

Two years later; The outcome of the U.S. war in Afghanistan was never in doubt; But the war's consequences and the animosity it created toward the U.S. are growing; Report from Kabul

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Walking through the streets of Kabul, one cannot help but notice the large number of amputees. No one knows exactly how many suffered this fate during the war with the Russians and the internal conflict with the Taliban. But certainly, children and young adults are victims of what the Afghans call the "American War."

These amputees, particularly children and young adults, can trace their wounds at least in part to the dropping of food packages in yellow plastic wrappers which White House PR experts in Madison Avenue techniques thought would rally Afghans to the U.S. cause. Unfortunately, the Pentagon also dropped cluster bombs, small bombs contained in big packages that spread out on the ground and work like mines.

Children confused these bomblets with the yellow plastic packages of food, with disastrous consequences. Afghanistan has never been a modern state, nor do its people have a strong sense of statehood.

The country is made up mostly of regional ethnic groups and tribes who have a sense of loyalty to one another, but not necessarily to others.

Kabul is the exception. It is for all practical purposes a city- state which has now expanded from 400,000 to one million inhabitants.

Whatever foreigners need has increased in price tenfold or more. A house that would locally rent for \$100 a month can fetch \$3,000 with a foreign renter. The city has expanded into shantytowns made of metal shipping containers used by the U.S. and

others to bring equipment into the country.

Electricity and water are scarce. Traffic is the scariest in the world, like being in a bumper car track. The city is in a valley and the pollution from smog is dense, lifting only when the sun cuts it by midday. The temperature is stiflingly hot in summer and bitter cold in winter.

Afghanistan's nation-building is a work in progress.

The administration knew before embarking on its military operations against the Taliban regime that it would take a significant commitment in time, human resources and money to help rebuild the country.

Most observers felt it was not going to be an easy task. The administration agreed and confirmed its commitment to stick with it.

This encouraged other states to support the U.S. military regime change.

However, in the Dec. 5, 2001, Bonn agreement, the U.S. handed nation-building to the United Nations, reserving for itself the role of going after Al Qaeda and Taliban forces.

As in Iraq, the outcome of the war was never in doubt, but its consequences and the animosity toward the U.S. that it generated among the population are growing.

The U.S. dropped 1.2 million tons of bombs on Afghanistan, and no one knows how many civilian or military casualties they caused. An estimated 100,000 civilians were driven into the mountains during the winter, and an undetermined number perished from the cold, malnutrition and disease.

Before the U.S. military operation, the Pentagon made it clear that it will not allow humanitarian assistance to go in during or immediately after the cessation of hostilities. Thus, the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and many non-governmental organizations were prevented access to refugees.

Deaths and animosity

There have also been some "incidents" involving civilian deaths, including the bombing of a wedding party that killed at least 40 people.

The animosity toward the U.S. feeds into Al Qaeda, the Taliban and others who project themselves as national resistance groups. These groups are active in the Kandahar, Paktika and Char Belo areas, and even in Kabul. In six incidents since July, more than 130 persons are known to have been killed.

The U.S. has for the past two years focused on military operations against Al Qaeda and elements of Taliban groups outside Kabul.

Occasionally, troops go out of their forts to strike at the renegades. But the targets are not always where they are supposed to be. Some, if not all, manage to get away.

The 1,500 miles of mountainous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan make it almost impossible for any military force--let alone some 8,500 U.S. troops--to control such a vast and rugged territory.

On the other side of that border, the Pakistani population supports Al Qaeda and Taliban forces. There are many rumors of Osama bin Laden sightings, and some of a sighting of his second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Some of these rumors even have al-Zawahiri in Kabul on two occasions. It does not take an expert to conclude that this is not a winning situation.

How long these military operations keep up will depend on whether Congress ever looks into this cost-benefit outcome. Is the pursuit worth the price? This question about cost versus benefits explains why Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has--in the case of Afghanistan as well as Iraq--sought funding from Congress without accounting and oversight. Congress acquiesced, abandoning its constitutional obligation to provide checks and balances.

The Pentagon has also prevented media access to the Afghan war theater. The media has

been reduced to a spectator role, dependent on information the administration produces.

One of the issues the administration has not addressed with the media is the increase in opium cultivation throughout the country. Afghanistan is, once again, becoming the world's largest grower of opium poppy, from which heroin is produced.

Aside from the obvious dangers of heroin, poppy growing hurts nation-building. Tribal leaders under whose auspices the poppy is being cultivated have a stake in not being part of a centralized state whose law enforcement can cut into their lucrative trade.

In addition, poppy growers and traders have to deal with outsiders to export their merchandise. Unlike the Colombians, who have developed an almost vertically integrated operation that goes from cultivation to street-level distribution in many countries, the Afghans are simply farmers selling their product.

The buyers are organized crime groups from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia, Russia and Pakistan. Thus, a new linkage has been forged between Afghan poppy growers and the international criminal community.

Because Afghanistan does not have a banking system, another serious impediment to its economic development, local transactions are conducted in cash, and the dollar is the preferred currency. The drug buyers pay in dollars, gold or in weapons, another fungible commodity in Afghanistan. The influx of such cash cannot be traced or segregated from other, legitimate funds that enter the country.

No means to stem crime

Without a strong army and police force, there is no means to control drugs, the free movement of drug money and arms money, or crime within the country. In two years, only 9,000 members of the Afghan army and Afghan police have been trained, instead of the 70,000 that were planned.

In time, poppy growers will have enough cash to buy the country, thus defeating efforts at nation-building and democratization.

In the Bonn agreement, the U.S. also washed its hands of security within the main cities, including Kabul, and security between cities. Thus, travel is somewhat hazardous, unless one knows how to contact influential persons in the various tribes that control different regions. Subject to toll payment, one can cross these areas without too much danger, but then no one can guarantee against the freelance bandits operating outside specific tribal areas.

Internal security has been turned over to the German government, which has provided some law enforcement and trained some local police.

Because the task is enormous, the results are necessarily limited. Only the center of Kabul is more or less safe. Beyond that, security is left to the local population.

Kabul isn't safe either

Even in the center of Kabul, there are two types of threats. Small bands of thieves and robbers commit urban crimes. Another threat comes from militants. Recently, a group of them demonstrated at the Pakistani Embassy, destroying phones, computers and offices. Foreigners travel in fast cars, often with escorts, while foreign government officials travel with armed escorts and in convoys.

This month, the U.S. turned over security operations in Afghanistan to NATO, giving the appearance of internationalization. But the NATO commander and senior command structure are basically made up of Americans, and for all practical purposes, the U.S. military still operates independently and without accountability.

In September, there will be a meeting of the loya jirga, a loose consultative council of regional and tribal leaders. It will bring in leaders from all over the country to Kabul to approve a new constitution and establish a permanent system of government. The debates are likely to take place over two months.

The major issues are the degree of centralization of government and the powers of government. The regional and tribal leaders will want to retain as much power as possible. While some of their powers may be limited, the region referred to as that of the

Northern Alliance, made up mostly of Uzbeks, is not likely to want to come under the control of a central government.

The U.S. relied on that group in the early days of the war. That group also killed an undisclosed number of Taliban POWs, it has been alleged, while U.S. Special Forces and CIA operatives were present.

The remnants of the Taliban regime are still in the population and among regional and local leaders. One of the more powerful is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar--a hard-liner sympathetic to the Taliban.

He and others are not likely to allow in the constitution the types of rights that the West will want to see, such as freedom of religion, freedom of the press and other rights fundamental in secular societies. Islamic law is likely to have a great influence over criminal law, family law and inheritance law, allowing modernists to draft new laws on what Islamic conservatives consider exotic categories, namely, commercial satellite communications, intellectual property and maybe securities.

Judicial training program

The Italian-run program to train the judiciary started in July. It aims to train 450 judges, most newly appointed, including 50 women. That is the largest number of women judges in any Muslim country.

The training program will last 16 months and cover issues of human-rights and comparative law. It is jointly directed by the International Development Law Organization and the International Institute of Higher Studies in Criminal Sciences. DePaul University's International Human Rights Law Institute is responsible for the human- rights aspect of the training.

The newly announced initiative to send Zalmay Khalilzad as the American czar of Afghanistan with more than 100 U.S. experts to oversee the spending of \$1 billion is a positive development, but it is fraught with dangers. It will rub raw the national sensitivities of Afghans and undermine the government of President Hamid Karzai by

making him appear a puppet of the U.S.

The U.S. plan will also marginalize the UN role, placing the U.S. front and center before the Afghan people. Such high visibility is counterproductive. Without the UN's legitimacy, the newly heralded U.S. initiative will be seen as another manifestation of neoimperialism, much as is the case in Iraq.

The administration needs to learn how to help others without hurting their national feelings, otherwise our intended good is fuel for resistance by the Taliban sympathizers.

For different reasons, they will find allies among the regional and tribal leaders, and that will make things more difficult.

The Afghans have their own ways and their own pace, and some things cannot be rushed. How successful Khalilzad will be depends on his sensitivity, and how Washington will respond to these indigenous factors.