



‘Afghanistan and the lingering doubts behind the British deployment’

Lord Ashcroft KCMG

When in 2001 the then Taliban administration refused to hand over Osama bin Laden what followed was both correct and necessary. There was never any doubt that the coalition forces, armed with hi-tech aircraft, daisy-cutter bombs and overwhelming firepower were going to drive the Taliban out of government.

In terms of a post-conflict national reconstruction plan, while much has been attempted, little has actually been achieved. There have been significant steps towards local democracy, with the signing of a Constitution and the holding of Parliamentary elections. However what international efforts have been expended over these last four years have, in the main, been wasted by a serious lacking of coordination between the various donor countries and if we are honest, a lack of international will. The recent wrangling in the Dutch Parliament over troop deployments and the lack of coordination between the various internationally sponsored Provincial Reconstruction Teams are proof enough.

A recent International Crisis Group report demonstrates the nature of the problem, “As of August 2005, there were 22 PRTs operating in Afghanistan, thirteen under the Coalition and nine under ISAF, eight of these led by EU member states. Whilst the composition and focus of each is unique, the outcomes are very different. The main efforts of the British PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif have been directed at security, with patrols and even small outposts in an area of considerable factional animosity. In Herat, the Italian PRT has emphasised reconstruction and cultural interaction. As an EC official said, “they couldn’t have set out to end up with a more non-standard system if they tried”.¹ This patchwork approach to the PRTs could undermine Afghanistan’s reconstruction. With these different methods being used in different parts of the country there is a chance that accusations of favouritism could be made – at heart Afghanistan is fiercely tribal.

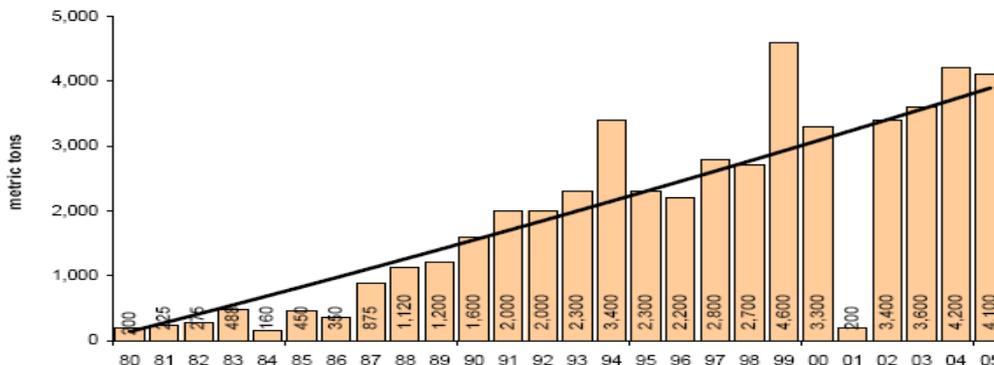
The recent London Conference on Afghanistan produced the strangely named ‘Afghanistan Compact’. This roadmap to Afghan reconstruction contains many worthy targets, aspirations and goals with an end-date of 2010 figuring prominently. Yet it is interesting to note how many times the PRTs are, or indeed are not, mentioned in the Compact. Just twice, in fact, and the only really significant mention concerning better coordination of PRTs with the Afghan authorities comes at the very end in Annex I. Whilst the Compact’s aspirations are worthy they will come to nought unless certain other key issues are addressed.

First, certain local aberrations need to be ironed out. Major donors will be loathe to commit large amounts of their tax-payers’ money to an Administration in which financial transparency is far from obvious. Confidence is further undermined by the inclusion of ex-warlords in the Administration – Ismael Khan of Herat Province survives in the recently re-shuffled Administration as Minister for Water and Energy. The influence of the opium barons out in the provinces is also cause for concern. Whilst dealing with the consequences of the world’s biggest poppy crop is one for the entire international community, only President Hamid Karzai can explain why he mysteriously moved the Governor of Nangarhar province

after a spectacularly dramatic 96% drop in poppy cultivation in that Province during the 2004/5 growing season. Speculation is that traffickers and the smugglers put pressure on the central government, and the seeds of suspicion have been sown.

May I suggest a litmus test: contrast the number of speeches President Karzai makes on Counter-Narcotics issues *inside* Afghanistan with the number he makes *abroad*. The results are not good and the mixed message this sends does not suggest that rhetoric directed at the West is being matched by resolve to deal with the problem within the country. The 2004/5 season produced over 4,100 tons of opium with an export value in excess of US\$2.7 billion.

Afghanistan opium production, 1980-2005 (metric tons)



source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005.

The 2006 poppy crop is set for record levels. British troops, soon to be deployed to Helmand province, are being dropped into a veritable Garden of Eden so far as poppy cultivation goes. Either side of Helmand sit the provinces of Kandahar and Farah. In terms of ranking the three provinces sit 1st, 2nd, and 4th in the league table of hectares under cultivation.ⁱⁱ And with only 500 Afghan Counter-Narcotics police to cover the entire country British troops will have to do far more than reconstruction if they are to make an impact in Helmand Province.ⁱⁱⁱ

Insecurity remains a major problem in Afghanistan, with about 1,700 people killed last year in militant violence, making 2005 the deadliest year since 2001. The toll is double that of 2004. The Canadians are suffering high casualty rates in Kandahar province and proportionally the United States lose more personnel in Afghanistan than they do in Iraq.

This brings me to the second issue - the irritating problem of resurgent Taliban elements. The Taliban movement is now split with the old guard preferring honourable combat – as when they fought the invading Russians – versus the young fanatics who prefer the imported methods of roadside and suicide bombs, as seen in Iraq. Asked about the size and nature of the threat facing UK troops (in fact all foreign troops) the UK Foreign Office admits it has “made no independent assessment of the numbers or strength of Illegal Armed Groups in Afghanistan”, but then goes on to say that the UN “estimates that there are 2,000 groups with a total strength of up to 100,000 members. 579 of these groups are already engaged in the disarmament and demobilisation programme”.^{iv} Fine – but what about the other 1,421 armed groups?

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Helmand and Kandahar are well known transit routes between Pakistan and the Taliban stronghold of 'the-soon-to-be-Dutch-controlled' Uruzgan province. Dutch politicians have done their troops no service at all. The political divisions displayed in The Hague have almost certainly guaranteed even more hostile attention from the Taliban. Casualties arriving home from Afghanistan are going to test the resolve of the Dutch people like they have never been tested before. Dissent on the home front is exactly what the Taliban want. So not only will British and Dutch troops have to help with reconstruction efforts, but they will have no choice but to get stuck into both the drugs trade and the Taliban, both of which they cannot avoid – even if they tried.

The Pakistan-side of the border is renowned for being a lawless region, a haven for smugglers and criminals evading the reaches of Afghan – and Pakistani - authority. The Taliban come and go at will through the porous frontier. Back in the United Kingdom the Ministry of Defence will not say what its policy on 'hot pursuit' is. There is also no recent history of UK forces having had joint training operations with their Pakistani counterparts. One would have thought that such training would have been invaluable for such a deployment.

Recently the Commons Defence Select Committee noted "There is a fundamental tension between the UK's objective of promoting stability and security and its aim of implementing an effective counter-narcotics strategy. It is likely the more successful the deployment is at impeding the drugs trade, the more it will come under attack from those involved in it. In the short term at least, the security situation is likely to deteriorate." ^v Sooner or later UK forces will be engaging in countering all aspects of crime, terrorism and lawlessness no matter how one looks at it. In this respect the rules of engagement are certainly unclear and not even understood by the commanders who will be leading the UK contingent.

Colonel Henry Worsley admits that the greatest threat facing UK forces will be the improvised explosive devices planted by the Taliban and "there has got to be a system whereby we can try and counter that" ^{vi}, and in a previous interview confirmed that the first operations would be along the border i.e. UK forces will be engaging the Taliban and drug smugglers. The line taken by Dr John Reid MP, Defence Secretary at the time of the UK's initial deployment, is somewhat different. He said of the UK deployment "that the role is not counter-terrorist" ^{vii}, but with the proximity of the Taliban stronghold of Uruzgan province and the training camps in Pakistan the fine line between counter-terrorism and security operations is bound to be breached.

The following questions fall to be answered. Is it right to send UK – and other - forces to a country *i.*) where the Government has yet to demonstrate its genuine desire to deal effectively and forcefully with the drugs issue, especially when one considers the implications for reconstruction efforts; *ii.*) in which a genuinely transparent Government is seemingly doomed from the outset whilst ex-war lords and militants are active members; *iii.*) where internationally sponsored PRT's are still operating under differing criteria, with no unified effort nor a common end-goal; *iv.*) where our own Government has yet to assess the threat facing our troops; and finally *v.*) where a haven from punishment exists for the Taliban and other militants and criminals just over the Pakistan border.

Of course the goal must be to place Afghanistan on an economically self-sustaining footing. The Taliban and other criminal elements must be quashed if this is to happen but they must be

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quashed by local Afghan forces if the country is to stand any real chance of success; history tells us that outsiders meddling in Afghan affairs usually end up worse off. An open-ended military deployment would be good for neither the UK nor Afghanistan. We need to know the political and military parameters before, not after we send our troops to such a hostile environment. International forces can, and should play a vital but limited role in rebuilding Afghanistan but under what conditions and at what price? These questions should have been answered before the advance guard of British troops deployed to Helmand Province. Without these answers it is very hard to support this new Afghan adventure.

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Since the fall of the Taliban Lord Ashcroft has visited Afghanistan on at least three occasions. Besides visiting Kabul he has also spent time in Herat, in the east of the country. He was last in Afghanistan in November 2005. More on Lord Ashcroft can be found at www.lordashcroft.com

ⁱ International Crisis Group - 'Rebuilding the Afghan State: The European Union's role', Asia Report N°107 – 30 November 2005. p. 11.

ⁱⁱ In 2005 the top four provinces, by hectares under poppy cultivation, were Helmand with 26,500h, Kandahar with 12,989h, Balkh with 10,837h and Farah with 10,240. Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime. 'Summary Findings of Opium Trends in Afghanistan, 2005' 12 September 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ Written Parliamentary Answer, *Hansard 7 Feb 2006 : Column 1041W*

^{iv} Written Parliamentary Answer, *Hansard 7 Feb 2006 : Column 1042W*.

^v HoC Defence Select Committee Report 'The UK deployment to Afghanistan' (HC 558), 6th April 2006.

^{vi} BBC R4 Today, Wednesday 8th February 2006

^{vii} *Hansard 26 Jan 2006 : Column 1536*