

## **A political solution awaits Afghanistan**

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NOTHING seems to be going right to lighten the darkness that is taking hold of Afghanistan.

June was the worst month for casualties among foreign troops, with 66 deaths, in the nine years they had been there to battle Islamic extremism and rescue the rubble-strewn country from decades of war.

The BBC tallied last month that roadside bombings had nearly doubled in the first quarter of the year from the same period last year, assassinations were up by half and suicide attacks by 100 per cent. More than a thousand have been killed in the first six months of the year.

London's Independent cited the number of verifiable civilian dead compiled by an academic at nearly 14,000 since the October 2001 invasion. Others, factoring in how hard it is to count bodies among communities as shell-shocked and disordered as those of Afghanistan, estimate the figure as many times more.

Then July came along to distinguish itself as the deadliest so far for the United States, 63 of whose servicemen perished as they surged against the Taliban. No relief from bad news is expected in subsequent months as, the newspaper noted, the conflict drags on to surpass in duration the First and Second World Wars combined.

Much of the rising toll in lives is explained by the arrival of 30,000-strong reinforcements ordered by President Barack Obama last December. Knowing that the war was being lost, he wagered on a last push to beat the insurgency for enough of an advantage to be able to pull out in favour of an increased role for Afghan forces.

That aim was made explicit at the international conference last month, when it was at last possible to stage one in Kabul after nine years of avoidance. The 70 participants, including foreign ministers and the United Nations secretary-general, heard President Hamid Karzai propose Afghan control of security in 2014.

They adjourned with a sense of unreality, however, and misgivings were blurted out. "Citizens of many nations, including my own," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "wonder whether success is even possible, and if so whether we all have the commitment to achieve it."

Afghanistan was not always so forlorn. As a member of the constitution committee in 2003, Prof Mohammad Hashim Kamali recalled an interim when its people had looked forward to salvation. Touring the Pashtun-majority east, he was welcomed by crowds eager to hear about their country's new charter.

“We were advised by Unama (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) not to go too far, not to have too many big meetings,” he said. “But we encountered not a single incident of violence to the extent that we were convinced we were safer without the police escort.”

According to Kamali, who heads the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies in Kuala Lumpur and hails from Nangarhar province, the Taliban’s re-infiltration of its heartlands in the south and east had been accomplished by default. The Karzai government had not made its presence felt and was on its way to wasting a historic opportunity to break Afghanistan’s condition of endless war.

There is plenty of blame to go round. In a paper in January, Anders Fänge of the Afghanistan Analysts Network encapsulated what doctors would call a “failure cascade”.

“The most fundamental problem in the present conflict lies with the Afghan government and its international allies, the lack of state services and justice in rural areas, corruption, absence of local governance structures, high rates of unemployment, the appalling lack of coordination and, to quite an extent, the dismal performance of the international assistance community,” he said.

Kamali added another dimension: the sudden visibility of al-Qaeda-hunting commandoes and drones in places like Konar province on the eastern border, where they had never been seen before. The WikiLeaks disclosure last month of thousands of field reports showed how early support for foreign intervention could have turned into widespread opposition.

The talibs, heirs of the anti-Soviet mujahidin, are adept at guerilla warfare — in its combat, and the terror tactics and exploitation of grievance with which cover is obtained from an oppressed population. If there is one thing to be learnt from the decade-long Russian occupation, it is that a determined band of warriors with knowledge of the territory can bog down the might of a superpower.

That may be happening already. The International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) reckons there may be up to 36,000 anti-government fighters capable of sustaining themselves indefinitely. Ranged against them are almost 10 times as many foreign troops and Afghan army and police personnel.

With such long odds, it is unlikely that the Taliban can be defeated, leaving only the option of a political settlement.

“The great majority of experts and observers as well as the politicians and military seem to agree that there is no military solution to the situation,” Fänge said.

Kamali recommended a credible exit plan for foreign troops at the same time as the convening of a loya jirga or conclave of elders with the participation of the Taliban.

Even Karzai, who might have to step down as a result, appears to be leaning in that direction. He is said to have met Pakistani generals to identify interlocutors and dangle the confidence-building carrot of removing them from terrorist watch lists.

The prospect of the Taliban's return, as distasteful as it may be, should not encourage the world to abandon Afghanistan as it had so disastrously done when the Soviets left in 1989.

Not unexpectedly, it is the soldiers from the more than 40 countries contributing to Isaf that have shown stronger stomachs for staying the course than their wilting politicians and publics back home.

Ending their four-year mission on Aug 2 after a change of government in June, Dutch troops muttered about a job not yet done as they handed over command of Uruzgan to the Americans and Australians.

No doubt, the Malaysian humanitarian contingent will demonstrate the same spirit as they report to the Provisional Reconstruction Team at the province of Bamyan to dedicate themselves in aid of their hosts.

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