

'War on terror': The s

By Simon Jenkins

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THIS weekend an army of 11,000 troops, including Britons, is roaming the mountains of southern Afghanistan trying to kill or capture the Taliban. Their professed aim is "to establish conditions" in which government institutions and NGOs can "begin the real work that needs to be done". Operation Mountain Thrust is the last American venture in the country before NATO takes over next month under British leadership.

The operation, coming after four such failed endeavours, is a show not of force but of face. When the troops return to the security of Kabul they will leave behind a few hundred corpses, some destroyed villages, a thousand new Taliban recruits and tens of thousands of angered and disillusioned Afghans. There is nothing new under the Afghan sun.

The British deployment to Helmand, in southern Afghanistan, makes no sense and visiting Kabul has only made me sure of it. This is quite different from Iraq, where the British Army is embarked on a delicate exercise of extraction.

Helmand is an exercise of insertion and has already cost a British life. About £1 billion is being spent on a base in the

desert. Nobody in London or Kabul can offer a clear mission statement for the 3,300 soldiers garrisoning it, only implausible remarks about "establishing the preconditions for nation building".

David Richards, the ebullient British general in Kabul, puts the best possible face on things. To emphasise the newness of his 'strategy he derides the Pentagon's four-year-old Operation Enduring Freedom as counter-productive and stresses the anarchy into which it has allowed Afghanistan to fall: 80 percent of the country is no longer under the control of Kabul.

At least American policy had clarity. As Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor make plain in *Cobra II*, their recent study of the war on terror, to Washington Afghanistan was never like Iraq. It was not about neocon nation building but a hunt to find Osama Bin Laden, "albeit with the wrong search party". Once a puppet ruler had been found in Hamid Karzai, America was happy to dump the job of propping him up on Britain and others. It even abandoned poppy eradication as a reward to the drug lords for their (temporary) support. The policy was cynical but it was a policy: punch hard and get out.

Richards is a victim of Britain's post-imperial romanticism. He must go back in. His plan is for "Malayan inkspots" across the country, holding isolated villages long enough for local leaders to win support against insurgents. There will be no more American-style

bombing of villages and wedding parties. Taliban units will be pursued and destroyed, but anti-Taliban areas will be rewarded with dollops of money.

British troops will not eradicate poppies, which is impossible, but eliminate the occasional shipment or middle-man (thereby making the crop even more valuable). Richards hopes this will bring the "lost" southern provinces over to Kabul's side. He shrugs at how this can possibly work with just 3,300 British troops and some reluctant Canadians and Dutch. He is the

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The western idea that Kabul can, with a handful of foreign mercenaries, assert a control over Afghanistan that it has not enjoyed in history is bizarre. Such ideas gain currency only when foreign policy departs the national interest and good sense vanishes in clouds of international do-goodery.

Kabul is now a statelet crammed with the cosmopolitan staff of massed United Nations development agencies and 800 NGOs, many withdrawn from an unsafe hinterland. They are guarded by a garrison of 36 nations under a

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NATO umbrella, said to be operating with 71 different rules of engagement. They form an astonishing babble of adventurers, mercenaries, idealists and philanthropists. Their joking ambition is to create "not an Afghanistan run by Swedes but a Sweden run by Afghans".

It is the sort of armchair interventionism ridiculed by Rory Stewart in his new book *Occupational Hazards*. As he picks his way across some mortar-strewn, bloodstained province in Iraq, he receives e-mails from Baghdad's green zone requesting

Richards's best bet is in the more friendly north.

Karzai is clearly distancing himself from the foreigners crowding his outer office. His coalition is stuffed with so many warlords, or "commanders", that a 2005 UN report had to be suppressed for fear of revealing their record of torture, murder and worse. Last month he further infuriated the foreign community by appointing 13 provincial police chiefs who were openly known as criminals, drug runners and thugs. All were tribal nominees.

now financing drug runners, warlords, murderers and torturers. That's overseas aid for you.

I see no alternative to what Karzai is doing. He was a provincial ruler and knows which way the wind is blowing. If NATO will not put 150,000 troops into Kandahar and Helmand, then he must rely on realpolitik and live with the Taliban in the south. Unlike Al Qaeda they are Afghans, not Arabs, and their hotheads may have cooled. Karzai must cut deals with territorial power, as Afghan rulers have done since time immemorial. He can never make his country Sweden, but he might at least make it Pakistan.

NATO troops remaining in and round Kabul may be able to protect Karzai long enough for him to piece together some such confederation, sharing power with provincial leaders prospering from the booming narcoculture (now 80 percent of total Afghan exports). This may be beyond the tolerance of donor countries but it is the best hope of stabilising a country that will otherwise revert to civil war.

The view taken by the coalition in Kabul so far — as by the Americans in Baghdad — is that the only thing "these people understand is force". Yet massive force has been deployed to bring Afghanistan to heel — costing \$18 billion a year — and all that has been achieved is thousands of deaths. Afghanistan is now less safe than at any time since the Taliban ruled and as open

as ever to the practice of terror.

The benign reincarnation of Britain's Victorian "kings of the Punjab" as marine colonels and earnest NGOs has not worked. The British empire was for life, not for re-election. As Lawrence of Arabia wrote of these parts, "Only when we learn to rule without soldiers will we be safe." We have not so learnt.

The one obligation that the West owes the Muslim world is rationality. Intelligence from this region all indicates that its leaders expect western soldiers to go home soon. Democracies have no stomach for a long haul. Shrewd local rulers can see that the fundamentalists are reasserting their power and they must shift allegiance accordingly. Drug and oil "protection" money is flowing towards Islamic nationalist groups, including from Gulf and Saudi "charities". Tribes must guard their interests against whatever the future holds.

Last week in Shanghai the leaders of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan met under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This little-reported group was intended to cement an alliance against further western intervention in Asia. So far, so understandable. But if western diplomacy allows that cement to harden into something more sinister, the "war on terror" will have been the stupidest mistake in history. COURTESY LONDON TIMES

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news of his gender awareness seminar and his democracy enhancement project.

Such is the raw material of Richards's Afghan crusade, regarded by most observers as the West's last attempt at constructive engagement in the region. He is answerable not to London but to Karzai and is desperate to downplay the significance of the Helmand operation in the south. All southern and eastern provinces straddling the border are awash in insurgency and instability. The most that any outside army can hope to achieve is to hold a few exemplary villages for a few exemplary days.

Last Sunday Karzai went one worse and said he was recognising and paying (with western money) various provincial warlords "to fight the Taliban". This sabotaged the West's disarmament programme and put some 120,000 militiamen under government arms. To appease western diplomats Karzai called them community policemen. One beneficiary was Sher Muhammad Akhonzada, sacked last year as governor of British-occupied Helmand for opium running. It was like sacking a Kuwaiti sheikh for selling oil. His private army is some 500 strong. British taxpayers are