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AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES AND CURRENT DANGERS

Fausto Biloslavo

NATO enlargement to the South and East

The expansion of the ISAF mission, under the NATO command in Afghanistan, is continuing with the placing of fresh troops from England (3,300 men), Canada (2,300), and Holland (1,400). *The third phase, which will see NATO assume command in the southwest of the country, in the "hot" provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan, should conclude in July.*

The supreme commander of the alliance, General James Jones, has announced that "phase four" of the expansion in the south-eastern part of Afghanistan could be completed "by the end of the month of August". Although this may be overly optimistic, the fact is that the American troops will simply remain in the eastern part of the country and pass from the Enduring Freedom mission to the ISAF. They will become the biggest body of US troops to be under the command of a non-American and it will mean that the ISAF contingent reaches between 23 and 25 thousand men, spread throughout Afghanistan.

As became clear from the very start of the enlargement, a problem over the double ISAF-Enduring Freedom command structures may arise. For the moment, they will remain separate until the English take command of the NATO forces in Kabul in what will be an extremely delicate phase.

The rise in the battles with the anti-government forces

Each spring the remaining Taleban and members of Al Qaida step up the guerrilla warfare and their terrorist attacks. This year however, they have launched a much bigger military offensive. The clandestine leaders of the forces hostile to the international coalition (Talebans, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb i Islami and the rump of Al Qaida) have decided to intensify the offensive to coincide with the enlargement of the NATO mission in the South. They probably hope that the English, Canadian and Dutch troops will be "softer" and less inclined to fight than the Americans.

There have been some 1,100 victims including around 50 soldiers from the international forces since the beginning of the year, and this is proportionally the highest number over six months since 2001. The USA has carried out 340 air raids in Afghanistan in the past three months. This is more than double the 160 launched over the same period in Iraq. The Afghan defence minister, Rahim Wardak, maintains that the increase can be linked to the USA handing over to the NATO forces: "As public opinion in various European countries is sensitive to what is happening in Afghanistan and as this causes political problems, the Taleban have chosen this moment to intensify their activities and to influence foreign public opinion".

Taleban propaganda claims that they have 12,000 men in their ranks but NATO reckons

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the number is about half this. The tactic of suicide terrorist attacks, which is not part of the Afghan tradition or mentality, has been carried over from last year. Despite a 200% increase compared to 2004 and a rhythm of between 1 and 3 kamikaze attacks per week, the effects are for the most part propagandistic. The kamikaze attacks in Afghanistan, unlike those in Iraq, are, for the most part, militarily and operationally, failures. The recruits, ready for "martyrdom" are probably not adequately trained and many of them explode before they reach their target. *New techniques for constructing and using far more deadly explosive traps (IED) have, however, recently been imported from Iraq.*

Zalmi Rassoul, National security advisor to Afghan president Hamid Karzai, claims that the majority of kamikaze terrorists, who blew themselves up in recent months, were from nearby Pakistan. There is no doubt that Hekmatyar, the Taleban, and the Al Qaida rump all count on the tribal areas of the Pakistan hinterland which are difficult for Islamabad to control. "The Taleban injured in Afghanistan are regularly treated in Pakistani hospitals. Training camps and "factories" for bombs and for the religious and psychological training of suicide attackers are located outside Afghan territory", claims Rassoul.

The deeper problem, however, is that the force of arms will never be enough in Afghanistan and especially in the southern areas dominated by the Pashun, the ethnic base of the Taleban. The "hearts and minds" of the population must be won over.

The weakening of President Hamid Karzai

The position of Afghan President Hamid Karzai is weakening because of the rapid increase in fighting in the south, the civil disorder which he himself has caused in Kabul, and the growing friction with the commanding officers of the international troops. Karzai has asked the international community to re-examine their approach to anti-guerrilla and anti-terrorist operations in the country. "It is not acceptable that over the past three or four weeks there have been between 500 and 600 victims. Even if they are Taleban, they are still children of this land", he said in a June press conference. The estimate of victims is clearly exaggerated but the hardline approach, especially of the Americans, remains a problem.

In order to underline his point, Karzai summoned General David Richards, ISAF mission commander and General Karl W. Eikenberry, commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, as well as the British, Canadian and Dutch ambassadors who represent the countries most deeply involved in the NATO expansion to the South.

Karzai is protesting with the foreign commanders because he is aware his domestic position is weakening and that public opinion is swinging away from him in the light of unkept promises connected with increased security and economic development. The situation reached a crisis point with the May 29 protests in the capital, the pretext for which was a road accident involving a vehicle belonging to the American contingent.

It should be remembered, however, that there are no credible alternatives to Karzai, who should be able to overcome this stalled phase by tackling the problem of the age-old disagreements between the Pashun, who hold a relative majority in the country and the

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Tajik, the second largest ethnic grouping. This division is reflected in the current political situation in the new groupings in parliament. *An alliance between Karzai, who is a Pashtun, and his rival Yunes Qanooni, the Tajik president of the lower house of parliament, should not be ruled out in the light of a national political project to overcome ethnic barriers.*

The opium threat

Afghan opium production is a key factor in the difficult relationship between stability and instability in this country at the crossroads of Asia. More than a "narco-state", Afghanistan has a "narco-economy". Latest estimates show that Afghan poppy production is 87% of the world total, at some four thousand tons per year. This business is worth 2.8 billion dollars, 560 million of which go to the local farmers. The income from this drugs traffic represents 60% of gross domestic product.

Poppy cultivations fell by 21% in 2005 but the particular climatic conditions allowed for a great harvest in the poppy growing zones, which expanded into the north of the country. This meant that the final production only fell a little, from 4,200 tons to 4,100. The number of refineries which turn opium into heroin in Afghanistan increased.

The problem is that narcotics trafficking not only makes organised crime rich, and this is one of the Afghans' main worries, but that the "narco-economy" permits the local warlords to maintain their militias and their power and thus remain an endemic factor of instability for the central government. *The shipping of loads of opium to Pakistan is only possible if a toll is paid to the anti-governmental forces that have infested the Southern and Northern parts of Afghanistan. Sometimes the guerrilla fighters themselves transport the opium and exchange it in the tribal zones for arms and munitions.* Finally, another destabilising factor should not be underestimated: the easy profits from narcotics trafficking make it easier to corrupt the same security forces whose task it is to bring it under control.