IN FOCUS

THE END OF NATO'S HONEYMOON?

By Amin Tarzi

The violent protests in Afghanistan against the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad that first appeared in a Danish newspaper culminated on 7 February with an attack targeting a NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Maymana, the capital of the northern Faryab Province. While the information on which side started shooting remains vague, at least four Afghan protestors were killed and some 20 others -- including five Norwegian troops -- were injured in the melee.

Norwegian Defense Ministry spokesman Commander Thom Knustad has described the attempt by the protestors to enter the military compound as "an attack on a NATO base in Afghanistan." And NATO officials have said the Norwegians acted appropriately and, under the circumstances, praised them for the restraint that they showed (see "RFE/RL Afghanistan Report," 13 February 2006).

Common People Protest

The fact that the attack against a NATO base -- in what is one of the safer areas of Afghanistan -- was carried out not by a band of insurgents or terrorists but rather the local population should bring the countries contributing troops to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) back to the drawing board regarding their long-term plans for Afghanistan.

Beyond the crisis over the cartoons, NATO should expect to be in the thick of volatile situations triggered by a domestic dispute or even a neighbor of Afghanistan.

NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels in December formally endorsed an expansion of NATO's peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan. The revised operational plan for ISAF -- known as "Stage 3 expansion" -- provides strategic guidance for increased NATO support to the Afghan government in extending and exercising its authority and influence throughout the country.

The next stage of that plan is the expansion of ISAF in 2006 to six south-central Afghan provinces: Daikondi, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Oruzgan, and Zabul. As part of the expansion, ISAF is expected to grow from its current strength of 9,000 soldiers from 26 NATO and 10 non-NATO countries to 16,000 troops -- with most of the reinforcements coming from Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

ISAF's expansion has been hailed as a sign of commitment by NATO to Afghanistan's long-term stability and has been deemed an essential factor in its transformation to a fully-functioning nation-state. However, the vague mandate of ISAF, the limitations
imposed on its operations based on national caveats, and the failure of the long-standing Washington hope to combine the commands of ISAF and the U.S.-led coalition forces, could spell trouble for the West's greatest military alliance in its first test outside of the European theater.

Stabilization

NATO's overall policy in Afghanistan is to conduct stabilization management rather than managing a crisis. Militarily, ISAF is mandated to conduct "stability and security operations" in coordination with Afghan national security forces and to provide support to Afghan government programs to "disarm illegally armed groups." However, it is not clear whether ISAF is authorized to use force if such an approach is adopted by Kabul. Technically, under the terms of the new Afghanistan Compact signed on 31 January in London mapping out the next five years for Afghanistan, Kabul is tasked with disbanding all militias by 2008.

Whereas NATO has yet to be tested in restive southern Afghanistan where the threats are much greater and the need for coordination more critical, the "attack" on the ISAF base in Maymana must have brought the message to countries contributing NATO troops that the Afghan mission may involve crisis management, not just stability and security operations.

Faryab is a province where the Kabul government's direct control is viewed as tenuous. Faryab is controlled by one of the more powerful warlords in Afghanistan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has his own militia and is engaged in a low-level struggle with a rival warlord, General Abdul Malik.

What took place in Maymana on 7 February -- whether a genuine expression of anger by a mob or an opportune situation for a domestic or foreign spoiler to pursue its agenda -- could very well spell the end of NATO's role as bystanders in Afghanistan's crisis.

Beyond the crisis over the cartoons, NATO should expect to be in the thick of volatile situations triggered by a domestic dispute or even a neighbor of Afghanistan. Iran, for example, could find it convenient to harm those countries which are working with the West to resolve Tehran's controversial nuclear program by using Iranian allies inside Afghanistan to spoil NATO operations there.

NEWS

ISAF EXPANDS AND PREPARES FOR LONG-TERM STAY.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) begins its expansion into southern Afghanistan in March. ISAF troops will move into Provincial Reconstruction Team bases in provinces like Helmand and Kandahar. NATO officials tell RFE/RL they are preparing to stay in Afghanistan for as long as a decade -- provided the UN Security Council agrees to extend the ISAF mandate that long. They say ISAF wants to raise its profile, but they also insist that ISAF troops do not want to take on a counterinsurgency role alongside U.S.-led combat forces in Operation Enduring Freedom (see "RFE/RL Afghanistan Report," 20 December 2005).

ISAF's commanding officer, Italian General Mauro Del Vecchio, says the move to the south by will be "sensitive and delicate."

During the next year, ISAF plans to deploy 6,000 troops into southern Afghanistan. They will be staffing bases for at least four joint civilian-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in the south. In some areas, ISAF will outnumber the combat troops of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom.

But General Del Vecchio insists that ISAF troops do not want to engage in combat against the remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. As a result of objections by France, Germany, and other European allies, ISAF will limit its work with Operation Enduring Freedom to a support role. Still, the two operations have a joint U.S. commanding officer. Depending on the mission, that commander answers either to ISAF or to U.S. Central Command.

Del Vecchio tells RFE/RL that ISAF is preparing to stay in Afghanistan for as long as 10 years -- provided that the UN Security Council continues to extend its mandate. He says ISAF is needed for another decade because it will take about 10 years before the fledgling Afghan National Army reaches 70,000 fully trained troops.

"The ISAF operation -- the ISAF mission -- probably will remain here in Afghanistan for seven to 10 years. The reason of this presence is linked, of course, to the preparation of the dispersion of the capacity of the Afghan [National Army across the country]," Del Vecchio says.

Currently, the Afghan National Army has about 30,000 fully trained men. Del Vecchio says training for those forces has been "very good." But he says the Afghan army is still far from being able to control security across the country without help from ISAF.

One NATO officer told RFE/RL that the Afghan National Army and police participate alongside ISAF in about 25 percent of the 600 patrols made by the international force each week.

ISAF PRTs also will soon become more involved in training local police and security forces. The United States already has embedded trainers in each unit of the Afghan National Army. ISAF hopes to do the same. So far, ISAF has lacked the funds and staff needed for such training missions. But it expects money and manpower to become available as expansion into the south unfolds.

Setting Up In Kandahar

ISAF troops are expected to be fully deployed at two PRTs, in Kandahar and Helmand, by July. Canadian ISAF troops already began moving to Kandahar from a base in Kabul in September. Australia and four European countries in NATO also are sending troops to the south: Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Estonia.

The European Union, one of Afghanistan's largest aid donors, is closely monitoring developments. The EU considers stability and security in Afghanistan a vital issue. One reason is that Afghan drug lords produce about 80 percent of the heroin that is sold illegally in Europe.

Franscenc Vendrell, the EU's special representative for Afghanistan, tells RFE/RL that he has been lobbying EU countries to contribute as many troops as possible to the ISAF mission.

"So, the issues of security, governance, human rights, and reconstruction are all linked together" Vendrell says. "And we need now forces in these provinces, international forces that will enable the Afghan government to extend its authority progressively in
the various provinces where there are serious problems."

Direct EU Involvement More Likely

Vendrell also says the EU is increasing its own direct involvement in Afghanistan. "There is a second possibility which is only now been approved -- just now -- and is not happening yet," he says. "This is the possibility of channeling some [European] Commission money to a Provincial Reconstruction Team for use by the PRT in their own civil-military projects."

The four European NATO countries involved in the southern expansion of ISAF have all agreed to do so without "caveats." NATO officials use the term caveat to describe restrictions that different countries place on military action by their forces. The ISAF command often has to contact the political leadership of different countries to gain access to their troops or assets in Afghanistan. Restrictions usually involve anything from specific "rules of engagement" to details about whether helicopters can carry Afghan personnel.

Other details about funding also have become an issue as ISAF’s expansion into the south moves forward. British troops plan to leave Mazar-e Sharif in March. They will hand over the PRT in the northern city to Swedish troops and a base at Mazar-e Sharif’s main airfield to Norwegian troops.

But London also wants to take most of the related NATO funds with it to develop the Kandahar airfield, a major logistical and supply base in southern Afghanistan.

This has rankled Germany, which already has spent 40 million euros ($48 million) on new facilities at Mazar-e Sharif and needs another 30 million euros to complete that project.

NATO’s civilian representative for Afghanistan, Hikmet Cetin, tells RFE/RL that he hopes the alliance will make a formal decision on Stage Four, a further expansion of ISAF into eastern Afghanistan, before the end of this year.

"After Stage Three what you need [is] a political decision," Cetin says. "Because the United States will stay in Stage Four and at that point NATO will have to take a political decision. And the sooner the better, I would say, because you cannot make too much separation between the east and the south [of Afghanistan]."

NATO military officials have expressed some doubts about whether a decision can be formalized this year on expanding ISAF into eastern Afghanistan. (Ahto Lobjakas)

**NATO, EU WON’T TAKE DIRECT ROLE AGAINST DRUG TRADE.**

Both NATO and the European Union agree that the illegal narcotics trade is one of the biggest threats to the recovery of Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, both refuse to lead a hands-on role in fighting the problem. Instead, the onus of battling Afghanistan’s drug lords is on the Afghan authorities. Senior EU and NATO officials in Afghanistan tell RFE/RL that the country will need a lot of time and assistance before it begins to bring the problem under control (see "RFE/RL Afghanistan Report," 13 February 2006).

None of Afghanistan’s main Western supporters doubt that the country’s recovery depends upon bringing the illicit drug trade under control.

http://www.rferl.org/reports/aspfiles/printonly.asp?po=y
Officials in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) estimate that
the production and trafficking of illegal narcotics accounts for up to two-thirds of the
Afghan economy. One ISAF official summarized the situation by saying that
Afghanistan's economy is comprised of Western aid and the illegal drug trade.

Hikmet Cetin, NATO's civilian representative in Afghanistan, estimates the value of the
drug industry at nearly $3 billion a year. Cetin says Afghanistan's economic
dependence on narcotics rules out any quick remedies.

"It is an illegal reality in this country -- drugs," Cetin says. "Whether you like it or not,
between 50 and 60 percent of gross domestic product [is] originating from drugs. And
what will happen, without creating an alternative, if you just -- in one year or one day -
- get rid of 55 percent of your GDP? In any country, everything will collapse."

Cetin says an effective counternarcotics policy is needed or there will never be "a
stable, secure, and peaceful Afghanistan."

Only 'Support' Role

Yet NATO rejects an active leadership in a counternarcotics role. ISAF's mandate from
the UN Security Council allows the NATO-led force only to "support" counternarcotics
efforts undertaken by the Afghan central government. A recent U.S. request for a
tougher NATO role in counternarcotics was vetoed by France.

ISAF officials in Afghanistan also say their joint civilian-military Provincial
Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) also are in a difficult situation. Pursuing drug traffickers
means antagonizing regional warlords or drug barons who profit from the illicit trade.
Often, these regional power brokers have strong influence over local public opinion.
The PRTs, in turn, have more difficulties when they do not have the support of the local
population.

Officials say that to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a narco-state, officials in Kabul
must achieve three closely linked tasks: establish the rule of law, reform the economy,
and provide alternative sources of income to Afghan farmers who grow the poppy
flowers from which heroin and other opiates are produced.

Establishing the rule of law means creating a functioning police force, judiciary, and
penal system -- as well as rooting out corruption. That may prove to be the hardest
task to achieve.

Cetin says about $800 million in drug proceeds go to Afghan poppy farmers each year.
He estimates the rest, more than $2 billion, is taken by drug traffickers and warlords
who control export routes from Afghanistan. Profits from the drug trade help some
warlords pay the salaries of illegal regional militia forces. Drug funds also are used for
terrorism.

Part Of The Problem, Not The Solution

Western officials say Afghan authorities must bear the brunt of the fight against
organized criminal drug traffickers. But they concede that Afghan police are unprepared
for the battle.

Cetin says 60 percent of Afghan police officers are illiterate. Police salaries are
relatively minuscule -- even compared to the Afghan National Army -- increasing

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opportunities for criminals to bribe police officers. Salaries remain an issue, despite some $900 million contributed to Kabul by the United States for police reforms and pay raises.

Francesc Vendrell, the EU's special representative for Afghanistan, tells RFE/RL that the Afghan police are "part of the problem" rather than the solution. "We still have a major problem with the police in terms that they are not properly trained," he says. "They are often a source of insecurity in this country rather than a source of security."

Vendrell says NATO and the EU can help indirectly by helping to build up an effective Afghan police force. He says ISAF should be doing more than its German-run police-training program. He suggests that ISAF could match the U.S. investment (see "RFE/RL Afghanistan Report," 16 January 2006).

Vendrell says Afghan authorities need to carry out a radical overhaul of law enforcement in order to weede out corruption. "You need a police [force] that will not be corrupted by narcotics," he says. "And you need to get rid of any authority -- any senior person in authority be it governor, chief of police, or head of a district -- who is linked to drug production and trade. Now, that last part is the one thing that I think we can do faster."

Alternative Livelihood Needed

Reform of the Afghan judiciary will take years. But establishing the rule of law is just the beginning. Vendrell notes that Afghanistan currently has nothing to replace drugs as its main export. And helping Afghan farmers develop alternative livelihoods also will take years.

NATO's Cetin says Afghanistan may not have so much time. As an example, he cites the recent experience of farmers in the eastern province of Nangarhar who heeded a call by Afghan President Hamid Karzai in 2004 to give up poppy cultivation. Cetin says those farmers "got nothing" in return and are now starting to grow poppies again.

Cetin says the $10.5 billion in aid pledged at the recent London Conference for Afghanistan may relieve the situation somewhat.

Vendrell suggests that what will be decisive in the end is whether the Afghan public thinks that justice is being served in their country. He says a counternarcotics policy cannot succeed if it targets poor rural farmers but leaves the "big men in the capital" untouched.

Vendrell insists that President Karzai must take tougher action against high-ranking government officials or parliamentarians who are implicated in drug trafficking. "We also need to take some tough measures. I think the best way to do it is for the president to remove from office a few notorious people linked to the drug trade," he says. "Then the message will go to all the other authorities that this is no longer going to be tolerated."

NATO's Cetin was unwilling to comment on reports about alleged links between Karzai and some people implicated in the drug trade. He says the Afghan president remains committed to the fight against illegal drug trafficking. Cetin also notes that Kabul has full control over all provincial governors -- as well as provincial police chiefs.

Vendrell says that with the correct political will there is no reason why Afghanistan cannot emulate Thailand or Pakistan -- both of which eliminated much of the illegal
poppy cultivation on their territory within 10 to 15 years. (Ahto Lobjakas)

KARZAI TO CONSULT PAKISTAN ABOUT SUICIDE BOMBINGS.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in Islamabad on 15 February for a two-day visit that includes talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz. The Afghan president says he wants Islamabad to work harder to stop cross-border terrorist attacks -- including the growing number of suicide bombings in Afghanistan that Kabul has blamed on "elements within Pakistan." But Pakistan has concerns of its own.

Karzai says his talks this week with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf will focus on a recent wave of suicide bombings in Afghanistan.

Karzai arrived in Islamabad amid repeated accusations from Kabul that "elements in Pakistan" have planned, organized or supplied most of the 15 suicide bomb attacks in Afghanistan since November.

Straight Talk

"I'm going to Pakistan especially to talk with the president of Pakistan and the government there about the issue of terrorism," he said. "I will talk to them about these bombings going on in places like Kandahar, Paktiya Province, Khost, and Mazar-e-Sharif."

RFE/RL Afghan analyst Amin Tarzi says relations between Kabul and Islamabad have suffered as a result of bombings and violent demonstrations that Kabul has blamed on "elements within Pakistan."

"Observers view [relations] between Islamabad and Kabul as the lowest they have been since the demise of the Taliban in late 2001," he said. "Afghanistan is accusing Pakistan of either supporting the neo-Taliban and other militants or at least not doing enough to stop the infiltrations. On the other hand, Pakistan is openly critical of Afghanistan's relationship with India -- namely, allowing India to bring its forces, about 400 of them, for protection along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And also, now, they are accusing Afghanistan of supporting separatist and rebellious movements inside of [Pakistan's border province of] Baluchistan."

Indeed, Pakistan's core foreign-policy issue is its decades-old rivalry with India. The flowering of trade, aid, and diplomatic relations between Kabul and India appears to be making Pakistani officials suspicious.

Terrorism The Key Issue

But it is the wave of suicide bombings in the last three months -- most claimed by the Taliban -- that has fuelled the accusations from Kabul that Islamabad is not doing enough to stop Pakistani-based militants from crossing into Afghanistan to carry out terrorist attacks.

"It's pretty clear that the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan is sustained by the fact that they get a lot of cross border support [from elements in Pakistan]," Joanna Nathan, a Kabul-based researcher for the International Crisis Group, said. "The top leadership [or the Taliban] lives in Pakistan. Of course, a lot of the training obviously takes place in Pakistan. And the border is fairly porous. So people can come and go.

and then seek the sanctity of an international border line."

"I'm sure Karzai would like to see some commitments from Musharraf to shutting down both this border, which is very porous, and also some of the madrasahs and extremist centers in the border areas where these ideas [for suicide attacks] are coming from," she said. "Karzai alone won't be enough. What we really need to see is some substantial international pressure going on Musharraf here to close down both the schools where these ideas come from and also the ability to so easily cross to and fro."

Pakistan's Issues

But Pakistani political analysts say Islamabad is constrained by internal and external considerations when it comes to fighting the Taliban. Islamabad risks alienating both Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns if it launches military crackdowns in the conservative tribal regions near the border, where many sympathize with the Taliban.

Pakistani analyst Hasan Askari Rizvi says the alliance of conservative Islamist parties that govern Pakistan's North West Frontier Province also would be enraged by military action there against Afghan Islamists.

Afrasaib Khatak is a human rights campaigner and an political analyst at Peshawar in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. "The main point [of Karzai's visit to Islamabad this week] is securing peace and stability in relations between these two countries," he said. "During these talks, it is important that they focus on strengthening economic and cultural ties as well as political cooperation."

Some events on Karzai's schedule suggest he will be attempting to do that. The Afghan president is scheduled to meet with Pakistani entrepreneurs and investors to try to encourage investment in Afghanistan. (Ron Synovitz)

Compiled by Amin Tarzi.