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By Richard Holbrooke

Pakistan is giving sanctuary to the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the east while Iran is playing a stabilising role in the west

IN a region of Pakistan almost unknown to most Americans, a sort of failed mini-state offering sanctuary to our greatest enemies has arisen. It is a smaller version of what Afghanistan was before Sept 11, 2001, and it poses a direct threat to vital American national security interests.

Waziristan and North-West Frontier Province, where Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leader Mullah Omar are hiding, have become a major sanctuary in which the Taliban and Al Qaeda train, recruit, rest and prepare for the next attacks on US, NATO and Afghan forces inside Afghanistan. The most recent, on March 29, resulted in the deaths of one American and one Canadian soldier. More attacks must be expected.

For the United States, the dilemma is huge. There is no chance that the training of the Afghan army and police will produce a force able to defend itself as long as the Taliban has sanctuary in Pakistan. Other than "hot pursuit", which is already permitted, the United States cannot invade Waziristan; such an operation would have little chance of success and would create an enormous crisis in US relations with Pakistan. Leave Afghanistan, and the

Taliban will return, along with bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The only viable choice is to stay, in order to deny most of the country to the enemy. That means an indefinite US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan. No US official will say it publicly, but the conclusion is clear: We will be in Afghanistan for a very long time, much longer than we will remain in Iraq.

The Afghans have a simple solution to the sanctuary problem: Washington should tell Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, that he must clean out the border areas — or else. The Pakistanis have an equally simple response: They are doing the best they can in a historically lawless tribal area and, in cooperation with the Americans, have already arrested or killed hundreds of terrorists. The Afghans, who deeply distrust Musharraf, do not believe this; while grate-

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ful to the United States for freeing them from the hated Taliban, they think Washington is too easy on Pakistan, in part to make up for Pakistan's anger at the recent nuclear deal with India.

The biggest programme of Washington and the European Union is the drug eradication effort. Almost 90 percent of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan. Official US and UN reports claim that last year's programmes reduced poppy production by 4 percent — at a cost of close to \$1 billion. That means the United States spent more than the entire national budget of Afghanistan to accomplish essentially nothing! Yet the failed drug policy is continuing

long road ahead

without significant change.

If the drug programme is the biggest failure, American-inspired efforts to give the women of Afghanistan a chance for a better life have the greatest potential. First lady Laura Bush deserves credit for making this a signature issue. Insisting that more than 25 percent of the seats in the National Assembly be reserved for women was risky but inspired. I met with 10 female legislators; they were more animated and more excited about their country than any of the men. If they form a women's caucus, a process that has started with encouragement from the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, they will become a powerful force for progress.

But let no one confuse progress for women at the higher levels (there is even one female provincial governor) with a significant

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change for the average girl or woman. Each time Afghanistan tried to advance the status of women, the men reacted with a strong backlash. They will do so again. Progress is distant and virtually meaningless to rural women. That striking symbol of Afghanistan, the head-to-toe covering of women that is known as the *burqa*, remains widely used everywhere. One vivacious legislator on the provincial council in Herat told me that while she did not like the *burqa*, she dared not let her "beautiful" 15-year-old daughter out without it. "The *burqa*," she said, "is my weapon." And self-immolation, forced on women by their families if they violate strict codes of conduct, is actually on the rise.

Herat, the only major city in the west, highlights the complexities of Afghanistan. Less than 100 miles from the Iranian border, it is enjoying an economic boom and almost no Taliban threat. But the economy is fuelled in large part by Iran, which is visibly gaining economic and political influence in the region. So here is the ultimate irony of a situation filled with irony: Our "strategic ally" (in President Bush's phrase) in Pakistan is giving sanctuary to the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the east, while an "axis of evil" country is playing a stabilising role in the west. In fact, of course, Iran is pursuing the same long-term strategic goal there as it does everywhere: to create a Shiite region stretching from Lebanon as far east as possible. Iran's growing strength in Herat can only heighten Tehran's sense that events are going its way these days.

With so much at stake, it is surprising that the administration asked for a pittance (about \$40 million) for Afghan reconstruction in its recent supplemental, after the State Department and the US Embassy requested about 10 times as much. Still worse, Congress compounded the lowered funding request by cutting the appropriation to \$4 million.

Let us hope that these cuts were simply an aberration caused by Hurricane Katrina and bureaucratic confusion. Afghanistan will be difficult, and we must do a much better job on the ground. There is always a risk that our presence will, over time, create an Iraq-like anti-American xenophobia (in a country with a famously xenophobic history). But Afghanistan is not Iraq. Denying the country to our enemies is not a long-term strategy, but it is essential in the current phase of history, especially as Iraq stumbles towards an increasingly bleak future. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST

The writer is former US ambassador to the United Nations