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Annocr: On the Line - a discussion of United States policy and contemporary issues. This week, "Afghanistan in Crisis." Here is your host, Robert Reilly.

Host: Hello and welcome to On the Line. Today, Afghanistan lies in ruins. Four years of rule by the Taleban have done little to repair the damage from two decades of fighting. First the Afghans defeated the Soviet occupation, but then fell to fighting among themselves. Though the Taleban control most of the country, fighting has continued this summer with the Northern Alliance, headed by the last Afghan president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Commander Ahmad Shah Masood. The worst drought in thirty years has added to the suffering of the Afghan people. Meanwhile, Taleban-controlled areas continue to provide safe haven to drug traffickers, and to Usama bin Laden and his terrorist organization, Al-Qaida.
Joining me today to discuss the situation in Afghanistan is Karl Inderfurth, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs.

Welcome to the program.

The fighting has been going on for so long in Afghanistan that it’s almost easy to lose sight of what it is about. How would you express that?

Inderfurth: The first thing to say is that the tragedy of Afghanistan continues, as you pointed out. This is almost of Biblical proportions. They have seen foreign occupation. They have seen civil war. They have seen earthquakes. And now, as you mentioned, they have seen one of the most devastating droughts in history. This is a great tragedy. And I think it is very clear that the United States and the international community must do whatever it can to help the Afghan people. Unfortunately, the civil war continues. The Taliban came to power. They control about eighty-five percent of the country now. They want to control the entire country. They see this as a divine mission, as they interpret Islam. Commander
Masood controls about fifteen percent of the country and that fighting continues, despite the efforts of countries, the international community, and the U-N to bring about a negotiated settlement.

Host: What about the nature of the fighting. I was reading an interview with a member of Commander Masood’s forces, who said, “they [meaning the Taliban] say they are bringing sharia, but it is not sharia to beat women and children, or to build terrorist bases.” Is this a jihad on both sides of the conflict over a religious interpretation of the Muslim law?

Inderfurth: I think that there is a degree of that. I think, though, that what the Northern Alliance has said about the Taliban we would agree with. The repression of women and girls in Afghanistan is well known. The fact that the Taliban continues to wage war, will not come to the negotiating table, which the North Alliance has said that it would do, the fact that the Taliban continues to harbor terrorists, including Usama bin Laden, and the fact that Afghanistan is
now the world's leading produces of opium, the
world's leading narcotics producer - all these
things are black marks against Afghanistan, a
country that just a few years ago was seen in the
international community as having taken a
courageous stand against the Soviet occupation and
getting the world's attention and praise for what
it did. So unfortunately, Afghanistan has moved
from that position just a few short years ago to
one where it is seen increasingly as a threat to
its neighbors and to the international community.

Host: Let's talk a little more about the character
of the Taleban, which I understand is the plural
of Taleb, religious student, and that many of them
were educated in religious schools in Pakistan.
How do they reconcile their very strict
interpretation of Islamic law with, number one,
what you said is the world's largest production of
opium and drug trafficking, and, two, terrorist
bases?

Inderfurth: The Taleban are profiting from the
drug trade; they are not actually growing the
poppy, but they are profiting from it. And on
terrorism, they have provided safe haven to bin Laden, who, as you know, the United States and the international community through the United Nations, believes should be brought to justice for actions he has taken, including against American citizens when our embassies were bombed in east Africa. And of course, many other innocents died, including several hundred Africans in this terrorist attack.

Host: Well, you, the U.S. government, made an official extradition request, did you not?

Inderfurth: We have made the request. We have given the Taliban the indictment, the very long indictment of bin Laden. And they say they cannot release him or will not expel him because he is a guest, because he was a part of that jihad against the Soviet occupation, which, of course, the United States also assisted through material assistance, and others in the region, including Pakistan. They say that he is a guest, an honored guest, because of his role then. We tell the Taliban that he is not an honored guest any longer, that he is dishonoring Afghanistan because
he is someone who has murdered innocent people, which is against the Koran, which is against all religions, and therefore he is dishonoring Afghanistan and should be expelled. Unfortunately, they have not taken that action.

Host: Assistant Secretary Inderfurth, what seems to be quite curious is the Taleban and Mullah Omar are saying that Usama bin laden is not conducting any activities. At the same time, the official spokesman of Al-Qaida is saying, we have been supplying fighters to Chechnya, which, of course, upsets Russia to no end.

Inderfurth: It certainly does.

Host: But it seems that they are active not only in Chechnya, but have worried the other Central Asian republics, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and even Iran. Could you amplify on the concerns of the countries neighboring Afghanistan?

Inderfurth: Well, I think that you have done that yourself. I think that we have seen evidence of those being trained in Afghanistan turning up in
Chechnya. We have seen evidence of those being trained in Afghanistan turning up in the Central Asian republics. They are certainly turning up in Kashmir, which is, of course, one of the important flash points in the world, one that we are very concerned about and the Indian government is very concerned about. So it is not only the issue of terrorism and blowing up embassies -- and, of course, the Jordanians right before the New Year uncovered a cell operating in Jordan that was planning to attack civilian targets - but it is also supplying jihadists, those who believe that they will wage holy war against the infidels, whether it be in Central Asia, in Chechnya, in Kashmir. All those things are taking place inside Afghanistan today, and it is of great concern.

Host: What is the interest of Pakistan in this, because Pakistan has long been a friend of the United States, and it was through Pakistan that the United States supplied those billions of dollars of aid to the Mujahedin when they were fighting the Soviets?

Inderfurth: This is another one of the tragedies
that we see coming out of the conflict there.

Afghanistan has been a country of concern to Pakistan for a long time. They are neighbors; they have a very long border. Pakistan is rightfully concerned about stability on its northern border. We don’t dispute that. And Pakistan has supported the Taliban. It is one of only three countries in the world that has officially endorsed and supported the Taliban. We believe that many of those that are now in positions in the Taliban have received their religious training in the madrassahs in Pakistan. This group, the Taliban, came to power promising order and stability, which is something that Pakistan wanted to see.

Unfortunately, the way they have imposed that order, their actions since taking control of most of the country, we believe is now not only threatening to others, but to Pakistan itself. And there is a concern about what is called the Talibanization, or making more radical, Pakistan itself. So we have urged Pakistan to use its influence on the Taliban to try to move it to the negotiating table for a negotiated settlement of the conflict, away from harboring terrorists, away from profiting from narcotics, and certainly away
from its treatment, its present harsh and abominable treatment, of women. And the Islam that is practiced by Pakistan is not that which is practiced in Afghanistan. There is a difference between militant Islam and moderate Islam. And what our concerns are, quite frankly, have little to do with Islam or the Afghan people, both of which we honor and respect. It has to do with the pollicies and practices of the Taleban.

Host: I just want to remind our audience for a moment that this is On the Line with Robert Reilly, and today we are discussing the crisis in Afghanistan with Karl Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs. Mr. Inderfurth, nonetheless, according to press reports, Pakistan continues to support the Taleban, and according to these same reports, the Northern Alliance is receiving military aid and equipment from Tajikistan and Russia. Does that comport with what you know?

Inderfurth: Clearly, both sides in the conflict are receiving support from outside powers. I think that that will continue, unfortunately, until the
parties themselves resolve that they will sit down at the table.

Host: What can induce them to do that?

Inderfurth: I think that one thing that could perhaps induce the Taliban is recognition that they are beginning to lose support internally.

Host: And why is that?

Inderfurth: Because I think that the imposing of their brand of order is increasingly resisted by many of the Afghan people. They are finding it very hard to find draftees to go fight up north. They are finding pockets of resistance in other parts of the country. They have had one of their governors assassinated not very long ago. They had the escape from jail of one of the leading opposition leaders in Herat. I think that they are seeing that, number one, they are losing support internally and, number two, they are increasingly isolated externally. The U-N Security Council has placed sanctions on the Taliban until they allow bin Laden to be brought to justice. And those
sanctions are not targeted against the Afghan people. They are very much specifically targeted against the Taleban, against the national Ariana airlines, against bank accounts, against assets. We have made it very clear that the sanctions are not intended to impede humanitarian aid to the Afghan people or private trade taking place, because the Afghan people have suffered enough. They do not need to suffer from the imposition of international sanctions.

Host: Speaking of the Taleban's loss of support inside Afghanistan, there was that rather extraordinary statement by the Taleban leader, Mullah Omar, that the drought was due to the Afghan people themselves, because of their lack of rigor in making their religious observances, and their griping about the Taleban rule. Do you have any sense of how such an accusation against the Afghan people was received by them?

Inderfurth: I don't have any solid information on that, but I think that is a further indication of how out of touch the Taleban is with the reality of Afghanistan today. The Afghan people are
suffering, and they are suffering because of the policies of the Taleban. And to suggest that the drought is a function of the Afghan people not being devout, I think, gives you a sense of how out of touch they are. Again, this is a tragedy that continues. I want to make one very important point, though, because the United States continues to try to do what we can in terms of humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. This year, the U-S contribution will be over one hundred million dollars, to include food and housing, education, health programs, assistance for clearing those deadly land mines which have been left over from past conflicts, [and] refugee assistance. Out of every ten dollars of food aid to Afghanistan from the international community, nine dollars comes from the U-S. We are trying to do what we can under very difficult circumstances, and we are working through very courageous international organizations. And of course, we are doing this at a time when the Taleban will often place greater restrictions on the provision of assistance to the Afghan people.

Host: If I may mention that bizarre episode from
earlier this summer, there were the bakeries in Kabul, operated by women, that provided bread to widows and orphans that were shut down by the Taleban. Subsequently, they were reopened because it seemed to create a scandal.

Inderfurth: It did and, fortunately, the Taleban reversed themselves very quickly, which we saw as a positive step. But of course, it followed a very negative, repressive action that they had taken. These are the people that are suffering the very most, the women, the widows and the rest. They can’t work; they can’t get an education; they can’t get adequate health care.

Host: They can’t leave their houses.

Inderfurth: They can’t leave their houses. Attempting to make over half of the Afghan population into non-persons is something that is incomprehensible not only to us, but to others, including many Muslim countries. So this is not the U-S versus the Taleban. This is the international community, of which we are an important part, but all of us expressing concerns
about what is happening in Afghanistan today.

Host: Is it too early to say that these sanctions are having any effect or that they may have an effect?

Inderfurth: So far, the Taliban has refused to comply with the U-N resolution that was adopted almost a year ago in October. We are looking at further measures in the Security Council. I think that there is a legitimate concern by those working in Afghanistan in the humanitarian organizations that we not consider any further measures that would make matters worse for the Afghan people. And I can assure you that anything that we do will not have that effect. But it will be time in October to review the record of non-compliance by the Taliban and to see what else could be done. I think perhaps an arms embargo, which would be very difficult to enforce. We are not suggesting that we can seal the borders here. But an arms embargo against the Taliban for its continued refusal to adhere to the U-N resolution — that may be something we look at, and perhaps further steps to isolate the Taliban leadership.
That is a possibility.

Host: Among the countries that have recognized the Taliban, you mentioned another U-S ally, Saudi Arabia.

Inderfurth: But they have downgraded their relations. And the three are Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia is very concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and very concerned that the Taliban has not been more forthcoming in terms of going to the negotiating table to find a solution. One thing that we are doing is trying to support all Afghan parties that are legitimately interested in bringing this conflict to an end peacefully, including some of those that live outside the country. There is the so-called Rome process that is organized around the former king of Afghanistan. There have been groups meeting in Cyprus and in Bonn. Many of them are calling for something called a Loya Jirga, which is a grand council, a traditional Afghan way of resolving differences and reaching some consensus. The United States is supporting that, as are others in
the international community, as just one part of a larger effort to see Afghanistan and a broad-based government established there, not one that is dominated by only one faction.

Host: Would you say that that is an objective that, even stated that generally, is shared by the six-plus-two group, meaning the six countries on the borders of Afghanistan, plus the United States and Russia? Do they all want that broad-based government?

Inderfurth: The objective is there of all in the so-called six-plus-two group. Unfortunately, that group has not been very effective in part because some members of that group, although they have said they want to see a broad based government established, they continue to provide one faction or the other with military assistance. So the group itself has some internal divisions, which has made it less than a successful U-N mechanism for resolving this. But at some point, the six-plus-two and the broader international community will all have to help. When I say that, I mean, in terms of helping, if there could be a peaceful
solution here, there should be some form of an
international conference to talk about
reconstruction and other forms of assistance,
because this country -- and I have been to it on
several occasions -- is completely devastated. It
looks like the photographs and the film that you
would see after World War Two, after the bombing
campaigns. You have the beggars on the streets.
You have little of the infrastructure of
electricity, of water. There has been no
reconstruction.

Host: In closing, may I ask you about the refugee
situation, because one of the Taleban claims to
legitimacy is that they control most of the
country and that people are living in peace. Yet
aren't there more than two million refugees still
outside the country and hundreds of thousands
displaced within it?

Inderfurth: Yes, the refugee situation is still
one of the continuing effects of that war of
liberation against the Soviet occupation. And many
refugees have simply refused to go home to
Afghanistan because of the continuing civil war.
So you still have very large refugee populations both in Pakistan and Iran. Iran is also suffering from the spillover effect of that. And Iran, quite frankly, has an important role that it can, and we hope will, play in bringing this conflict to an end. The Iranians can play a positive role there, as they have within the six-plus-two context. So the refugees are still there. The war continues and the tragedy continues. And we hope that, before long, it will come to an end.

Host: I'm afraid that's all the time we have this week. I would like to thank our guest -- Karl Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs -- for joining me to discuss the crisis in Afghanistan. This is Robert Reilly for On the Line.