzbekistan, according to which Afghanistan will get 500 megawatts more electricity.

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GOP's Graham cites worldwide good will for Obama

AP

By JENNIFER LOVEN

15 January 2009

WASHINGTON

A confidant of the man Barack Obama defeated in November said Wednesday that the president-elect has earned enormous global good will and "a moment in time" to re-engage other nations with the United States.

The assessment by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., was noteworthy because he is a conservative Republican and one of Sen. John McCain's closest friends. Graham campaigned vigorously against Obama in last year's presidential race.

Noting himself that he had been "one of the chief opponents" of Obama, Graham pronounced himself now "very pleased" with the president-elect's attitude and policies toward the countries they visited.

Graham appeared Wednesday with Vice President-elect Joe Biden at Obama's transition headquarters. Biden and Graham were there to brief Obama on what they learned during a just-completed five-day, bipartisan fact-finding mission to Kuwait, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I cannot tell you how much enthusiasm we saw in Pakistan for this new president," Graham said, sitting in a chair to Obama's right. "There is a moment in time here for this country to re-engage the international community, to make sure that we have international support to stabilize Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq."

He added: "This president's popularity and the respect that he has earned throughout the world gives America a chance to re-engage not only in the region, but in a way that will in the long term make this job easier, take some pressure off our troops. And that's a compliment to you and the way you have campaigned."

Biden and Graham gave Obama an initial report on their trip and will later present the president-elect with a more detailed accounting, including recommendations. Reporters weren't allowed into the meeting, but the trio talked to reporters brought in after it was over.

Biden said "things are going to get tougher in Afghanistan" before they improve. Graham agreed, predicting that "casualties are likely to increase" in Afghanistan as the number of U.S. troops there goes up this year.

The U.S. is rushing as many as 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, seeking to the turn the tide in fighting that has seen al-Qaida-linked militants and the Taliban make a comeback after initial defeats in the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

However, on the day that a new audiotape believed to be from Osama bin Laden was posted on Islamic militant Web sites, Biden struck an optimistic note, saying that the assets and cooperation he saw in the region led him to feel more positive about the anti-terror fights.

"I come away from the trip more encouraged rather than less encouraged," he said.

Biden, still chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee until his expected resignation from his Senate seat before becoming vice president on Tuesday, took the trip as a member of Congress, not as incoming vice president.

But it was a distinction without a difference.

The administration-in-waiting wanted to show its interest in the crucial region as soon as possible. And an official White House trip would have been much more cumbersome and have taken much longer to organize than what's known in Capitol Hill-speak as a CODEL, or congressional delegation trip. Graham is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Though the pair stressed they went to each country "to listen, not to convey policy," they also expressed concern to some leaders, when necessary, "about some of their actions - or lack of actions."

For instance, they both emphasized the crucial role Pakistan will play in whether the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan can be successful. Militants cross the porous, dangerous border from the lawless frontier on the Pakistani side into Afghanistan, where they attack U.S. troops.

Obama said little to reporters, other than thanking the two senators and announcing that he plans to enlist Graham as "one of our counselors" on foreign policy.

"The recommendations that you're going to be delivering to me are going to be of enormous help in making sure that we do what is my No. 1 task as president-elect and as president, and that is to keep the American people safe and to make sure that when we deploy our military, that we do so with a clear sense of mission and with strong support from the American people," Obama said.

He pledged during his campaign to remove all combat troops from Iraq by May 2010 and to refocus on Afghanistan. However, he has said that he would consult with military commanders first and adjust his timeline if it would risk the safety of U.S. troops remaining behind to train Iraqis and fight al-Qaida or if it would cause backsliding in Iraqi stability.

Graham, in another shift from his statements during last year's presidential campaign, also praised Obama's approach on bringing troops home from Iraq.

"We have an opportunity, now, in a responsible manner, to bring our troops home," he said.

Associated Press writer Ann Sanner contributed to this report.

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NATO Tightens Rules of Engagement in Afghanistan

Voice of America

14 January 2009

NATO says it has tightened its rules of engagement in Afghanistan in an attempt to minimize civilian casualties and reduce tensions.

An alliance spokesman Wednesday announced that Afghan forces will take the lead in all searches of Afghan homes and religious sites. The directive specifies that foreign troops can only lead such searches if a clear danger has been identified.

This new rule went into effect last month but was only made public Wednesday.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly called on the roughly 60,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan to avoid harming civilians. He has said the issue of civilian casualties has undermined public support for foreign troops in his country.

NATO blames Taliban fighters for causing the majority of civilian deaths in Afghanistan.

In other news Wednesday, a spokesman for the Afghan Defense Ministry, General Zahir Azimi, said that only four districts in Afghanistan's volatile south remain under Taliban control. General Azimi made the remarks at a joint Afghan-NATO press conference in Kabul.

Officials say one district is located in Daykundi province while the other three are in Helmand province.

Some information for this report was provided by AFP, AP and Reuters.

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The Difference Between Afghanistan and Iraq

DemocracyArsenal.org, NY

By Ilan Goldenberg

15 January 2009

Pat has a great post up on the importance of having a serious and thoughtful debate about troop increases in Afghanistan and the new blog [Get Afghanistan Right](#). I don't disagree that there needs to be a serious discussion of the issues before a large number of troops are deployed into the region. And I am not really sold one way or the other on troop increases.

However, I do think that any discussion, must start with a candid assessment of American interests. And I do think that there is a major difference between the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Particularly in the FATA) and that of Iraq in 2003. In this case what is going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan does in fact present a direct and immediate threat to American security and interests.

Over the past few years, pretty much every single major terrorist attack or foiled plot against the U.S. or its allies has in some way involved the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Obviously there was 9/11. The 2005 London bombings. The 2006 plot to blow up Transatlantic flights or the conclusion by Gordon Brown and British counterrorism officials that "[t]hree-quarters of the most serious terror plots being investigated by UK authorities have links to Pakistan." Moreover, in the case of the Iraq war there were major disagreements between the Bush administration and the intelligence community over whether there was any real relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq (There wasn't). In fact the administration cherry picked and misrepresented intelligence to make it's best case. In the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan it is the Intelligence Community that has lead the way and drawn more attention to the issue, releasing an NIE in 2007 that explicitly made the case that the safe haven on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border represented the single greatest direct threat to the U.S. homeland.

On top of that, Pakistan, a nuclear state going through dramatic economic and political upheaval, presents a real proliferation threat. If the situation continues to deteriorate it could call into question the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. What doesn't seem very likely is the traditional scenario of an extremist regime taking over the state and using the weapons or giving them to terrorists. But what is possible is that the lack of security combined with the Al Qaeda elements, leads to some kind of nuclear theft. Or perhaps there is a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan. The report by the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, chaired by Bob Graham, who was the chair of the Senate Intel Committee in 2002 and voted against the war, came to the same conclusion. As did CAP's terrorism index survey, where 74% of foreign policy experts thought that Pakistan was the country most likely to transfer nuclear technology to terrorists.

Now, all of this is not meant to scare people. Nor does the above mean that we should by default send thousands of troops to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. If there is to be a large troop increase I'd like to see a very specific set of limited goals that responsibly address American interests. The plan should also include a clear path to accomplishing those goals, a clear exit strategy, and a convincing articulation of why American troops are needed to accomplish these goals. If that plan cannot be formulated then I wouldn't support a large troop increase, but I do think the Obama administration deserves some time to think this through and present its plans.

In short, the fact that progressives are having this debate is a good thing. This is a question that must be thought about carefully. But I do think that it's a much more complicated question than that of going into Iraq in 2003. The stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan are much higher today, than they were in Iraq in early 2003. And the people who are calling for more resources and focus are the intelligence and military professionals - not the political ideologues who were eager to start a war with Iraq.

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US Afghan tribe plan 'is risky'

BBC News

By Martin Vennard

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Afghanistan's ambassador to the US, Said Jawad, has said a US-backed plan to form local tribal groups to help combat the insurgency is very risky.

The US hopes groups similar to those that have had success in Iraq will counter the growing insurgency and the lack of security forces.

But Mr Jawad told the BBC the plan could backfire.

He said it could undermine state institutions and actually strengthen warlords and criminals.

Weapons

Mr Jawad is the latest Afghan official to publicly raise concerns about the US-backed plan.

"In order to gain a short-term term victory we might be in danger of losing the long-term objective of building state institutions," he said.

Mr Jawad said that Afghanistan's traditional tribal structures had been undermined by three decades of conflict.

He said that if the plan was not properly managed it could strengthen the warlords and criminals.

The plan has revived memories of the militias formed in the 1980s by Afghanistan's Communist government. They later became involved in factional warfare.

But the US ambassador to Kabul, William Wood, said the plan, which is due to be tried out in Wardak province near Kabul, was not a re-creation of those tribal militias.

He said the groups would not be armed by the Americans, but receive training, clothing and military back-up.

The governor of Wardak says the plan is still being discussed and the groups will be involved in things such a reconstruction as well as security.

But critics say the groups will have to have weapons to be effective and are wondering where those arms will come from.

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Rhetoric on bin Laden toned down in interview

Boston Globe, United States

January 15, 2009

After the Sept. 11 terror attacks, President Bush vowed to smoke out Osama bin Laden and bring him back "dead or alive" - like those Old West wanted posters.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain liked to say he would follow bin Laden to "the gates of hell."

But in an interview that aired last night on CBS, President-elect Barack Obama, even as he described Al Qaeda as the top national security threat, took a somewhat more measured approach.

"I think that we have to so weaken his infrastructure that, whether he is technically alive or not, he is so pinned down that he cannot function," Obama said.

"My preference obviously would be to capture or kill him. But if we have so tightened the noose that he's in a cave somewhere and can't even communicate with his operatives then we will meet our goal of protecting America."

In a recording released yesterday on an Islamist website, bin Laden said that Obama would "inherit a long guerrilla war against a patient, stubborn adversary."

GLOBE STAFF

Biden to Obama: 'Tougher' days ahead in Afghanistan WASHINGTON - Freshly returned from a tour of war zones and global hot spots, Vice President-elect Joe Biden told President-elect Barack Obama yesterday that "things are going to get tougher" in Afghanistan.

GOP Senator Lindsey Graham, Biden's partner in the five-day fact-finding mission to Kuwait, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, predicted that "casualties are likely to increase" in Afghanistan as the number of US troops there goes up this year.

The Pentagon is rushing as many as 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, seeking to turn the tide in fighting that has seen Al Qaeda-linked militants and the Taliban make a comeback after initial defeats in the US-led invasion in 2001.

Biden and Graham gave Obama an initial report on their trip to the four countries, all central to America's security agenda and the broader war on terror, at Obama's transition headquarters.

They will present the president-elect later with a more detailed accounting, including recommendations for action based on what they saw and heard.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Democrats try to extend tax cuts using recovery bill WASHINGTON - Barack Obama's economic recovery bill has grown to \$850 billion after negotiations with his Democratic allies in Congress, who have rewritten some of the president-elect's tax proposals and may drive the price tag even higher.

For starters, Capitol Hill Democrats are trying to use the economic recovery bill to extend a tax cut for middle- to upper-income taxpayers despite concerns from Obama's transition team that it won't boost the economy.

Representative Charles Rangel of New York, chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, said lawmakers in both the House and Senate want to use the stimulus package to make the annual fix to the alternative minimum tax to prevent more than 20 million additional tax filers from having to pay it.

Making that fix for one year alone would cost about \$70 billion, a healthy chunk out of the approximately \$300 billion that Obama has set aside for tax cuts.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Biden says war will get worse in Afghanistan

AP

1/15/09

WASHINGTON

Freshly returned from a tour of war zones and global hotspots, Vice President-elect Joe Biden told President-elect Barack Obama on Wednesday that "things are going to get tougher" in Afghanistan.

GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham, Biden's partner in the five-day, bipartisan fact-finding mission to Kuwait, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, predicted that "casualties are likely to increase" in Afghanistan as the number of U.S. troops there goes up this year.

The U.S. is rushing as many as 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, seeking to turn the tide in fighting that has seen al-Qaida-linked militants and the Taliban make a comeback after initial defeats in the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

"It is a fair criticism to say, Mr. President, that we have taken our eye off the ball in Afghanistan and we need to re-engage," Graham, R-S.C., said. "And that re-engagement is going to come at a heavy price."

Biden and Graham gave Obama an initial report on their trip to the four countries, all central to America's security agenda and the broader war on terror, at Obama's transition headquarters. They will present the president-elect later with a more detailed accounting, including recommendations for action based on what they saw and heard.

Reporters weren't allowed into the meeting where Biden and Graham briefed Obama, but the trio talked to reporters brought in after it was over.

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US general in Central Asia visit

BBC News

By Rayhan Demytrie

15 January 2009

Almaty, Kazakhstan

The top US military commander for the Middle East and Central Asia has denied reports the US is planning to open a military base in Kazakhstan.

Speaking in the Kazakh capital, Astana, Gen David Petraeus also said the US had no plans to withdraw its military presence from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

The general is in Kazakhstan for talks on the role of Central Asian states in supporting America's Afghan operations.

It is his first visit to the region since his appointment last year.

Afghan route

Gen Petraeus and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev discussed the partnership between their countries, and Kazakhstan's role in supporting US operations in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan has recently signed an agreement allowing the transit of non-military US supplies to Afghanistan.

The US is currently seeking alternative supply routes for Nato forces in Afghanistan.

Most of its supplies go via Pakistan's volatile North-West Frontier Province, but the rise in Taleban attacks in the region has forced the Pentagon to look for safer routes.

This tour comes at a time when Gen Petraeus is preparing a major review of US strategy in Afghanistan.

The commander pointed out recently that peace and stability in Afghanistan was incomplete without improving relations with the country's neighbours.

Three out of five Central Asian states share borders with Afghanistan, and the US has a military base in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Gen Petraeus said the recent speculation in the press that the Kyrgyz government would demand the withdrawal of US forces from its territory was groundless.

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Is PEBO Changing the Goal When it Comes to Capturing or Killing bin Laden?

ABC News

January 14, 2009

In an interview with Katie Couric to air on CBS Evening News tonight, President-elect Obama uses new language when discussing how critical it is to capture or kill Osama bin Laden -- language that seems to cast the capture or killing of Osama bin Laden as less critical than he once said it was.

Today Mr. Obama said the following when asked what he will do differently to bring Osama bin Laden to justice.

OBAMA: "Well, I think-- I talked frequently during this campaign that we took our eye off the ball when we invaded Iraq. And now it's done. My job is to withdraw in a responsible way from Iraq and stabilize the situation there. But our real focus has to be on Afghanistan, the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And we have to put as much pressure on them as possible. I've already spoken to my National Security team about how we're going to do that. And I'm confident that we can keep them on the run and ensure that they cannot train terrorists to attack our homeland. That's my number one priority as President of the United States."

COURIC: "How important do you think it is, Mr. President-elect, to apprehend Osama bin Laden?"

OBAMA: "I think that we have to so weaken his infrastructure that, whether he is technically alive or not, he is so pinned down that he cannot function. My preference obviously would be to capture or kill him. But if we have so tightened the noose that he's in a cave somewhere and can't even communicate with his operatives then we will meet our goal of protecting America."

Video can be watched [HERE](#). (Please excuse the commercial for the sitcom "Gary, Unmarried")

Mr. Obama's language today seems to lower the bar on how critical he thinks it is to capture or kill bin Laden.

On 60 Minutes on November 16, 2008, Steve Kroft asked the President-elect "Where does capturing or killing Osama bin Laden fall" in terms of military priorities, Mr. Obama responded: "I think it is a top priority for us to stamp out al Qaeda once and for all. And I think capturing or killing bin Laden is a critical aspect of stamping out al Qaeda. He is not just a symbol, he's also the operational leader of an organization that is planning attacks against US targets."

In both instances, Mr. Obama emphasizes bin Laden's role as operational leader of a terrorist group, but in November he said capturing or killing OBL was "critical." Today he said it would be his "preference" though cutting OBL off from communication with his operatives would meet his goal.

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Afghans Feel Ill Effects of Rising Air Pollution

NPR, Morning Edition

By Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson

01/14/2009

Air pollution in the Afghan capital of Kabul is so serious that President Hamid Karzai has declared a state of emergency.

Many residents burn plastic and tires for warmth. Those lucky enough to own a car use leaded fuel. Plus, thousands of gas-burning generators in shops and homes across the city provide power that the government can't.

Experts say Kabul is rapidly becoming one of the world's worst cities for air pollution, and nowhere is it more polluted than in a neighborhood near the presidential compound.

Measuring The Problem

Here, the rancid air casts a yellow haze. Pedestrians hurry past, pressing scarves to their faces.

Several American Humvees roll past Mahboobullah Bakhtiari, who is setting up a cylindrical device. He works for Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency and is here to measure just how bad the air is.

Bakhtiari places white filters in the monitor. He says it will take less than a day for those filters to turn black.

Jarullah Mansoori, chief of staff at the Afghan EPA, says air pollution in Kabul is seven times more than what is considered safe.

"The pollution that we are facing currently in Afghanistan and Kabul, if such pollution existed anywhere else in the world, there would be no schools open, no shops. No government agencies would be able to function," he says.

And the problem is growing. Experts say there are many reasons why. For example, Kabul has a population of 5 million people; it was designed for just 500,000. Most residents burn wood, coal and trash to keep warm during the cold winters. Raw sewage and dust add to the smog, as do factories that spew unfiltered smoke.

There are also 10 times as many cars on the streets now than during the Taliban era. Most are foreign castoffs that run on leaded fuel.

Ailments On The Rise

The result of all this smog is seen in hospitals across Kabul. Doctors say residents flock to them with lung and heart ailments as well as cancers.

Mohammad Iqlil Niazi, a doctor at Ali-Abad hospital, says that four years ago, one in five patients had an ailment triggered by air pollution. Now, he estimates one in three is sick from the smog.

Mohammad Ismail, 55, is one of them. The frail shopkeeper who doesn't smoke suffers from a chronic lung disease his doctors say is caused by air pollution. He comes to the hospital for drugs to ease his cough. His doctors say the only real remedy is for him to leave Kabul.

That's what Mansoori, the Afghan EPA official, did. He moved to a nearby town. He says he would rather risk attacks by militants during his commute to Kabul than let his kids breathe the air here.

Situation Will Require Years To Improve

Yet few in the government besides Mansoori have paid attention to air pollution. He says that issues such as security and defense were a priority - not the environment.

The government established its EPA three years ago - but gave it no teeth and little money. Even now, few environmental laws are on the books, and none are enforced because of rampant bribe-taking.

At a recent Cabinet meeting, President Karzai declared that such inaction must end quickly.

Mansoori, who was at that meeting, says Karzai authorized \$100 million to buy equipment to reduce air pollution in Kabul. He formed an emergency committee with far-reaching powers to tackle the problem.

Mansoori says the president also ordered that bushes be handed out to residents for planting to help absorb the toxins.

He says he thinks the Cabinet members and the president himself now realize that a clean environment is necessary for economic and social development.

But Mansoori says that doesn't change the fact that it will take years to reduce the smog.

NPR's Najib Sharifi contributed to this report.

How Afghanistan Compares According to Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency, the level of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) was 52 ppm (parts per million) on an average day in Kabul in 2008. The U.S. EPA national air quality standard is .053 ppm.

The level of sulfur dioxide (SO₂) was 37 ppm on an average day in Kabul in 2008. The U.S. EPA national air quality standard is .030 ppm.

According to the U.S. EPA, exposure to NO₂, SO₂ and other particulate matter negatively affects the respiratory system, damages lung tissue, and can cause cancer and premature death. The elderly, children and people with chronic lung disease, influenza or asthma tend to be especially sensitive to the effects of particulate matter.

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Afghan soldiers pick up US weapons

AFP

January 13, 2009

CAMP HERO, Afghanistan

Having already fought against the Taliban in his two years in the Afghan army, Gul Mohammad has little trouble picking up the tricks of his new American-issue automatic weapon.

What concerns the young soldier is whether he will be able to rely on the weapon when it counts, as he has done so often before with its Russian equivalent, a Kalashnikov AK-47, favoured in central Asia for decades.

"The worst thing for a soldier would be if his gun were to fail in the middle of a battle," says Mohammad, speaking during a break in weapons training at the base of his 205 Atal (Hero) army corps in southern Kandahar province.

The corps numbers about 20,000 soldiers drawn from across the country to fight the fierce Taliban in their heartland -- the four provinces of the rugged south, one of the most intense battlefields of the extremist insurgency.

In a hangar at Camp Hero, 50-60 troops have been split into small groups, each with a former US Marine or army soldier introducing them to M-16 rifles and M-249 light machine guns, standard-issue weapons in most NATO countries.

After driving out the Taliban regime in late 2001, the United States started to build Afghanistan a new army to replace the illegal militia forces loyal to regional warlords who were ruling the country from different power bases.

The country's previous army had been formed during the 1979-89 Soviet occupation into a force of around 200,000 men.

But it was destroyed in the 1992-96 civil war when various ethnic-based factions -- armed and funded by the United States, Pakistan and other nations to fight the Soviets -- turned on each other.

The new Afghan army brings together young men of the country's seven ethnicities in a test of national unity.

With mainly US funding and training it now numbers roughly 80,000 men with plans for its expansion to 134,000 by 2012 - a priority in efforts to beat the Taliban insurgency that last year was at its most intense yet.

The US military has regularly praised the progress of the new Afghan army, although critics question the loyalty of the troops, a significant AWOL rate and the lack of quality leadership.

The army started leading some anti-insurgent military operations early last year, but US and NATO troops still control most of the action.

"Leading independent operations indicate that we have improved," says the commander of 205 Atal, General Sher Mohammad Zazai.

"Our enemies are no longer able to confront us face-to-face. When we go into an area, the enemy leaves that area. If he chooses to fight us, they suffer casualties."

A programme launched in late 2007 aims to replace the AK-47s with US-made rifles and machine guns, and supply the Afghan forces with Humvees, the main vehicle used by the US military.

This means the Afghan army will get around 104,000 M-16 rifles, 4,300 machine guns, 2,250 grenade launchers, 4,000 armoured Humvees and 660 Humvee ambulances, says Lieutenant Colonel Christian Kubik, spokesman for the US military training programme.

Most of the M-16s are refurbished Marine Corps weapons and about 2,200 were donated by the Canadian government, he says.

The total cost for these weapons alone is about 60 million dollars, with the Humvees costing about 760 million dollars, he says.

The Afghan government had requested the M-16s, which are considered more accurate and reliable than the AK-47s, Kubik says.

The M-16 "provides a well-trained Afghan soldier a distinct advantage over an insurgent with an AK-47 of dubious origination," he says.

This news should reassure Mohammad, the soldier getting the hang of his new weapon, who says he takes pride in being part of the developing army.

"I have fought countless battles with Taliban," says the ethnic Hazara at Camp Hero, which is in a Pashtun area.

"They are good fighters, but we are even better," he says.

"I think I'm doing the right thing, defending my people and my country."

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Saudi Intel chief meets top Afghan officials

Associated Press

By FISNIK ABRASHI

Jan. 15, 2009

KABUL, Afghanistan

Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief met Wednesday with top officials in Afghanistan, the government said, likely part of a behind-the-scenes effort to smooth hostilities between the Afghan government and insurgents seeking to overthrow it.

Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz Al Saud met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other government leaders during his Wednesday trip to the Afghan capital, the statement said. He also met with opposition leader Burhanuddin Rabbani and other former jihadi leaders who fought against Soviet occupation but are now involved in the political process.

Muqrin was sent to Kabul by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, the statement said, without disclosing the content of the talks.

As the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, Saudi Arabia has been attempting to play a low-profile, inconspicuous role in trying to bridge the differences between Karzai's government and some members of the insurgency.

Last September, Taliban members met with Afghan and Pakistani officials during a dinner hosted by the Saudi king, but there were no visible results from the meeting.

Karzai has called many times on Taliban leadership to give up its fight and join the political process, and has urged the Saudi monarch to help facilitate peace talks with insurgents. The Taliban has said no talks can take place while foreign troops are in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia is a leader of the Sunni Muslim world and the location of Islam's two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina. It was one of a handful of countries that recognized the strictly Islamic Taliban as rulers of Afghanistan in the 1990s.

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan has forced the U.S. to rush as many as 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, seeking to turn the tide in fighting that has seen al-Qaida-linked militants and the Taliban make a comeback after initial defeats in the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

Some 32,000 U.S. troops already in Afghanistan serve alongside 32,000 other NATO-led and coalition troops, the highest number since the U.S.-led invasion.

U.S. Vice President-elect Joe Biden, who toured the region this week, said that "things are going to get tougher in Afghanistan before they're going to get better."

President-elect Barack Obama pledged during his election campaign to withdraw all American combat troops from Iraq within 16 months of taking office and shift the focus to Afghanistan.

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Security Forces will be Strengthened

Written by <http://www.quqnoos.com/>

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

The Afghan Pakistani border still remains a porous transit point for insurgents and terrorists

The defense ministry has announced that security forces will be strengthened this year.

The war is still going on, but by adding to their numbers and improving firepower, the security forces say they will be able to target Taliban better than the past.

Meanwhile the Spokesman for ISAF said that coordination between governmental forces and foreign troops can strengthen and enable them to struggle against terrorism better.

The Afghan Defense ministry and Coalition forces added that next year will see an escalation in the war, but both Afghan

forces and foreign soldiers have increased their troop numbers and relations appear to be improving with Pakistan.

Head of the US forces common relations, colonel Julion Gerge, said: "Increase of foreign troop and Afghan forces, support of people and increase in aid, and coordination among Afghanistan government, United Nations and foreign troops can strengthen security forces to fight against terrorism".

Civilians' casualties are a great challenge in any military operation and ISAF says the Taleban is very callous about using civilians as human shields.

ISAF spokesman, Richard Ve Planchet, said: "We try our best not to kill civilian and innocent people in our attacks, but Taliban choose civilian houses as military base".

The Afghan Pakistani border still remains a porous transit point for insurgents and terrorist, but it is hoped greater security cooperation with Islamabad will help seal the borders better.

Three districts of Helmand and one district of Nuristan aren't under control of Afghan forces, said the defense ministry

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Tumult of Bush era falls to Obama, historians

AFP

15 January 2009

WASHINGTON

At noon on January 20, George W. Bush hands successor Barack Obama two unfinished wars and a worldwide economic meltdown and leaves historians the job of judging his tumultuous eight-year presidency.

The 43rd US president also bequeaths the controversial tactics of the global "war on terror" that he credits for protecting the United States after the September 11, 2001 attack -- the worst strike ever on US soil.

The vastly unpopular Bush, 62, will also leave behind the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a Middle East still in flames, uneasy relations with Russia, and, his supporters say, vastly improved ties with Brazil, China, and India.

Aides point to his overhaul of US aid overseas, including an unprecedented increase in assistance to help Africa battle deadly diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS, and cite efforts to spread democracy worldwide among his successes.

His high points included a defiant vow in the still-smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center to punish Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorists at a time when he enjoyed staggeringly high popularity with the US public.

His low points included the failure of the government response to killer Hurricane Katrina, which drowned New Orleans and helped send his job approval to lows not seen in at least a generation.

On the economic front, Bush boasts of more than 50 months of uninterrupted growth and has rejected any responsibility for a US housing crisis that has contaminated the financial sector worldwide over the past year.

In 2008, the US economy shed more jobs than at any time since 1945.

Still, Bush said with one week before Obama takes over, "I'm better than fine. I am proud of the accomplishments of this administration.

"I know I gave it my all for eight years. And I did not sell my soul for the sake of popularity. And so when I get back home and look in the mirror I will be proud of what I see," he said.

Where critics see a bloody invasion of choice in Iraq and a failed war in Afghanistan, Bush unabashedly cites the "liberation" of the 50 million people in both countries, and links them to what he has touted as his greatest success, the absence of a new terrorist attack since 2001.

Bush, famously averse to publicly admitting mistakes, says the Iraq war was justified despite the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction at the core of the public case for the March 2003 invasion.

"The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision early in my presidency, it is the right decision at this

point in my presidency, and it will forever be the right decision," he said in March 2008.

With the Iraq war in its sixth year, at a cost of more than 4,000 US lives and hundreds of billions of dollars, Bush acknowledged this week that his May 2003 speech under a "Mission Accomplished" banner "was a mistake" that "sent the wrong message."

But the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, were "disappointments" -- not mistakes -- he said, adding: "Things didn't go according to plan, let's put it that way."

"I have often said that history will look back and determine that which could have been done better or, you know, mistakes I made," he said.

Bush has also brushed aside charges that his administration is among the most secretive and ideologically driven ever, and criticisms that he betrayed US values by creating a secret prison system for suspected terrorists later moved to Guantanamo Bay.

Some of his foes have blasted the president for authorizing interrogation practices -- like the controlled drowning of "waterboarding" -- long regarded as torture, and for warrantless spying on Americans.

Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have said such tactics were critical to preventing terrorist attacks, and dismiss anger at the failure to capture or kill bin Laden.

But the wars and the controversies, as well as corruption scandals and the increasingly sour economic climate, led Bush's Republicans to defeat in the 2006 legislative elections, two years after he won a second term and achieved the rare accomplishment of holding a congressional majority.

Shortly after the defeat, and after months of rejecting calls to oust Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Bush finally replaced him with Robert Gates, whom Obama will keep in the job.

Bush's second term also saw him part with the neoconservative foreign policy that drove the Iraq war -- which alienated some key traditional US allies and most of the Muslim world -- in favor of pragmatic policies towards countries like Iran and North Korea, which he had once branded part of an "axis of evil."

For some, like Senate Democratic majority leader Harry Reid, Bush will be remembered as "the worst president this country ever had."

But Bush's supporters admire his refusal to compromise, as the outgoing president himself shrugs at history's judgment.

"Listen, they're still writing books analyzing George Washington," he said in November 2007. "And so therefore my attitude is if they're analyzing the first president, the 43rd president doesn't need to worry about it."

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BEHIND THE SUPERPOWER CURTAINS - What the world does not know about the US, Al-Qaeda and the "war on terror"

Nolan Chart LLC, VA

By Edu Montesanti Goldoni

Wednesday, January 14, 2009

Palestine and Afghanistan bleeds. Children has been killed, beheaded, raped - including by the Coalition forces. Until when will they pretend they fight terror, in the name of God, or oil, and will we pretend we believe it? Explosive (and documented) revelations involving the US policy in the Middle East, from Carter to Bush the son, contesting the "war on terror" and the Israel bombardment in Gaza. The UN and the world media trumpet about individual and group terrorism acts. Nothing about terrorism of State. Hiding behind democracy speeches and liberation to others, Bush today carries Branham's teology too far, based on "American sword power", exterminating nations. We unmask the superpower and its "war on terror", describing as well the childish suffering in Palestine and Afghanistan. A generation lost. A future lost

We have been seeing on TV Palestinian children panic-driven, rushing headlong away, totally discouraged among endless wreckages, many of them even killed. An image has shown an about 3-year-old beheaded child in Gaza, victim of Israel's bombardment. There is neither electricity nor water in Gaza, and the Palestinian people have scarcely food. A Palestinian psychiatrist has said that traumas will be with his compatriotic children for ever, implicating all their lives. A generation lost. A future lost. What can we expect?

From Afghanistan, we receive long ago reports that children have been forced to commit suicide, tortured and raped including by the Coalition forces, and been arrested (eight Afghan minors have been carried to Guantanamo since 2002, and the US recognizes that there are 10 minors, one of them a 12-year-old boy, on the Bagrom base in Afghanistan). Young girls cannot attend school or go to hospital, running the risk of being captured, hit, raped, burned or killed. What to conclude about this all?

An Exclusive War

The present Israel's response to Hamas is the only conflict all over the world in which the attacked people cannot cross the border to flee to another land. After being expelled from their homes by the Israeli Army, thousands of Palestinians found escape on schools of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). For 33 of them, it was in vain: 30 died on January 6, under a bombardment on a school in Yabalia; 55 were wounded. In another attacked school in Gaza, three civilians died. The British John Ging, chief of the UNRWA, said that this conflict is inhuman: according to him, entire families with more than 10 members has been exterminated in their homes. But it is not the first conflict in the world which war crimes are committed - and they have been committed in two ways: 1. The brutal differences between both sides; and 2. The death of civilians. Up to date, died 919 Palestinians, and 13 Israelis.

Israel does not permit press to cover the conflict and report the real situation in Gaza, and barely permit humanitarian aid there. It is NOT impressive how the world media only analyses Israel's side in this conflict, or even creates facts, is it? No, it is not, and we are going to prove it in the lines below, after some other preview considerations. Mr. David Brooks wrote in his column to The New York Times, on January 6: "When Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran became leading players in the Middle East, that land-for-peace game was suspended. The extremist groups believe in the eventual extermination of Israel. The extremists's goal is to kill as many Jews as possible, and wait for God (or Iran) to kill the rest. Israel's goal is to restrain the brazenness of the extremists until their movement somehow burns itself out or is destroyed from within Arab society. Israel's realistic immediate goal is not to achieve some permanent resolution, but to merely suppress terrorism week by week, and month by month."

Well, it is NOT impressive how innumerable international observers ignore history and reality, is it? No, it is not. First of all, a commentator or politician that still believes in military means to win terror, in terror against terror is just kidding. And if the facts involving Israel in Gaza cited above, which are not new to the world, are not sufficient to condemn this conflict, it is really difficult to understand, discuss and solve the problem.

Israel x Palestine - A History of Genocide

Well, we have to remember that the United Kingdom (UK) occupied Palestine in the end of the II World War, and in 1917 the British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour supported the idea of a homeland to Jews in the region, defending as well the Arab community rights on the ground. Mr. Balfour promised Palestinians an independent state, never created. Three years later, the UK received a mandate from the United Nations (UN) to rule over Palestine. So, Arab leaders considered themselves betrayed by the UK and threatened by Jews.

After the II World War, the devastated UK gave the UN the responsibility of solving the problems in the region. In 1947, without listening to Palestinians who had lived the region for ages, the UN approved the division of Palestine into two states - one to Jews, and another to Arabs who rejected the deal. In 1948 was created the State of Israel, and in the following year the war ended with Israel's victory. 700 thousand Palestinians took refuge in Cisjordan, in the Gaza Strip and in Arab countries. Egypt took office of Gaza; Jordan took office of the Eastern Jerusalem and Cisjordan, and since then Palestinians have had no land. The Arab-Palestinian State promised was not proclaimed, and up to date Jews rule over more than 75% of the Palestinian territory.

It is also worth remembering that such a land-for-peace game was closer more than ever in the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin years (1992-1995), killed by an ultra-rightist Jew after a manifestation for peace in Tel Aviv, on November 4, 1995. We have to remember as well that the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (2002-2006) caused a strong radicalization among Palestinians: he expanded the Jewish communities, suspended negotiations with Palestine and intensified the siege to the Arab territories, causing a genocide against Palestinians. So, it is clear that the roots of the problems are not Palestinians.

Distorting Reality

Mr. Brooks went on: "In this game, violence does not necessarily beget violence", referring to the assassination of Abdel Aziz Rantisi and Ahmed Yassin in 2004 which, according to Mr. Brooks, temporarily suppressed Hamas suicidal bombings".

At last, he stated that, "The new game is not a war of attrition. It is a struggle for confidence, a series of psychological exchange designed to shift the balance of morale. What is really important is how each episode ends (the material destroyed and the psychological effects), because ending defines the meaning". Mr. Brooks coolly and tendentiously states that ending defines the meaning, forgetting all the civilian losses in Palestine. But if Mr. Brooks, reflecting the world press viewpoint as he does, is so sure about this, why could not Palestinians and any local party, taking history into account, respond the same way? Does ending define the meaning only to one side? Why? The terror of State practiced by the great powers is previous to Hamas, which is a subproduct of it. Why can Israel and the US use their Armies and strong bombs to defend their interests, while a people who has not even a land, taken away from them, cannot defend themselves through armed fight? We are totally against war and any kind of violence, but in the present world reality, why does coward genocide practiced by State is not considered terrorism? This has been motive of divergence at the UN. Another point of discussion is if legal definition about terror should take into account conditions that cause it, such as poverty, social differences and injustice. We do not defend Hamas, but we contest contradictions, such as Mr. Brooks's one.

All this circus of information we have been watching and reading on the media is not "for nothing", but has serious motivations, what we are going to understand exactly in the explosive lines below.

They Pretend They Fight Terror, We Pretend We Believe It - Behind the Superpower Curtains

Actually, the messianic American disposal to the global domination is based on William Branham's teology (1909-1965). Considered a prophet by some evangelical ramifications in the country, Mr. Branham preached that the world salvation had to be promoted by the American "sword power", that is, through permanent war against the nation enemies. Such a viewpoint is very timely to the "American oil thirst", and George Bush the son has been carried this teology too far.

Israel, his allied in the Middle East, there is no more excuses but they insist on defending the indefensible. Why do they insist on fighting terror through military ways? Why do they insist on calling us fool? What is behind the superpower curtains? Many things.

Michel Chossudovski is the director of the Centre for Research on Globalization in Canada, and professor of International Economics Development at the Ottawa University. His interview with the Brazilian magazine Caros Amigos in July, 2004, telling about his book War and Globalization - Before and After September 11, 2001, answers fully our questions. Let us read some passages of Mr. Chossudovski statements in the interview:

"Al-Qaeda was created by the US. It was a CIA project, launched during the Jimmy Carter administration in 1979, when the National Security Counsellor was Mr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. Later, this initiative got stronger during the Reagan administration, when some agents were sent to support the mujahedins recruiting (Muslim guerrillas) to finance madrassas, or canon schools, where the talibans studied. If you ask about this to the CIA, they say, "Yes, we created Islamic brigades, but for a good cause". The official explanation presented, unbelievable, is that in the end of the Cold War these Islamic brigades turned against the US. So, the CIA recognizes that it created Islamic brigades, in other words created Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

"Several men who are today in the Bush administration were involved in the Islamic brigades architecture. Richard Armitage, sub secretary of State, was responsible for financing and supporting the mujahedins. Collin Powell was also involved when came to surface the scandal Iran-Contra, he was the military commander who authorized that sale [of weapons to Iran in the war against Iraq], and with the money the American government financed the contra in Nicaragua, as well the mujahedins.

Brzezinski tells that the American government created the Afghan insurgency the same way it created the contra.

The CIA encouraged such sects to build schools in Afghanistan and to develop a holy war against the Soviet invaders, who were secular. But if you remember the 70's, you will see that there was in Afghanistan a secular post-colonial government supported by the Soviet Union (USSR), and the Afghan society was also secular, it was starting to build government institutions, and what Americans actually did was to create essentially insurgency and incite the Soviets to intervene. In my book, in an interview with Mr. Brzezinski, he says very clearly: 'We created the Islamic jihads and carried support and financing to them'. In time, Al-Qaeda cells were used in several countries, including after the Cold War. It was used by the US to destabilize the ex-USSR. One of the important strategic passages is Chechnya. Why is it important? Because it is in the Soviet oil duct crossing and the US tried to destabilize the Russian control over these oil duct routes, and using Al-Qaeda supported insurgencies in this region. And the Pakistani Intelligence (ISI) played a very important part in all this.

The ISI became prominent exactly in the beginning of the Reagan administration, in 1981, 1982, when started recruiting radicals from all around the Middle East. Bin Laden was created by the CIA during the Soviet-Afghan war, in the 80's. I proved in my book that there was a collaboration between Al-Qaeda and the American government in Yugoslavia, starting in Bosnia in 1993. I reproduced in the book a document of the Republican Party Committee in the US Senate, from 1997 which accuses Bill Clinton of collaborating to Bin Laden. And this is a very explicit document saying clearly: 'The Clinton administration collaborates to the terrorism net called Al-Qaeda'. And there were other events in the 90's. There are other evidences of collaboration, but these are the most crucial, in Kosovo and in Macedonia. In Macedonia, it happened some weeks before September 11, 2001. Inside the same semimilitary array, there were American military counsellors of the Pentagon working side by side with the mujahedins designated by Al-Qaeda. It happened in August, 2001, and was denounced by the Macedonian Prime Minister at the time [Mr. Branko Crvenkovski].

There are documents in my book which prove the collaboration of the ISI to the CIA. General Ahmad was received by the Bush administration high echelons, had meetings with Mr. Powell, with Mr. Armitage, with the director of the CIA, Mr. George Tenet, and also met important members of the Congress in September, 2001.

Senator Bob Graham and Deputy Peter Gross went to Pakistan on August, 29 and had meetings with the local government, and with Mr. Massoud [Mr. Ahmed Massoud, Northern Alliance chief, killed in a suicidal attempt on September 13, 2001], later identified by the FBI as involved in financing the attacks of the 9/11.

The US supported Taliban in 1996 to promote a radical Islamic government, conservative in Afghanistan, Mr. Massoud and the Northern Alliance were supported by Russia. But later the US realized that could not manipulate Taliban as once imagined, and needed the Northern Alliance to substitute it. We do not know what was exactly the goal of the General Ahmad's visit to the US, but on the American media there was kind of a silence about his presence in the country In the following day to the attempt [9/11], as if the meeting had been planned before, he was in Mr. Armitage's office! And was there to discuss the terms of the Pakistani co-operation to the war on terror, on running behind Taliban and Al-Qaeda. And such negotiations were completed on September 13, when he met Mr. Powell. In the morning of 9/11, Mr. Ahmad had a breakfast with Mr. Graham and Mr. Gross, this was reported by the American media.

The FBI wrote a report in the end of September, affirming that he transferred money to Mohamed Atta, pointed out as the head of the 9/11 attempt."

Mr. Obama and the Middle East

The President-elect Barack Obama has said that the US has one president at a time, and he is right. But on the other hand, he is wrong for have being so vague in his presidential campagin about the question. As well, he is terribly wrong for choosing Mr. Hillary Clinton to be his secretaty of State.

Mr. Obama is planning to commit thousands of additional American troops to the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, which is already more than seven years old, has costed billions and billions of dollars, many lives (including American ones), and long ago turned into a total failure. What will be the US mission there? The Afghan people is pleading the foreign forces led by the US to leave the country. Mr. Malalai Joya, an ex-Parlamentary observed: "The U.S. could easily get rid of a bunch of medieval-minded, illiterate and ignorant people like Taliban. Actually, the U.S. is not serious in its fight against the Taliban and just needs an excuse to prolong its presence in Afghanistan to threaten Iran, China, Central Asia and other Asian powers" (Read more in our article Anna Politkovskaya Award' 2008 to Malalai Joya, the Bravest Woman in Afghanistan, here).

In his article for Newsweek, Mr. Bacevich wrote: "The chief effect of military operations in Afghanistan so far has been to push radical Islamites across the Pakistani border. As a result, effects to stabilize Afghanistan [we and Afghans contest such effetcs] are contributing to the desestabilization of Pakistan, with potentially devastating implications. One thing is right: the US and the international forces cannot deliver Afghanistan to their own fate". Yes, the US really cannot deliver Afghans to their own fate now, but cannot occupy their land any more. Not only the focus of the US policy has to be changed, as well the aspect of its discussion. If Mr. Obama insisits on this liar "war on terror", running behind ilimited power, there will neither be enough politics to change the present world situation, nor the US economical crisis. Bush used the "war on terror" to solv its economical problems. What then?

Terror Made in West. Until When?

An act of terror does not justify another, but the UN has developed an extensive legislation on terrorism practiced by individuals or opposition groups. However, it has not defined the terrorism of State, and all around the world most victims have been pacific and disarmed civilians, inciting them to the armed fight - few people have been suffering as much as Palestinians. But this terrorism they suffer is out of fashion to the media. Underground the Middle East we find the answer to this.

Israel, supported by the US, is attacking and destroying Palestine, turning its back to the world - "we do what is better to our people", forgetting that the Palestinian children will grow someday. What to expect from them? Such a land-for-peace game, which to the unreasonable mind of many "violence does not necessarily beget violence" (but only to one side), is interrupted for a generation more, and I really pray to God that we Westerners, within 10, 20, 30, 40 years still remember these infamous Israeli attacks, which bloodshed requires a careful way to be solved - the first one, giving back Palestinian land.

We are the roots of most world rages, let us never forget January, 2009 in the coming years - the men of tomorrow will be the children of today. May we have a good memory not to cheerfully applaud politicians and the media spectacles.

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AFGHANISTAN: Government abandons voter registration at health centres

IRIN

14 January 2009

KABUL

Mounting security concerns have forced the Afghan government to stop using health centres across the country in the election process, but the use of schools will continue, officials said.

"The president [Hamid Karzai] has ordered the election commission to move all voter registration sites out of hospitals and other health facilities," Abdullah Fahim, a spokesman for the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), told IRIN in Kabul on 13 January.

Afghanistan plans to hold presidential elections in the second half of 2009 and parliamentary elections in 2010.

Dozens of health facilities, particularly in remote rural areas, have been used as voter registration sites over the past few months despite threats by Taliban insurgents to disrupt the process.

Taliban insurgents attacked a health facility used as a voter registration centre in Ghazni Province on 20 October, killing one and wounding several others.

At least three health posts used for voter registration in different provinces have been reportedly attacked or set ablaze since November 2008.

Mosques and schools throughout the country have also been utilised by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) for electoral purposes.

"We will continue to use schools. Thus far there have been no attacks on schools used in the election process," Daud Najafi, an official at the IEC, told IRIN.

"Soft targets"

Health facilities have been attacked, medical workers have been killed or kidnapped and polio immunisation campaigns have been repeatedly disrupted by Taliban fighters over the past five years, according to media reports.

Consequently, access to health posts in large swaths of the country, particularly in the volatile south, has diminished and the country's target to wipe out polio by 2006 is yet to be achieved, according to aid workers.

The MoPH's Fahim told IRIN earlier that by July some 400,000 people did not have access to basic health services because of attacks on health personnel and health centres, and also due to lack of security for health workers.

The insurgents often deny attacking health and education facilities, but sometimes justify such deeds in terms of undermining the Afghan government and its international backers.

The Canadian National Post newspaper quoted Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, a purported Taliban spokesman, in November as saying the insurgents were not against health facilities, as long as they obeyed Islamic law.

"If they are here to treat the poor people, we welcome them and support them," he said in an interview. "If they are here for other reasons, we will ban them."

By attacking "soft targets" such as hospitals and schools, the insurgents aim to discredit the government in the eyes of people for its inability to stop the attackers, experts say.

Denying insurgents a pretext to attack

MoPH officials said that by moving all election-related activities out of health facilities, they were trying to leave the Taliban no excuse to attack them.

"Hospitals and health centres are apolitical facilities and must remain immune from attacks and abuse," said Fahim.

The insurgents' warnings that they would disrupt the election process through armed attacks prompted some in insecure areas to steer clear of health centres where electoral activities were taking place.

"You'll not be able to convince the Taliban that you are visiting those centres for treatment and not for registration or voting," said Najibullah, a resident of Logar Province, 36km southeast of Kabul.

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Karzai weakened, but likely still Afghan voters' choice

Agence France-Presse

01/14/2009

KABUL

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, darling of the West in 2001, is due to stand for reelection this year with his position weakened by his failure to stem extremist violence and government corruption.

But analysts say he still has the upper hand over any rivals who may emerge before the as-yet unscheduled polls, with one major advantage being that he is a known quantity to the country's voters and its international allies.

"There is this incumbency privilege, comparative advantage, that he has-that he is already in place," said analyst Ahmad Idrees Rahma-ni, director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Much hope was pinned on Karzai, 52, when he was picked at an international conference to become the first leader of the transitional government established here after the ouster of the Taliban in 2001.

In his favor: His command of English; his elegance and education; his role in the resistance to the 1980s Soviet occupation without the claims of atrocities levelled at others; and his roots in the powerful Pashtun tribe.

Afghans endorsed Karzai in the country's first-ever presidential elections in 2004, giving him 55 percent of the vote, but their disillusionment has slowly mounted over the years.

"Everybody knows that the government doesn't work and is corrupt," said Haroon Mir, another analyst at the Center for Research and Policy Studies.

"He allowed corruption to grow everywhere, including within his family," a UN official from a Western country and an expert on Afghanistan added, on condition of anonymity.

Allegations persist about the involvement of one of Karzai's brothers in Afghanistan's enormous trade in opium and heroin. They are repeatedly rejected, with the president's camp calling them an attempt to tarnish his reputation.

The UN official added that Karzai "has been unable to improve security in the south, his area," referring to Kandahar province, his family's home area and a key battleground of the Taliban's intensifying insurgency.

The president has also been accused of failing to cleanup his government and not taking a tougher line on warlords accused of rights abuses in the past decades of war.

The majority of the country's nearly 30 million people meanwhile complain that Karzai's government has brought few

improvements to their lives, with food prices higher and jobs scarce, despite billions of dollars in foreign aid.

"If Karzai stays, most of the people will lose hope in change and the future," Mir said.

But with elections due in the coming months, Karzai is still the only credible candidate to confirm his intention to run.

Ashraf Ghani, an internationally respected academic who was finance minister for two years immediately after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, has signaled he may stand but has yet to make any official announcement.

Another likely contender yet to confirm his candidacy is former Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, who quit Karzai's cabinet in 2005 for a university job in the United States.

"Ashraf Ghani is too independent for the US, his personality is too strong," said a senior official at Karzai's palace, requesting anonymity.

"Jalali could be a solution but he does not have a strong network so far," he said, adding: "Who do you put in Karzai's place?"

The National Front—a shaky collection of disparate and disaffected figures from the past who have formed an opposition party—has yet to offer a candidate.

The party is unlikely to be able to field a strong contender who would have the backing of Iran and Russia, which both have considerable influence in Afghanistan, parliamentarian Shukria Barakzai said.

The United States has meanwhile kept its preferred candidate close to its chest, perhaps waiting for President-elect Barack Obama's new administration to settle in.

"People will not have a choice between good and bad," Barakzai told Agence France-Presse.

"They will have to choose between bad and worse. People will have to vote for him [Karzai] again."

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A Flawed Legacy

The Jewish Journal of greater L.A., CA

By Paul Kujawsky

January 14, 2009

The fact that George W. Bush is about the most unpopular president in history does not necessarily mean he is the worst president in history. Popularity is judged during one's term in office, with all the immediacy of turbulent political passion. Historical judgment will rest on

cooler appraisals, from a dispassionate distance. Moreover, popularity and leadership are not identical. Abraham Lincoln was reviled in office; Harry Truman's unpopularity rivaled Bush's. Today both have taken their places among the most highly regarded presidents.

Also, when high stakes require high-risk decisions, if you succeed, you're considered a genius; if you fail, you're considered an idiot. Thanks to the Islamist attacks of Sept. 11, Bush had a much more high-stakes presidency than almost anyone expected. Every president, like every human being, makes mistakes. Bush's were bound to be magnified in significance.

Still, things don't look good for Bush and his reputation. He is neither evil nor stupid. But his inclination to lofty rhetoric with inadequate preparation or inconsistent follow-through has doomed even his better ideas. (And not every idea was so wonderful.) This is the recurring theme throughout his presidency. Some examples:

Israel. No one doubts Bush's commitment to Israel's security. Yet his policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians have not enhanced Israeli security. Bush correctly identified liberalization of Palestinian society as a condition for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. He correctly rejected chief terrorist Yasser Arafat as a negotiating partner. But he insisted on premature Palestinian elections, which brought Hamas to power. Hamas' implacable Islamism has brought a rain of terror on Israel and a reign of terror in Gaza.

Compounding that mistake, he embraced the new Palestinian Authority leader, Mahmoud Abbas, who said last February, "Now we are against armed conflict because we are unable. In the future stages, things may be different." U.S. policy has reverted to propping up a Palestinian strongman instead of demanding changes in Palestinian society and political

culture. The desire for a quick peace treaty made Bush forget that treaties are worthless as long as the Palestinians who matter - the ones with guns, bombs and rockets - still hope to displace Israel.

Iraq/Afghanistan/Iran/The War Against Islamism. After Sept. 11, Bush rose to the challenge, however imperfectly. He overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and drove al-Qaeda into the mountains. He recognized that Islamism is the enemy. He understood that to defeat the enemy, liberalization must come to the Muslim world. Afghanistan today is an emerging democracy, as is Iraq, after its liberation from Saddam Hussein. These are important achievements.

But it has not been done well. Our Iraq mission long teetered on the edge of disaster. It took Bush too long to change tactics. Afghanistan, thrust into the background while Bush focused on Iraq, is menaced by the Taliban again. Most seriously, Bush has not pushed consistently for reform in the Arab world. Bush has never seriously challenged Saudi Arabia, the fountainhead of Wahhabi propaganda. After prodding Egypt on free elections, Bush accepted sham reforms; now Egyptian opposition leader Ayman Nour sits in prison. Reform in Lebanon has stalled as Hezbollah subverts the government. Throughout the Middle East, liberals wonder whether they can really count on American support over the long haul.

Bush's Iran policy in particular has been a failure. He repeatedly announced, "America will not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon." These were empty words. The mullahs ignored U.N. resolutions and pretended to negotiate, buying time to enrich uranium; Bush has watched, speaking loudly and not using the sticks at his disposal. At this stage Iran is actually very likely to acquire nuclear weapons.

National Security/Civil Liberties. The claim that Bush shredded the Constitution is unserious. Undeniably, the balance between personal liberties and personal security has shifted toward the latter. But many would argue that this is appropriate in time of war; not being murdered by terrorists is also a civil right. Thus, for example, while it's debatable whether the Patriot Act was necessary, it has done little real damage.

But Bush plainly overreached at times. The status of the detainees at Guantanamo is legally complex and just what rights they should be accorded is something reasonable people can argue about. But it was tyrannical to forbid access to the courts, even to determine whether their detention had any factual basis. Bush stubbornly clung to this policy long after reflection should have revealed its error.

Again and again, whatever his intentions, Bush achieved poor results. Everyone agrees on the importance of ending American dependence on foreign oil. What did Bush accomplish? Nothing. The No Child Left Behind Act, in the name of "high standards," requires all students to become above average, a logical impossibility. While he didn't bring down the economy single-handedly, he has presided over its collapse.

The arguments over Bush's place in history will go on for a long time. But today we must judge his presidency, if not a failure, at least a series of lost and mismanaged opportunities.

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U.S. says bin Laden tape demonstrates isolation

Reuters

By Tabassum Zakaria

Wed Jan 14, 2009

WASHINGTON

The White House on Wednesday said a new audio tape from Osama bin Laden calling for jihad demonstrated the al Qaeda leader's isolation and was likely an effort to raise money.

The tape surfaced as the United States prepares for a handover of power from President George W. Bush to President-elect Barack Obama next week.

After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Bush declared that he wanted bin Laden captured dead or alive. The al Qaeda leader has eluded a U.S. manhunt and is believed to be hiding in the remote border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the latest tape, bin Laden called for jihad or holy war over the Israeli offensive in Gaza and said the global financial crisis had exposed waning U.S. influence in world affairs that would in turn weaken its ally Israel.

"It appears this tape demonstrates his isolation and continued attempts to remain relevant at a time when al Qaeda's ideology, mission, and agenda are being questioned and challenged throughout the world," White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said.

"This also looks to be an effort to raise money as part of their ongoing propaganda campaign," he said.

Bin Laden last audio tape in May also focused on Gaza, urging Muslims to help break the Israeli-led blockade of the

area.

(Reporting by Tabassum Zakaria; Editing by Jackie Frank)

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Election Worker Murdered

Written by <http://www.quqnoos.com/>

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Motive for killing unknown

A woman was killed by her husband last night in Zabul province.

Deputy to Zabul's governor says , the husband who committed the crime , escaped the scene.

Local residents saying the dead woman was working for Election Commission Office in Zabul and her killing may have been a result of her work, though thus far it is unclear whether the motivation for her murder was personal or political.

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Why the U.S. has already lost in Afghanistan

Salon.com - Joe Conason

Jan. 15, 2009

Rampant corruption by U.S. contractors has left the country in shambles.

The first of 20,000 to 30,000 additional U.S. troops are scheduled to arrive in Afghanistan next month to re-win the war George W. Bush neglected to finish in his eagerness to start another one. However, "winning" the military campaign against the Taliban is the lesser half of the story.

Going into Afghanistan, the Bush administration called for a political campaign to reconstruct the country and thereby establish the authority of a stable, democratic Afghan central government. It was understood that the two campaigns -- military and political/economic -- had to go forward together; the success of each depended on the other. But the vision of a reconstructed, peaceful, stable, democratically governed Afghanistan faded fast. Most Afghans now believe that it was nothing but a cover story for the Bush administration's real goal -- to set up permanent bases in Afghanistan and occupy the country forever.

Whatever the truth of the matter, in the long run, it's not soldiers but services that count -- electricity, water, food, healthcare, justice and jobs. Had the U.S. delivered the promised services on time, while employing Afghans to rebuild their own country according to their own priorities and under the supervision of their own government -- a mini-Marshall Plan -- they would now be in charge of their own defense. The forces on the other side, which we loosely call the Taliban, would also have lost much of their grounds for complaint.

Instead, the Bush administration perpetrated a scam. It used the system it set up to dispense reconstruction aid to both the countries it "liberated," Afghanistan and Iraq, to transfer American taxpayer dollars from the national treasury directly into the pockets of private war profiteers. Think of Halliburton, Bechtel and Blackwater in Iraq; Louis Berger Group, Bearing Point and DynCorp International in Afghanistan. They're all in it together. So far, the Bush administration has bamboozled Americans about its shady aid program. Nobody talks about it. Yet the aid scam, which would be a scandal if it weren't so profitable for so many, explains far more than does troop strength about why, today, we are on the verge of watching the whole Afghan enterprise go belly up.

What's worse, there's no reason to expect that things will change significantly on Barack Obama's watch. During the election campaign, he called repeatedly for more troops for "the right war" in Afghanistan (while pledging to draw down U.S. forces in Iraq), but he has yet to say a significant word about the reconstruction mission. While many aid workers in that country remain full of good intentions, the delivery systems for and uses of U.S. aid have been so thoroughly corrupted that we can only expect more of the same -- unless Obama cleans house fast. But given the monumental problems on his plate, how likely is that?

The Jolly Privateers

It's hard to overstate the magnitude of the failure of American reconstruction in Afghanistan. While the U.S. has occupied the country -- for seven years and counting -- and efficiently set up a network of bases and prisons, it has yet to restore

to Kabul, the capital, a mud brick city slightly more populous than Houston, a single one of the public services its citizens used to enjoy. When the Soviets occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s, they modernized the education system and built power plants, dams, factories and apartment blocs, still the most coveted in the country. If, in the last seven years, George W. Bush did not get the lights back on in the capital, or the water flowing, or dispose of the sewage or trash, how can we assume Barack Obama will do any better with the corrupt system he's about to inherit?

Between 2002 and 2008, the U.S. pledged \$10.4 billion in "development" (reconstruction) aid to Afghanistan, but actually delivered only \$5 billion of that amount. Considering that the U.S. is spending \$36 billion a year on the war in Afghanistan and about \$8 billion a month on the war in Iraq, that \$5 billion in development aid looks paltry indeed. But keep in mind that, in a country as poor as Afghanistan, a little well-spent money can make a big difference.

The problem is not simply that the Bush administration skimmed on aid, but that it handed it over to for-profit contractors. Privatization, as is now abundantly clear, enriches only the privateers and serves only their private interests.

Take one pertinent example. When the inspectors general of the Pentagon and State Department investigated the U.S. program to train the Afghan police in 2006, they found the number of men trained (about 30,000) to be less than half the number reported by the administration (70,000). The training had lasted eight weeks at most, with no in-the-field experience whatsoever. Only about half the equipment assigned to the police -- including thousands of trucks -- could be accounted for, and the men trained were then deemed "incapable of carrying out routine law enforcement work."

The American privateer training the police -- DynCorp -- went on to win no-bid contracts to train police in Iraq with similar results. The total bill for American taxpayers from 2004 to 2006: \$1.6 billion. It's unclear whether that money came from the military or the development budget, but in either case it was wasted. The inspectors general reported that police incompetence contributed directly to increased opium production, the reinvigoration of the Taliban, and government corruption in general, thoroughly subverting much ballyhooed U.S. goals, both military and political.

In the does-no-one-ever-learn category: The latest American victory plan, announced in December, calls for recruiting and re-arming local militias to combat the Taliban. Keep in mind that hundreds of millions of dollars, mostly donated by Japan, have already been spent to disarm local militias. A proposal to re-arm them was soundly defeated last fall in the Afghan Parliament. Now, it's again the plan du jour, rubber-stamped by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Afghans protest that such a plan amounts to sponsoring civil war, which, if true, would mean that American involvement in Afghanistan might be coming full circle -- civil war being the state in which the U.S. left Afghanistan at the end of our proxy war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. American commanders, however, insist that they must use militias because Afghan Army and police forces are "simply not available." Maj. Gen. Michael S. Tucker, deputy commander of American forces, told the New York Times, "We don't have enough police, [and] we don't have time to get the police ready." This, despite the State Department's award to DynCorp last August of another \$317.4 million contract "to continue training civilian police forces in Afghanistan," a contract DynCorp CEO William Ballhaus greeted as "an opportunity to contribute to peace, stability and democracy in the world [and] support our government's efforts to improve people's lives."

In other areas less obviously connected to security, American aid policy is no less self-serving or self-defeating. Although the Bush administration handpicked the Afghan president and claims to want to extend his authority throughout the country, it refuses to channel aid money through his government's ministries. (It argues that the Afghan government is

corrupt, which it is, in a pathetic, minor league sort of way.)

Instead of giving aid money for Afghan schools to the Ministry of Education, for example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds private American contractors to start literacy programs for adults. As a result, Afghan teachers abandon the public schools and education administrators leave the Ministry for higher paying jobs with those contractors, further undermining public education and governance. The Bush administration may have no particular reason to sabotage its handpicked government, but it has had every reason to befriend private contractors who have, in turn, kicked back generously to election campaigns and Republican coffers.

There are other peculiar features of American development aid. Nearly half of it (47 percent) goes to support "technical assistance." Translated, that means overpaid American "experts," often totally unqualified -- somebody's good old college buddies -- are paid handsomely to advise the locals on matters ranging from office procedures to pesticide use, even when the Afghans neither request nor welcome such advice. By contrast, the universally admired aid programs of Sweden and Ireland allocate only 4 percent and 2 percent, respectively, to such technical assistance, and when asked, they send real experts. American technical advisors, like American privateers, are paid by checks -- big ones -- that pass directly from the federal treasury to private accounts in American banks, thus helping to insure that about 86 cents of every dollar designated for U.S. "foreign" aid anywhere in the world never leaves the USA.

American aid that actually makes it abroad arrives with strings attached. At least 70 percent of it is "tied" to the purchase of American products. A food aid program, for example, might require Afghanistan to purchase American agricultural products in preference to their own, thus putting Afghan farmers out of business or driving even more of them into the poppy trade. (The percentage of aid from Sweden, Ireland and the United Kingdom that is similarly tied: zero.)

Testifying before a congressional subcommittee on May 8, 2001, Andrew Natsios, then head of USAID, described American aid as "a key foreign policy instrument [that] helps nations prepare for participation in the global trading system and become better markets for U.S. exports." Such so-called aid cuts American business in right from the start. USAID has even developed a system for "preselecting" certain private contractors, then inviting only those preselected companies to apply for contracts the agency wants to issue.

Often, in fact, only one of the preselected contractors puts in for the job and then -- if you need a hint as to what's really going on -- just happens to award subcontracts to some of the others. It's remarkable, too, how many former USAID officials have passed through the famed revolving door in Washington to become highly paid consultants to private contractors -- and vice versa. By January 2006, the Bush administration had co-opted USAID altogether. The once independent aid agency launched by President Kennedy in 1961 became a subsidiary of the State Department and a partner of the Pentagon.

Oh, and keep in mind one more thing: While the private contractors may be in it for the duration, most employees and technical experts in Afghanistan stay on the job only six months to a year because it's considered such a "hardship post." As a result, projects tend not to last long and to be remarkably unrelated to those that came before or will come after. Contractors collect the big bucks whether or not the aid they contracted to deliver benefits Afghans, or even reaches them.

These arrangements help explain why Afghanistan remains such a shambles.

The Afghan Scam

It's not that American aid has done nothing. Check out the USAID Web site and you'll find a summary of what is claimed for it (under the glorious heading of "Afghanistan Reborn"). It will inform you that USAID has completed literally thousands of projects in that country. The USAID loves numbers, but don't be deceived by them. A thousand short-term USAID projects can't hold a candle to one long, careful, patient program run, year after year, by a bunch of Afghans led by a single Swede.

If there has been any progress in Afghanistan, especially in and around Kabul, it's largely been because two-thirds of the reconstruction aid to Afghanistan comes from other (mostly European) countries that do a better job, and partly because the country's drug lords spend big on palatial homes and services in the capital. But the one-third of international aid that is supposed to come from the U.S., and that might make a critical difference when added to the work of others, eternally falls into the wrong pockets.

What would Afghans have done differently, if they'd been in charge? They'd have built much smaller schools, and a lot more of them, in places more convenient to children than to foreign construction crews. Afghans would have hired Afghans to do the building. Louis Berger Group had the contract to build more than 1,000 schools at a cost of \$274,000 per school. Already way behind schedule in 2005, they had finished only a small fraction of them when roofs began to collapse under the snows of winter.

Believe me, given that same \$274,000, Afghans would have built 15 or 20 schools with good roofs. The same math can be applied to medical clinics. Afghans would also have chosen to repair irrigation systems and wells, to restore ruined orchards, vineyards, and fields. Amazingly enough, USAID initially had no agricultural programs in a country where rural subsistence farmers are 85 percent of the population. Now, after seven years, the agency finally claims to have "improved" irrigation on "nearly 15 percent" of arable land. And you can be sure that Afghans wouldn't have chosen -- again -- the Louis Berger Group to rebuild the 389-mile long Kabul/Kandahar highway with foreign labor at a cost of \$1 million per mile.

As things now stand, Afghans, as well as Afghan-Americans who go back to help their homeland, have to play by American rules. Recently an Afghan-American contractor who competed for reconstruction contracts told me that the American military is getting in on the aid scam. To apply for a contract, Afghan applicants now have to fill out a form (in English!) that may run to 50 pages. My informant, who asked to remain anonymous for obvious reasons, commented that it's next to impossible to figure out "what they look for." He won a contract only when he took a hint and hired an American "expert" -- a retired military officer -- to fill out the form. The expert claimed the "standard fee" for his service: 25 percent of the value of the contract.

Another Afghan-American informed me that he was proud to have worked with an American construction company building schools with USAID funds. Taken on as a translator, he persuaded the company not only to hire Afghan laborers, but also to raise their pay gradually from \$1 per day to \$10 per day. "They could feed their families," he said, "and it was all cost over-run, so cost didn't matter. The boss was already billing the government \$10 to \$15 an hour for labor, so he could afford to pay \$10 a day and still make a profit." My informant didn't question the corruption in such overbilling. After all, Afghans often tack on something extra for themselves, and they don't call it corruption either. But on this scale it adds up to millions going into the assumedly deep pockets of one American privateer.

Yet a third Afghan-American, a businessman who has worked on American projects in his homeland, insisted that when Bush pledged \$10.4 billion in aid, President Karzai should have offered him a deal: "Give me \$2 billion in cash, I'll kick back the rest to you, and you can take your army and go home."

"If Karzai had put the cash in an Afghan bank," the businessman added, "and spent it himself on what people really need, both Afghanistan and Karzai would be in much better shape today." Yes, he was half-joking, but he wasn't wrong.

Don't think of such stories, and thousands of others like them, as merely tales of the everyday theft or waste of a few hundred million dollars -- a form of well-organized, routine graft that leaves the corruption of Karzai's government in the shade and will undoubtedly continue unremarked upon in the Obama years. Those multimillions that will continue to be poured down the Afghan drain really represent promises made to a people whose country and culture we have devastated more than once. They are promises made by our government, paid for by our taxpayers, and repeatedly broken.

These stories, which you'll seldom hear about, are every bit as important as the debates about military strength and tactics and strategy in Afghanistan that dominate public discourse today. Those promises, made in our name, were once said to be why we fight; now -- broken -- they remind us that we've already lost.

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Tribes end Afghan border blockade

BBC News

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Protesters in western Pakistan have ended their blockade of a key route supplying international forces in Afghanistan, officials say.

Ethnic Pashtun tribesmen began the blockade of the border crossing in the Chaman area of Balochistan province five days ago.

They were protesting at the killing of a tribesman by the security forces.

The main supply route, in the Khyber area, has also suffered severe disruption in recent months.

The problems have left the US and Nato looking at an alternative route for supply.

Rockets

A police spokesman said that the blockade at Chaman ended after it was agreed that the death of the tribesman would be investigated.

The tribesmen were also reportedly angry over the military's searches for militants.

Officials said traffic was now moving smoothly.

The Chaman route into Afghanistan has been relatively free of trouble compared to the larger Torkham crossing in the Khyber section.

Last month authorities briefly suspended the Khyber supply route to launch an offensive against militants.

The operation was intended to halt a wave of hijackings and attacks on vehicles carrying supplies into Afghanistan.

However, on Tuesday several rockets were again fired at a Nato supply depot terminal on the outskirts of Peshawar, damaging a number of trucks.

Routes through Pakistan carry about 75% of the supplies needed by the US and Nato forces.

On Wednesday, US Central Command chief Gen David Petraeus said the US was talking to Kazakhstan about using it as a transit point for supplies to Afghanistan.

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