

The case for withd



By Tariq Ali

The Taliban is growing and creating new alliances not because its sectarian religious practices have become popular, but because it is the only available umbrella for national liberation

IT is Year 6 of the UN-backed NATO occupation of Afghanistan, a joint US/EU mission. On 27 February there was an attempted assassination of Dick Cheney by Taliban suicide bombers while he was visiting the 'secure' US air base at Bagram (once an equally secure Soviet air base during an earlier conflict). Two US soldiers and a mercenary ('contractor') died in the attack, as did twenty other people working at the base. This episode alone should have concentrated the US Vice-President's mind on the scale of the Afghan debacle. In 2006 the casualty

rates rose substantially and NATO troops lost forty-six soldiers in clashes with the Islamic resistance or shot-down helicopters.

The insurgents now control at least twenty districts in the Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan provinces where NATO troops have replaced US soldiers. And it is hardly a secret that many officials in these zones are closet supporters of the guerrilla fighters. The situation is out of control. At the beginning of this war Mrs Bush and Mrs Blair appeared on numerous TV and radio shows claiming that the aim of the war was to liberate Afghan women. Try repeating that today and the women will spit in your face.

Who is responsible for this disaster? Why is the country still subjugated? What are Washington's strategic goals in the region? What is the function of NATO? And how long can any country remain occupied against the will of a majority of its people?

Few tears were shed in Afghanistan and elsewhere when the Taliban fell, the hopes aroused by Western demagoguery did not last too long. It soon became clear that the new transplanted elite would cream off a bulk of the foreign aid and create its own criminal networks of graft and patronage. The people suffered. A mud cottage with a thatched roof to house a family of homeless refugees costs fewer than five

thousand dollars. How many have been built? Hardly any. There are reports each year of hundreds of shelter-less Afghans freezing to death each winter.

Instead a quick-fix election was organised at high cost by Western PR firms and essentially for the benefit of Western public opinion. The results failed to bolster support for NATO inside the country. Hamid Karzai the puppet President, symbolised his own isolation and instinct for self-preservation by refusing to be guarded by a security detail from his own ethnic Pashtun base.

In the event of a NATO withdrawal will be vital in guaranteeing religious diversity. The NATO has revived the Taliban

He wanted tough, Terminator look-alike US marines and was granted them.

Might Afghanistan have been made more secure by a limited Marshall-Plan style intervention? It is, of course, possible that the construction of free schools and hospitals, subsidised homes for the poor and the rebuilding of the social infrastructure that was destroyed after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 could have stabilised the country. It would also

drawal from Afghanistan

have needed state help to agriculture and cottage industries to reduce the dependence on poppy farming.

90 percent of the world's opium production is based in Afghanistan. UN estimates suggest that heroin accounts for 52 percent of the impoverished country's gross domestic product and the opium sector of agriculture continues to grow apace.

All this would have required a strong state and a different world order. Only a slightly crazed utopian could have expected NATO countries, busy

land prices reached a high point after the Occupation since the occupiers and their camp followers had to live in the style to which they had become accustomed. Karzai's colleagues built their large villas, protected by NATO troops and in full view of the poor.

Add to this that Karzai's younger brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, has become one of the largest drug barons in the country. At a recent meeting with Pakistan's President, when Karzai was bleating on about Pakistan's inability to stop cross-border smuggling, General

region as a fully-fledged imperial occupation. The Taliban is growing and creating new alliances not because its sectarian religious practices have become popular, but because it is the only available umbrella for national liberation. As the British and Russians discovered to their cost in the preceding two centuries, Afghans never liked being occupied.

There is no way NATO can win this war now. Sending more troops will lead to more deaths. And full-scale battles will destabilise neighbouring Pakistan.

Musharraf has already taken the rap for an air raid on a Muslim school in Pakistan. Dozens of children were killed and the Islamists in Pakistan organised mass street protests. Insiders suggest that the 'pre-emptive' raid was, in fact, carried out by US war planes who were supposedly targeting a terrorist base, but the Pakistan government thought it better they took the responsibility to avoid an explosion of anti-American anger.

NATO's failure cannot be blamed on the Pakistani government. If anything, the war in Afghanistan has created a critical situation in two Pakistani provinces. The Pashtun majority in Afghanistan has always had close links to its fellow Pashtuns in Pakistan. The border was an imposition by the British Empire and it has always been porous. Attired in Pashtun clothes I crossed it

withdrawal Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian states seeing a confederal constitution that respects ethnic and NATO occupation has not made this task easy. Its failure and increasingly the Pashtuns are uniting behind it

privatising and deregulating their own countries, to embark on enlightened social experiments abroad.

And so elite corruption grew like an untreated tumour. Western funds designed to aid some reconstruction were siphoned off to build fancy homes for their native enforcers. In Year 2 of the Occupation there was a gigantic housing scandal. Cabinet ministers awarded themselves and favoured cronies prime real estate in Kabul where

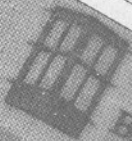
Musharraf suggested that perhaps Karzai should set an example by bringing his sibling under control.

While economic conditions failed to improve, NATO military strikes often targeted innocent civilians leading to violent anti-American protests in the Afghan capital last year. What was initially viewed by some locals as a necessary police action against Al Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks is now perceived by a growing majority in the entire

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