

India drawn deeper into Afgha

By Sudha Ramachandran

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INDIA's presence and influence in Afghanistan has come under fire again. While an Indian road construction project was attacked by suspected Taliban militants a little over a week ago, Indian television serials are being taken off the air in Afghanistan under pressure from religious conservatives.

In the years since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India's presence in Afghanistan has grown dramatically. India does not have a military presence in Afghanistan, but it does play a significant role in the country's reconstruction and has won support across Afghanistan's ethnic groups.

India's proximity to the Hamid Karzai government and growing India-Afghanistan co-operation has raised hackles among the Taliban and in Pakistan.

On Monday, an Indian working for a Dubai-based firm was kidnapped in Herat province, while on April 12 a convoy of India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO), which is engaged in a road construction project, was attacked by the Taliban. The suicide attack left two BRO personnel dead and seven others, including two Afghans employed on the project, injured.

BRO is building a 218-kilometer road linking Delaram to Zaranj, which

lies on Afghanistan's border with Iran.

The attack on the BRO came close on the heels of Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak's week-long visit to India, during which he requested the Indian government to provide Afghan soldiers with counter-insurgency training. He also asked India for support in maintaining Afghanistan's Soviet-era helicopter gunships. Wardak visited the Indian Air Force's training command at Bangalore and the army's 15 Corps headquarters in Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir, which would have undoubtedly ruffled feathers in Islamabad, where the Pakistan government disputes India's rights to that territory.

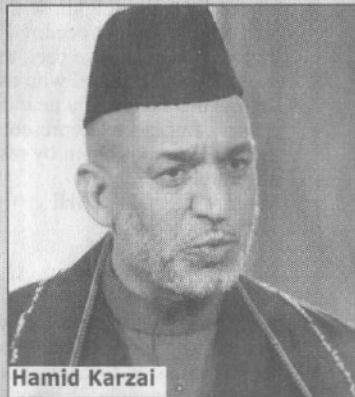
Even if the attack on the BRO convoy in Afghanistan's Nimroz province was not an angry reaction from the Taliban to Wardak's visit to India, it was at the least a reaction to India's growing influence in Afghanistan.

The Zaranj-Delaram road project has been in their cross-hairs for a while. The project has come under attack at least a dozen times and the recent one is the third in which Indian personnel on the project have been killed.

In November 2005, Ramankutty Maniyappan, a 36-year old driver working with the BRO, was taken hostage then beheaded. In January this year, a suicide attack on a BRO convoy resulted in the death of two personnel of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, which are providing security to BRO personnel in Afghanistan. About 56 Afghan security personnel are said to have lost their lives guarding Indian engineers and crew on

this road project.

There have been Indian casualties in other projects in Afghanistan. In 2003, an Indian engineer working for an Afghan telecom company was shot dead. The same year, two Indians employed by an Indian company and contracted by an American firm on a highway construction project were abducted and subsequently released. In 2006, an Indian national working for a Bahraini company was abducted and then beheaded.



Hamid Karzai

Of all India's projects in Afghanistan, the Zaranj-Delaram road triggers the most unease in Pakistan. This is because the route will reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan and increase India's land access to Afghanistan.

Goods to landlocked Afghanistan, including supplies for North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation forces and international non-governmental Organisations stationed there, currently come through Pakistani ports and then wind their way overland through the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan.

The Zaranj-Delaram road will link Afghanistan's Garland Highway to the Iran border through the Milak Bridge and onwards by rail and road to Iran's Chahbahar port, giving Afghanistan a shorter option to that than through Pakistan to the sea.

What adds to the annoyance of the Taliban and Pakistan is that India's involvement in Afghanistan - unlike that of other countries there - is winning it support among people.

India is Afghanistan's fifth-largest bilateral donor and is involved in an array of projects in the country. It is constructing roads and setting up power transmission lines, sinking tube wells and building schools, hospitals and public toilets. It is constructing the Afghan parliament build-

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For India, the Zaranj-Delaram road will provide it overland access though Iran not just to Afghanistan but across Afghanistan.

It is this expanding Indian access that the Taliban and its Pakistani backers are seeking to end with their intimidation and violence.

ing and is engaged in repair and construction of the Salma dam project in Herat province. It has gifted Afghanistan with buses and is providing food assistance. It has trained civil servants and police and is extending scholarships to Afghan students to study in India.

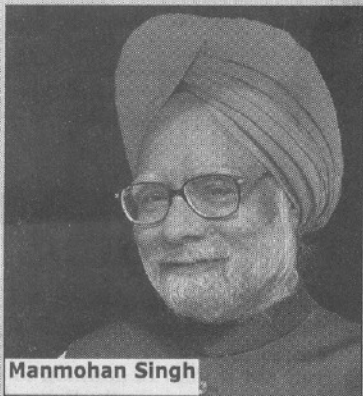
Like other donors, India has fallen

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short on handing out funds it pledged, disbursing only a third of the US 750 million dollar pledged for the 2002-09 period.

However, its involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction has been quite different from that of other countries, providing the kind of help Afghans want and not merely extending assistance it thinks Afghanistan needs or foisting on the country projects New Delhi thinks are good for Afghanistan.

While India's role in Afghanistan's



Manmohan Singh

reconstruction has won it appreciation among the locals, religious conservatives do not seem to be impressed with its impact. They have called for a ban on Indian television soaps, which are hugely popular among Afghans. Six Indian serials are currently being televised, but the Afghan government - under pressure from hardline clerics - has ordered tele-

vision stations to take them off air on the grounds that they are "un-Islamic".

Neither the general deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan nor specific attacks on Indian project personnel there is likely to persuade India to reduce its presence or to dilute its commitment to projects. On the contrary, it could result in India stepping up its role in Afghanistan beyond the current reconstruction and development work.

Following his meeting with Wardak, India's Defence Minister A K Antony ruled out military involvement in Afghanistan. But India can be expected to take up the counter-insurgency training of Afghan soldiers. This will bring it another step closer to military engagement of the Taliban.

Thanks to Pakistan's objections to an Indian military role in Afghanistan, India was forced to stay out of the Afghan military quagmire. But that could change.

There are sections in India that are keen to send troops to Afghanistan to take on the Taliban, this at a time when even the erstwhile Northern Alliance is reaching out to the Taliban.

A bigger military role will only put India in a tighter embrace with the failed US-led military misadventure in Afghanistan. It will make Indian personnel in Afghanistan more vulnerable to violence. And more importantly, it would erode the many gains made over the past few years with regard to earning public goodwill there. **COURTESY ASIA TIMES**

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