

Settling Afghanistan

By A.G. Noorani

Afghanistan

THE distinguished French journalist and diplomat, Eric Rouleau, revealed, in an interview on April 24, 1993, that de Gaulle's advisers once suggested that he negotiate with "the moderates" in Algeria, known as 'Beni Oui, Oui' (yes, men).

The president's reply should be heeded by President Barack Obama as he contemplates parleys with "the moderates" in Afghanistan. "If you want to forge a lasting peace, you have to negotiate with those who are firing on your soldiers. You don't negotiate with those with no blood on their hands, because they are irrelevant."

Obama admitted on March 6 that the US is not winning the war in Afghanistan. The renegade Taliban commander Mullah Salam provides warning enough. Installed by the British, with President Karzai's support, as district governor in Musa Qala, in Helmand province, he earned popular contempt for his venality. If the aims are to establish peace and a legitimate government, exploiting "fissures" will not help.

The 'war on terror' has failed dismally in its objectives because it was based on a fundamental error: 9/11 was an act of terrorism by a non-state actor, Osama bin Laden; not an act of aggression by the Taliban regime of Mullah Omar. He wanted to be rid of the guest but without loss of face. David Ottaway and Joe Stephens of the *Los Angeles Times/Washington Post* reported at the end of October 2001 that a US-Taliban deal fell through because of the US "demand that bin Laden face trial in the US", not in a neutral country. The British MI5's chief Stella Rimington dubbed the US response "a huge overreaction". That criminal folly has laid a whole country waste.

If the aborted diplomacy is to be resumed now, it must reckon with the realities of today. Since 2005 Karzai has made plaintive appeals to the Taliban for talks. "I will myself go and contact them," he said on Sept 29, 2007, offering posts in the government and

participation in the polls due in 2009. On Nov 17, 2008, their deputy leader Mullah Brother said, "as long as foreign occupiers remain in Afghanistan we are not ready for talks".

They have relented recently thanks to the intercession of Abdullah Anas, a former friend of bin Laden, and to Saudi efforts. Both sides have defined their positions realistically, separating the immediate from the long-term goals such as the drafting of a new constitution and sharing of power. Immediately, the government seeks the Taliban's rejection of Al Qaeda, and end to attacks on schools, teachers, engineers and on roads. The Taliban demand an end to house searches, arrests and release of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and Bagram Air Base.

But, Carlotta Gall of *The New York Times* reports, the negotiators are waiting for Karzai "to secure guarantees of support for the process from foreign governments, and in particular the United States, before they could go further".

The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

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put the cart before the horse when she proposed, on March 5, "a big tent meeting with the parties who have a stake and an interest in Afghanistan" — members of Nato and Isaf (International Security Assistance Force), donors and "nations that have regional, strategic, and transit positions vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and international organisations". A Tower of Babel would be a more accurate description than "a big tent".

Who will represent Afghanistan? An international conference to guarantee Afghanistan's independence and neutrality as the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 does, would make sense only after the Afghans first agree on their own internal setup in negotiations free from duress.

Realistically, the Taliban cannot be defea-

ted militarily. But they know, as Anas said, that "it is a different situation from 1996 when they swept to power". They seek peace and a big share in power. What must the West's goal be? It is surely not governance of Afghanistan or bases there but credible guarantees against terrorist attacks on other countries and curbs on poppy cultivation. This requires western investment of money and sincerity.

The peace process in Northern Ireland acquired an impetus when on Nov 9, 1990 the secretary of state for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke made it clear that Britain "has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. Our role is to help, enable and encourage. Britain's purpose is not to occupy, oppress or exploit, but to ensure democratic debate and free choice" — by the Irish themselves. The declaration deeply impressed the IRA.

President Obama has said, "One of the things that I think we have to communicate in Afghanistan is that we have no interest or aspiration to be there over the long term."

That is not enough. He must go further and declare that the US has no desire to promote any party or regime in Afghanistan. Its interests are an end to terrorism, and a government set up by accord among the Afghans themselves. It will withdraw troops assuredly once accord is reached internally, sanctified by an international treaty to guarantee Afghanistan's independence.

Negotiations on these goals will succeed only if the US supports the process sincerely and confines itself strictly to the legitimate interests of the international community. The USSR and the US took turns to ruin Afghanistan. They and their friends must now unite to make amends to a great nation. The alternative is a widening of the war with unpredictable consequences for the entire region. The US will be least affected. It is we in the region who will suffer most. We must unite to demand conciliation and peace. ■

The writer is a lawyer and an author.