

AFGHANISTAN: TRANSITION UNDER THREAT



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On **December 17-18, 2006**, a workshop was held near Waterloo, Ontario Canada to assess Afghanistan's progress since the end of the Taliban regime. Among the 35 participants at the workshop were diplomats, academics, aid workers, soldiers and practitioners with extensive experience in Afghanistan. This report will highlight some of the key areas of discussion.

Since 2001, there are many indications that Afghanistan has moved well beyond the instability marked by years of Soviet occupation, civil war, and after 1996, the installation of the Taliban regime in Kabul. Following the Bonn Agreement of December 2001, Afghans have negotiated a new constitution, elected a president and a new national legislature. Little-reported economic measures have been very positive. A viable banking system has emerged in a very short time. The Afghan currency is "ridiculously" stable, and the economic growth rate has been at an impressive 10% for the past five years. Micro-finance is now playing a much bigger role in economic development than ever before. Power lines are coming into Kabul, which will "revolutionize" the city's unstable electrical supply. In other major areas, there are important improvements. Six million Afghan children are now in school, two million of whom are girls. Health care has also become much more available: by one estimate 80% of the population now has access to basic health services.

But such developments have been overshadowed by growing concerns about the ability of the Afghan state to provide for its citizens, and a perception that the Afghan government and the international community has lost a great deal of momentum since the fall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001. As one participant noted, "the Afghanistan transition is on a knife's edge – it could go in a very adverse way indeed if changes do not occur very swiftly. If the transition fails . . . the degree of despair Afghans would feel would be almost unbearable."

From the outset, there appears to have been an international consensus that securing and rebuilding the country could be done "on the cheap." The faith in a "light footprint" in Afghanistan appealed to international leaders, but it translated into substantial under-funding. Just a small proportion of the funds committed at the Tokyo and Berlin donor conferences, for instance, have been delivered. On a per capita basis, development funding for Afghans is significantly lower than in other post-conflict areas, such as the former Yugoslavia.

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Yet even with the passing of the Afghanistan Compact in 2006, a perception among Afghans remains that the country's development priorities are too often determined outside of the country. The role of international consultants and NGOs has led to a type of development by international consensus, without adequate regard for Afghan opinions on development priorities. This has left the impression that development projects are disconnected from the Afghan national government – again providing little incentive to support the government. There also needs to be a more balanced regional distribution of development to avoid the perception that the south is being “rewarded” for its instability.

One organization that is attempting to redirect development funds within Afghanistan is the Peace Dividend Trust, a CIDA-funded operation which promotes the marketing of Afghan goods and services. (<http://www.peacedividendtrust.org>) In 2006, the Peace Dividend Trust redirected US \$36 million for the purchase of goods within Afghanistan. As noted by the group, “donor money should be spent in Afghanistan, not just on Afghanistan.” The participants often stressed private sector development as an untapped source of strength for Afghanistan. The Afghan people are determined to create a better life for themselves, and the international community would be well advised to increase their knowledge and support of internal capabilities and decrease their reliance on external sources for future contracts. Afghans should not be in unfair competition with outsiders for government and donor projects. Training and micro-finance could greatly assist the development of the private sector to be more competitive.

The tendency to resolve this problem by producing quick impact projects has led to greater public cynicism and disillusionment. Again, the governors and the national government should be seen as providing security and development initiatives, not the international community. Even so, the international community should support ‘conditionalities’ to ensure a competent Afghan administration that is relatively free from corruption and poor governance.

The participants heard that the Bonn agreement has been unable to overcome the enormous tasks of reestablishing the Afghan state and its institutions, drawing together fragmented groups of political elites and overcoming the massive social dislocation brought about by years of occupation and civil war. The present political system, based on a strong presidency, does not offer provincial governors enough resources or political power to create much regional cooperation or security. Tribal leaders, themselves reflecting enduring ethnic and tribal affiliations, are unimpressed with the power of the governors to make significant improvements, and remain doubtful about the benefits of democratic governance. The result is that the loyalty of the average Afghan remains firmly with the village leader, not the governor or the president.

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Spending priorities have also meant that some state institutions have been slow to rebuild, with pervasive political and social consequences. For example, a great deal of international energy has gone into rebuilding the Afghanistan National Army (ANA). This came at the expense of an effective police force, which could have helped advance the rule of law in Afghanistan, as well as effective judicial and penal systems. All of these problems are set within a country where millions of displaced people remain vulnerable to unemployment, poverty and the influences of the Taliban.

The Role of Pakistan

The strongest discussions from the workshop came over the question of insurgents training in Pakistan and then crossing the porous Afghan-Pakistan border. As one participant put the case emphatically: “There is no prospect of military victory without addressing . . . [the issue of Pakistan.]” The situation in Pakistan is complicated. On the one hand, Pakistan is an ally supported by the United States. Pakistani troops have captured or killed several high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives. On the other hand, the powerful Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) has been a blatant supporter of the Taliban in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the largely autonomous tribal belt that borders Afghanistan. Pro-Taliban Pashtun tribes in the FATA are accommodated by factions within President Musharaff’s government.

Pakistan should be acknowledged for the positive steps it has taken, including accepting Afghan refugees, troop contributions along the border regions, reconstruction efforts and trade ties. But a policy of quiet diplomacy by the international community towards Pakistan seems to have largely failed. The international community needs a much more robust and direct engagement with Pakistan. Continued trade with and assistance for Pakistan should, for example, be linked to real, not symbolic, support in defeating the Taliban.

The Growth of the Drug Economy

A great deal of discussion also centred on poppy production in Afghanistan. Poverty offers only a simplistic explanation for what is driving the drug economy. Participants argued that effective policing helps to limit the drug trade, but once the criminal activity begins, the farmers soon require criminal protection, taking them deeper into levels of criminal association and indebtedness.

The group also challenged the perception that drugs were not a problem under the Taliban. It was noted that in 1999 poppy production in Afghanistan under the Taliban reached then record levels, and that the Taliban continues to benefit enormously from poppy production and distribution. In Helmand and

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Kandahar provinces, where the Taliban continue to pose the greatest threat, increased poppy cultivation in 2006 represents nearly half of the country's opium production.¹

As crackdowns have occurred, the drug network has re-organized itself in what one participant called "a stunning example of tribal cooperation and communication." According to participants, spraying to destroy the crop would be a disaster since every health and agricultural problem would be blamed on the state's policy of spraying, thus further undermining government support.

There were no easy answers to the problem of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, which grew by 49% in 2006.² Some comment arose over recent proposals to legalize poppy production in Afghanistan. The general consensus was that this option would be ill-advised until a fully-functioning police force and judiciary is in place.

Canada's role in Afghanistan

Canada's role in Afghanistan formed a continual thread through the discussions. Canadian armed forces personnel were in Afghanistan very soon after the American-led invasion of the country, and Canadian soldiers have served both under the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OED) and as part of the UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Successive Canadian governments have committed Canadian troops to Afghanistan until 2009, making this mission the largest Canadian military operation since the Korean War. Since 2005, Canadian troops have been committed to the dangerous and fragile Kandahar province in the country's south.

As reports of Canadian casualties increased throughout 2006, the Canadian public debate reflected a concern that Canada was committed to military operations at the expense of ongoing development and diplomatic initiatives. Besides pledging over \$1 billion to Afghan development to 2010, Canada has also made major contributions to election monitoring; heavy weapons cantonment; a Strategic Advisory Team to the government in Kabul; and ammunitions destruction. One participant noted that "Canada is good at this", meaning that Canadians have demonstrated a unique ability to coordinate the work of our security, development, and diplomatic teams. Canadians have also shown respect for the Afghan people and its government, and continues to be a very popular force within Afghanistan.

¹ United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey*, September 2006: 10. <http://www.unodc.org/pdf/execsummaryafg.pdf>

² *Afghanistan Opium Survey*: 7.

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But Canada is just one of 36 countries making a military contribution in Afghanistan. Each has its own perceptions of what it can and cannot do. With an ongoing insurgency and the prospects of renewed fighting, some asked whether public opinion will accept Canada's continued contribution to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. No doubt similar questions are being asked in each of the capital cities of countries currently committed to Afghanistan. It is also a question being asked in Kabul.