

Uncertain endgame in Afghanistan

By KAMRUL IDRIS

BEYOND 2014: The country could do with more development and less fighting

To the anxious question of what will happen to Afghanistan when foreign troops leave in 2014, Dr Abdul Qayum Mohmand had an unexpected answer. "Nothing will happen," the former University of Afghanistan assistant professor said. "Because nothing is happening now."

Before a somber seminar on the country's future in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, last week, Mohmand tried to lighten his pessimism by exaggerating for effect. But between the candour and humour of his chat at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia was a sorrow that could not be concealed by bluntness.

Mohmand laid most of the blame for Afghanistan's misery on the Great Game -- the scrummage of major powers in the region since the days of the British Raj.

The players are no longer just the Cold War antagonists of America and the West versus Russia and the Soviet bloc.

"Pakistan and Iran are invading Afghanistan culturally, economically and politically," Mohmand said. His thesis seemed to be that nothing good has come of outside involvement because it was never undertaken with the interests of the Afghan people at heart.

Yet, whatever the motivations, the post-Sept 11 intervention remains widely seen as an expensively missed opportunity to reverse the Afghan tailspin that began with the onset of war in 1978 -- and to disprove Mohmand and others, if not in theory then at least in practice.

The backdrop for this failure has been compared with that of Iraq, and narrows down to what is in hindsight an astonishing underestimation of the country and its specific problems. Wishful thinking was reinforced by the ease with which Kabul fell and by the Hamid Karzai interim administration's smooth takeover following the Bonn agreement in December 2001.

How thin the illusions turned out to be is chronicled by Jason Burke in *The 9/11 Wars*, a wrap-up of the first decade of conflict accruing from the terrorist atrocities in New York and Washington.

As a journalist for London's *Guardian* during the bombing of the Tora Bora mountains, he describes the helter-skelter scattering of the Taliban from their hideaways -- and their incredible regrouping across the border in Pakistan not long after.

Despite the generals' expectations of victory, the Taliban have kept coming back. The reason is simple but hard to comprehend for those who have expended so much for Afghanistan's salvation: the ex-seminarian guerillas fulfil a need, particularly in the rural areas.

The need arises from what Burke calls "the core weakness of the effort in Afghanistan: the incompetence, corruption, cynicism and effective paralysis of the central Kabul government". That is why the Taliban's role, especially in the Pashtun-majority south and east of the country, has been reappraised, even in the liberal Western capitals most revolted by their 1996 to 2001 record in government.

The Taliban's gentler side is hinted at by Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeif, who accompanied Mohmand to Kuala Lumpur last week. A former ambassador to Pakistan, he was surrendered by his erstwhile hosts to incarceration in Guantanamo Bay and has since his release been associated with attempts at contacting his former colleagues now reconstituted in the Quetta Shura and other bases of the insurgency. (He, however, denies acting as an "address".)

Zaeif characterised the Taliban as a creature unique to its time and place. After taking part in the jihad against the Soviet Union, the students of the madrassah retired when the Russians withdrew. A few years later, another round of warring (1992-1996) ensued.

"In 1994, when there was a need for security, the Taliban re-emerged," Zaeif said. For all their faults, he said the Taliban made 90 per cent of the country safe, re-established central government and eradicated opium production.

That the Taliban could have been more than protectors of al-Qaeda and oppressors of women is now an accepted basis for considering what is to become of Afghanistan. Burke pinpoints when the about-turn took place: late 2009.

"Alarm at the seriousness of the situation in 2008 and the recognition that many of the original aims of the Western project in Afghanistan had become simply unrealisable, had led to the understanding among some analysts and diplomats that, if the West was ever going to extricate itself from Afghanistan, it would be necessary to talk, somehow, to the Taliban."

He is echoed by the European-funded Afghanistan Analysts Network (ANN), whose Kabul-based experts say that an externally-imposed military solution is not possible.

"The US's 'fight, talk, build' approach is often presented as being in support of a political solution, but it is more likely to be counterproductive in the context of an insurgency that has deep roots in (parts of) Afghan society, is more than a terrorist fringe group, and whose persecution leads to continuous 'collateral damage'," it said in a report titled "The international community's engagement in Afghanistan beyond 2014" this month.

Reconciling the Taliban, however, is complicated by an assumption unspoken in the AAN report but not by the forthright Mohmand: that a weary international community will once again abandon Afghanistan as it did when the Soviets left in 1989, despite denials at the second Bonn summit early this month. It is thus not easy to predict Afghanistan's fate, and Mohmand could well be right in supposing that little will change from the utter destruction of the country wrought by the Soviet invasion in 1978.

Burke could find nothing more positive to end his book with than the case of Ali Shah, a young shepherd who left home in Bamiyan as the Taliban arrived, soon to destroy its famous Buddha statues.

He is found huddled against the cold on a roadside in Dunkirk, hoping to steal into a truck to take him illegally across the channel to the United Kingdom.

"I have been travelling for too long. I would like to go home, but the situation in Afghanistan is very bad," he said. "Hopefully, things will be better when I get to the other side. I am now very tired."