

Peace for Afghanistan calls for a new vision

The security and economic situation in Afghanistan is now so untenable that only a radical rethink of American military policy and exit strategy towards the country can yield results, writes MOHAMMAD HASHIM KAMALI

IT is time for the United States and Nato to acknowledge the failure of their military approach to Afghanistan.

The talk of ousting the Taliban and bringing peace and democracy to that country has also lost credibility. Afghanistan has become another Iraq, in that the US military approach to bringing peace and stability has failed in both.

Iraq welcomed the downfall of Saddam Hussein just as Afghanistan welcomed the end of Taliban rule but America is now seen as a foreign invader whose military presence in the country is no longer welcome. A steady increase in civilian casualties, poverty and degradation under a hopelessly ineffective government has led to widespread public disaffection.

US President Barack Obama's intense deliberations over this "war of necessity" and the groundswell of opposing voices among the American public over the futility of continued war in Afghanistan have run into deadlock for simple reasons: a reluctance of the US leadership to see the facts for what they are.

The military establishment cannot be expected to give the needed advice, and Obama has little choice but to be decisive over what has become an unwinnable war. More of the same will simply not deliver and the president should consider a reversal of the military approach.

Eight years of escalating war, troops and more troops, crippling corruption, warlordism, criminality and the drug economy to sustain them all have brought the country down to its knees. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and its security situation is rapidly deteriorating. More war is simply not an option.

There is no more room for procrastination; a new vision is needed to plan a peaceful future for Afghanistan. Obama has inherited a difficult legacy and he is at a crucial juncture on whether to perpetuate it or make a decisive turnaround.

Why is it so difficult to stop an extremely unpopular war and launch a peace plan? The current debate could be turned into a historic opportunity, how-



Afghanistan is now dependent on the drug economy to sustain itself. — AFP picture

ever, if Washington would contemplate a new plan and vision along the following lines:

- Plan its exit from Afghanistan and announce a prospective end to its military policy.

This would send a positive message and dispel the suspicion that America and Nato entertain a hidden geopolitical agenda to use Afghanistan as an observation post over Iran and China, and a trade route also to the former Soviet republics.

- Launch a peace and reconstruction plan by allocating the lion's share of its current military budget to infrastructure projects, schools and hospitals, employment and training programmes in all provinces.

This would begin to erode the credibility and presence of the Taliban in the countryside. Afghans are tired of war. Give a decent man a choice to earn an honourable living and he will most likely take it if it offers him a way out of mercenary and drug-related activity.

- Start a countrywide land reform programme by assigning plots of barren land to individuals and families to reclaim and eventually own in two or three years. Open agricultural cooperatives to provide soft loans, seed and equipment.

This would give the people prospects and a future to work for. Afghanistan used to be agriculturally self-sufficient, even exporting some of its pro-

duce to India and Pakistan. It is now totally dependent on imports from those countries for almost all its needs.

All provincial governors should be tasked with starting two or three government farms each, with visible employment opportunities, and to form agricultural cooperatives for the distribution of arable lands as soon as possible.

- Beef up police and patrol capabilities in major towns. Plan for release of political prisoners and grant amnesty also to certain categories of other prisoners.

- Plan a national reconciliation programme through the use of jirga councils, supervised by district governors, local notables and religious leaders. A national-level "truth commission" may also be planned to follow up on these efforts.

- Plan an extensive media programme to expatiate on the objectives of the peace plan, to enlist public support. Islam's peaceful messages and its staunch regard for the sanctity of life should be a visible component of this campaign.

A limited troop increase may only be considered as part of a larger peace plan to build a credible military presence, yet in a totally defensive capacity and a clearly articulated strategy for an initial period of, say, six to nine months.

A temporary increase in subversive activities and violence may be expected following an-

nouncement of the proposed exit strategy, which might not be significantly more than what the country is experiencing now. Given a declared plan to end militarism and a visibly constructive engagement in peace-building efforts, one can expect eventual progress towards sustainable peace.

The whole of this plan must be decisive, practice-oriented, and must avoid as far as possible protracted meetings and consultative procedures. People want to see rapid results.

Obama might consider a major policy speech to outline his new Afghanistan policy. The mere announcement of such a policy is likely to deal a blow to the Taliban's claim to legitimacy. The plan should be given maximum media exposure within Afghanistan.

A high-level group of eminent people, including national and international personalities, religious leaders and a significant United Nations involvement, could be set up with a set of guidelines to supervise the proposed peace and reconstruction plan for Afghanistan.

Some level of diplomatic engagement with Pakistan and Iran to enlist their backing would also be advisable.

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