

June 1, 2006

EDITORIAL

Afghanistan, Unraveling

Something has gone alarmingly wrong in Afghanistan, previously touted as the Bush administration's one quasi-successful venture in nation-building. Afghanistan's rising carnage still has not reached Iraq-like levels. But the trend is running in decidedly the wrong direction. Poorly thought-out American policies are at least partly to blame.

Unless Washington starts correcting its mistakes, parts of Afghanistan could start tumbling back toward the kind of anarchic chaos that once made such areas an attractive sanctuary for international terrorists like Osama bin Laden.

The warning signs go well beyond this week's deadly outbreak of anti-American rioting in Kabul — the worst violence there since the Taliban were evicted from Afghanistan's capital in 2001. And Kabul is widely acknowledged to be the most secure place in Afghanistan.

The past few months have also seen a stronger than expected Taliban military revival (with open help from supporters in Pakistan), a lengthening list of Afghan civilians accidentally killed in American military operations, a badly flawed United States-backed opium eradication program, and rising public disenchantment with Washington and its leading Afghan ally, President Hamid Karzai.

Afghans have long been renowned for their hostility toward foreign troops on their territory, as the 20th-century Russians and the 19th-century British learned the hard way. Until now they have made a conspicuous exception for the 21st-century Americans, who helped them shake off Taliban misrule and then promised their poor and war-shattered country an international rebuilding effort on the model of the post-World War II Marshall Plan.

More than four years later, Afghanistan's patience is running out. America's military presence is seen as narrowly focused on Washington's own agenda of hunting down Al Qaeda fighters and indifferent to Afghan civilian casualties and Afghanistan's own security needs.

Armed militia commanders still rule many areas. Some provincial cities and villages are back under the control of the same corrupt officials the Taliban won cheers for chasing out a decade ago. Farmers have fallen victim to a poppy eradication program unaccompanied by realistic plans for alternative economic development.

The answer is not for Washington to scale back legitimate American objectives. Pressing the fight against Al Qaeda is essential to America's own national security. Combating Afghan's growing narcotics trade is a vital precondition for any healthy economic development there.

What Washington needs to do is fight a lot smarter. It should begin talks at once with Afghanistan's government to arrive at a mutually

satisfactory agreement on basic ground rules governing American military personnel in their interactions with Afghan civilians. It should reinforce its anti-narcotics drive with development programs that allow farmers to find adequate replacement livelihoods in more constructive lines of work.

Most Afghans do not want to go back to the horrors of the recent past. Washington needs to re-enlist their support by demonstrating that it cares not just about Afghanistan's strategic geography, but also about a decent future for its people.

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
