

Dealing with warlords

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FOLLOWING up on his interview with the *New York Times* on July 12, in which he had identified the warlords and their militias as the principal threat to security in Afghanistan and to the holding of fair elections President Karzai issued on the July 14 a decree calling for immediate disarmament. The disarmament decree, announced on Kabul Television, said collecting weapons and integrating armed groups into the ministry of national defence are fundamental conditions for peace and economic recovery.

It went on to say that, "Anyone who refuses to disarm or who remains allied with a private militia "will be considered disloyal and rebellious and, in accordance with the law of the country, will face the severest of punishments. It also warned that any armed group that remained outside the defence ministry, continued to recruit and arm people, or attempted to reinstate those already disbanded, would be punished. Any demobilized soldiers who try to rejoin their old units, or any units or individuals who try to retain heavy weapons would also be punished, it said.

President Karzai faces daunting odds created by the divisions within the country's body politic, by the gap between the rhetoric of the international community and the tardy delivery on their promises, by the continuing opposition from the Taliban, by the continued interference in Afghanistan by its neighbours some unintentional and some carefully planned, by the abject failure of the narcotics elimination campaign and the use of narcotic money by the warlords and the Taliban etc.

Many of these problems can be laid at the door of the warlords and in almost equal measure on the international community's unwillingness or inability to help the Karzai government to enforce its authority throughout the country. It is fair to say that had the Americans or the ISAF (and preferably both) insisted on the observance in letter and spirit of the Bonn agreement on the de-weaponization of Kabul and the removal of all militia from the city, many of these problems would not have arisen. Certainly the disarming of the war-

100,000. Ambassador Khalilzade a couple of weeks ago while conceding that only a small proportion of this militia had been disarmed and demobilized went on to state that the total number was exaggerated. He estimated that the total strength of warlord forces was not more than 40,000. Since then this figure or a figure of 50,000 has been repeated by most western media sources even while stating accurately that the total number of demobilized militia members was about 10,000.

There have been two notable exceptions. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on July 13 that no less a person than the defence minister, Marshal Fahim, had estimated that the warlords' militia was 100,000 strong. The second was the *New York Times* which in a July 15 editorial entitled "A Threatened Afghanistan" called for the disarming of the warlords before the

The Americans must assure their full cooperation to the ISAF in the demilitarization of Kabul. Nato must not send its troops for only eight weeks to assist in the peaceful completion of elections and then leave the battle against the warlords and the narcotics traffickers to the Afghan army. There is a feeling in Nato circles that the Americans do not really want action against the warlords.

elections and mentioned in this context that the militia commanded by Marshal Fahim by itself numbered 50,000. The *New York Times* does not get its figures wrong nor should there be any doubt about the authenticity of the figure that the *Christian Science Monitor* obtained from the defence minister.

How then should one interpret the figure given by Ambassador Khalilzade and subsequently used by unsuspecting reporters? The strong suspicion arises that Zalmay Khalilzade has excluded the militia of Marshal Fahim — the Shura-i-Nazar — and regards this as a regular force under the command of the ministry of defence. A similar suspicion is aroused by the reference in the decree to the offending militias being "any armed group that remained outside the defence ministry" and to the assertion in the decree that "integrating armed groups into the ministry of national defence" is a fundamental condition for the restoration of harmony and economic recovery.

Such suspicions are further reinforced by

istered for voting out of a potential total of 10 million. Yet, twenty-four hours later he was told and he repeated the figure that over seven million voters had been registered.

How did this happen when the UN is still short of funds and when its registration drive has been slowed in the south and southeast by renewed Taliban attacks on election officials and voters? Second, while I do not have province-wise figures it is reasonable to assume that much of the registration of voters in the relatively peaceful north had been completed at least a couple of weeks ago. The mind boggles at accepting the fact that the current rapid accretion in figures is occurring in the south and southeast. It boggles further at accepting that the percentage of registered women voters has risen from 39 per cent to 40 per cent, when it is known that the Pushtun more so than the Tajik or Uzbek would try and keep women from registering.

I fear that, a lot of fictitious persons are being registered in the north. If this is carried further as some of the Tajik leaders would no doubt like the final count of registered voters may see the Pushtuns being replaced by the Tajiks as the plurality in Afghanistan. This is not fanciful exaggeration but, I believe, a reasonable extrapolation.

The American administration is looking for a foreign policy success. Perhaps it believes that the shenanigans of this nature will ensure that there is a peaceful presidential election in Afghanistan and this can be trumpeted in the American election campaign as the bringing of Afghanistan into the comity of democratic nations with a democratically elected president. Even if this objective is achieved and it is hard to see how the Pushtun plurality if not majority will allow an election to be peaceful in these circumstances. The aftermath will be a disaster for the unity of Afghanistan.

One can only hope that this is not the case. Admittedly President Bush is under the gun for his Iraq policy. Admittedly he needs some foreign policy success to offset the scathing criticism to which he is now being subjected. But a cooked election in Afghanistan will bring him only a marginal advantage if any. The game is not worth the candle.

Statesmanship and the battle against terrorism, by which President Bush theoretically lays so much store, require a more cautious approach. President Karzai's

arisen. Certainly the disarming of the warlords in the north and west would not have posed a problem and in all probability the Taliban would not have been able to retain any substantial measure of support in the south and south-east of the country.

Carrying further the might-have-beens had President Bush not diverted attention and material and manpower resources to Iraq the problems in Afghanistan would not have acquired their present proportions.

One assumes that President Karzai's present decree has been issued not on the strength of his fledgling army but on the strength of assurances from the Americans that they would provide the force needed to bring recalcitrant warlords in line. As a well wisher of Afghanistan and as an admiring observer of President Karzai's efforts to bring a semblance of order to his country one can only welcome and applaud this decree. But this applause and endorsement is conditional on whether the decree is really aimed at disarming all warlords and securing the dewatering of Kabul. This question arises because there are certain disquieting facets in statements made by Ambassador Khalilzade and in the decree itself.

It has been the accepted conventional wisdom based on observations by western correspondents and on statements by Afghan officials that the total number of militia under the control of warlords was

Such suspicions are further reinforced by the fact that the decree makes no mention of the demilitarization of Kabul. This was a fundamental requirement of the Bonn Agreement and has not been implemented despite the lapse of more than two years. The last ISAF commander was quite categorical in asserting that the blame for ISAF's failure to achieve this was to be laid squarely at the door of the defence ministry and Marshal Fahim.

Earlier there had been reports that President Karzai was negotiating with the Northern Alliance warlords and in return for their support in the elections was promising them both high office in his government and a large measure of autonomy in the areas they controlled. President Karzai had not denied these meetings but had denied making any such deals. If, however, the foregoing interpretation of the Khalilzade statement and the language of the decree is correct it would seem that deals have indeed been made, and worse still, that they have been made under American pressure or with American blessings.

There are other disquieting features about events in Afghanistan. Deputy Secretary Armitage is usually kept very well briefed about Afghan developments, more so when he is visiting the region. Yet while he was in Pakistan he spoke of the fact that 6.5 million Afghans had been reg-

ally lays so much store, require a more sagacious approach. President Karzai's decree must be made applicable to all militia including the militia of Marshal Fahim, Sayaf, Atta Mohammad, Dostum, Ismail, Daud, Hazrat Ali and others. The decree must recognize as forces of the Afghan defence ministry only the 12000 odd men that comprise the Afghan army.

The Americans must assure the ISAF that it would have their full cooperation for the demilitarization of Kabul. Nato must also be told that it is unacceptable for Nato to say that it will send troops for only eight weeks to assist in the peaceful completion of elections and that it would leave the battle against the warlords and the narcotics traffickers to the Afghan army. There is a feeling in Nato circles that the Americans do not really want actions against the warlords and are not concerned about narcotics. This must not be allowed to stand.

If this approach requires the postponement of elections then let it be so. President Bush would probably derive more political advantage from initiating a successful campaign against the Afghan warlords than he would from a dubious Afghan presidential election. Even if he does not, he must eschew what will be a small political advantage and do what is right for the long suffering Afghan people.

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