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Why a further Afghanistan Conference?

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AFGHANISTAN MAIN FINDINGS

Recommendations

Binding commitments by the international community to provide long-term support for the economic and political development of Afghanistan.

Separating presidential elections from parliamentary elections. Setting a realistic date for the parliamentary elections and only holding parliamentary elections towards the end of 2004.

More complex and appropriate strategies to combat drug-growing, reintegrate the militiamen and address the problem of warlordism.

Greater integration of the rural regions, in particular the country's South, into reconstruction.

Improving the co-ordination of international efforts at the operative level.

The third international Afghanistan Conference takes place in Berlin from the 31st March to the 1st April, under the heading "Afghanistan and the international community – a partnership for the future". While the first Afghanistan Conference, on the Petersberg near Bonn in November 2001, achieved a timetable to peace and the setting up of a transitional government, the second Afghanistan Conference in December 2002 gave the international community the opportunity to pledge its continued support for Afghanistan. The crucial issue is whether the third Conference can set accents that will really point the way forward or whether it is only going to be a goodwill event.

The Afghans have pinned high hopes on this conference. The Bonn timetable to peace ends with the elections scheduled to be held in June 2004. Especially against the background of the precarious security situation and the resurgence of the Taliban, many Afghans fear that the international community could be introducing an exit strategy with these elections in order to pull out of Afghanistan without too much loss of face. The international community has to address these concerns if it is really serious about combating terrorism. What counts is to demonstrate that, in spite of sluggish reconstruction and many setbacks, it is willing to provide continuous and reliable support to Afghanistan on its way to peace. In this respect, the international community ought to clarify what

financial and political framework it intends to grant Afghanistan for the future. Clear financial and support commitments for a specified period are just as important as straightforward definitions of roles in the process of reconstruction.

The Afghanistan Conference in Berlin has set itself three priorities: political reconstruction, improving the security situation and economic reconstruction. All three thematic areas are inevitably interrelated and mutually conditional.

Regarding political reconstruction, the key topic at the Berlin Conference will probably be the June elections. Much speaks against the prescribed scheduled being kept to. Registering voters is making slow progress, and by the end of February, just ten percent of all voters were registered. And it is as yet unclear whether the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections will be held simultaneously or whether the parliamentary elections are to be postponed to a later date.

The different degrees of volatility and significance the two elections bear as well as the different preparatory measures they require speak for their being held separately.

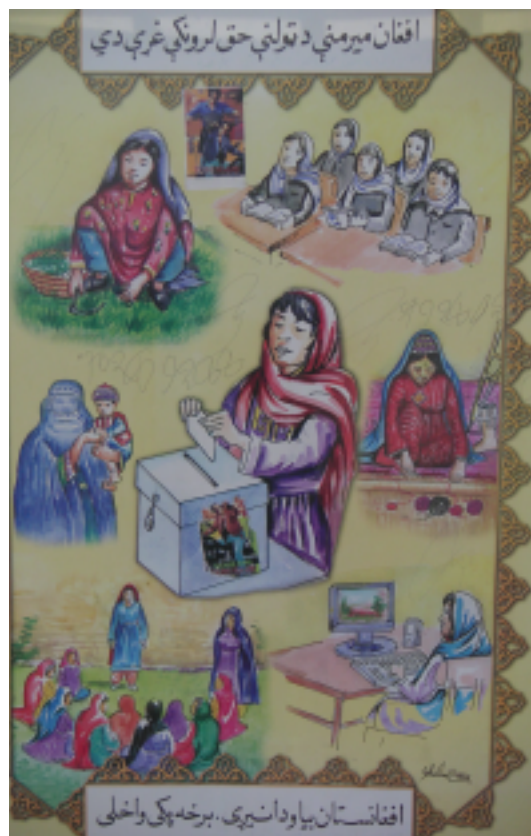


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The Kabul airport

Two dates for two elections

The presidential elections pose the lesser problem. For other than Hamid Karzai, who has made use of the last two years to consolidate his power and popularity, no rival candidate of equal format has been nominated yet. Karzai has succeeded in having the international reconstruction effort automatically associated with his name. In a nutshell, this means that if Karzai's presidency is not confirmed, there is a danger of international involvement being drastically reduced. Also, at the constituent Loya Jirga in December 2003, Karzai played the Pashtun hand for the first time. So it is regarded as probable that the majority of the Pashtuni, who represent the largest ethnic group, will vote for him. With respect to



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National elections: poster for registration



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Election process near Imam Sahib

the presidential elections, the Berlin Conference ought to be taken advantage of as an opportunity to set a new, realistic date so that registering of voters can be concluded in time. However, the time window is small. US President George W. Bush is pressing for the Afghan elections to be held before the American presidential elections in November 2004. For the Bush administration needs news of success to justify the US-led war on terror, which is being called into question more and more by the events in Iraq.

The parliamentary elections represent the true challenge that Afghanistan's political reconstruction is facing. The precarious security situation is an obstacle to free and fair elections. There is a threat of the warlords dictating voting in the areas they control. Another serious shortcoming is the absence of any democratic parties. Since clientelism and family ties condition political relations, there are as many political parties in Afghanistan as there are clans and spokespersons. Finally, there is the danger of the elections becoming ethnicised. For the leading holders of power are in an insufficient position to overcome ethnic barriers, and the temptation for them to attract votes by taking advantage of ethnic polarisations is simply too great for them to resist.

Solely the Islamists gathered around the alliance of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tadjik, and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a Pashtun, are in a position to overcome this ethnic barrier. However, this opens up a further danger the elections potentially bear. For Rabbani and Sayyaf are responsible for the worst period of war between 1992 and 1994 as well as for crimes against humanity. Thus there are doubts whether these forces' doing well in the elections will be conducive to Afghanistan's young, still very fragile democracy. Given this considerable conflict potential, preparation of the parliamentary elections has to be optimal, which could be ensured better if a later date were opted for. However, the period of one year the constitution allows for should not be taken full advantage of so that a further boosting of the president's position thanks to the lack of a legislative corrective can be avoided.

The second priority to be addressed by the Berlin Conference is the problem of the unsatisfactory security situation, which jeopardises progress being made in political and economic reconstruction. Over the last few months, Afghanistan has turned into a divided country. Ongoing battles between the military forces of Enduring Freedom, led by the US, and the Neo-Taliban have turned



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The German PRT in Kunduz

the South of the country into a combat zone. In addition, in the northern half, countless warlords are in power who have their own militias, impose protective tariffs and act entirely independently of the government. So far, the demilitarisation and reintegration programmes for ex-combatants have shown only modest success. Militiamen have been receiving more money for handing in their weapons than they would cost at the bazaar. Moreover, an improved security situation and a reduced potential for violence are not achieved solely by gathering weapons but by also reintegrating the combatants into society. In addition to vocational reintegration, creating a new future for the militiamen in society can only work if their dependence on their commanders is reduced. And here, care has to be taken that civilians looking for work are not put at a disadvantage. The tasks of the civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) should also be considered at the Berlin Conference. For instance, there is an urgent need for the PRTs, which are predominantly oriented on military objectives, to demonstrate their presence by patrolling, as is the case in Kabul, and concentrate on genuine security activities (e.g. demilitarisation, conversion) that do not clash with development activities that are already in progress.



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The entrance of the US-PRT near Gardez



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Children playing on the road from Taluqan to Kunduz

No security without adequate financial support

Economic reconstruction represents the last priority area at the Berlin Conference. Afghanistan's transitional administration is reckoning with a binding approval of substantial contributions on the part of the international donor community for the next few years. Here, however, it has already bidden farewell to its approach of setting unrealistic standards by referring to higher per capita performance for other countries. Expenditure of around 250 US dollars per capita and per annum, as paid to East Timor, Rwanda or Kosovo, would represent a financial effort of 5.5 billion US dollars per year for Afghanistan. In the meantime, the transitional administration has linked its reconstruction targets to the Millennium Development Goals passed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2002. Currently, the Ministry of Finance, supported by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF, UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) is attempting to adopt this approach in its budget. Irrespective of how high the sum will ultimately be, it has to be



Military shelter near Salang pass

based on a comprehensive needs analysis and priorities set according to regional and sectoral requirements. For in spite of various attempts to attune activities to one another, the country's un-coordinated and sluggish reconstruction and its unequal progress in regional terms represents a significant problem. Moreover, during the last two years, parallel structures have established themselves in Afghanistan that are causing a waste of resources. The Afghan government, the United Nations, the PRTs and the relief organisations are each pursuing their own individual interests, which is reflected in a lack of co-ordination, the absence of overall concepts and the duplication of projects. So setting a framework for improved operative co-ordination and clear responsibilities would be desirable outcomes of the Berlin Conference.

The security situation in Afghanistan is still very tense and volatile. Even regions, regarded as being relatively calm and safe, are not immune against a sudden outburst of violent conflicts. Only recently, fights erupted in Herat, a would-be shelter of stability and recovery during the past two years, after Minister for Civil Aviation and son of Governor Ismail Khan was assassinated.

Different security situations in different parts of the country have also resulted in an imbalanced regional distribution of international aid programmes and, ultimately, in striking regional inequalities in development. While Kabul and Herat currently represent true boomtowns, the rest of the country benefits much less from economic development. The situation is particularly problematic in the South of the country. There, the Neo-Taliban have been pursuing the strategy of launching attacks on members, offices and vehicles of international organisations for about one year. This has resulted in a complete standstill of development activities in southern Afghanistan. The country is now threatening to split into a slowly developing northern half and a southern half in which development has stalled. Therefore, at the Berlin Conference, strategies ought to be developed to overcome this spatial disparity. For instance, it could be considered whether projects in the South of the country should be carried out under military protection if necessary. Moreover, in future, co-operation incentives ought to focus primarily on the country's reconstruction, and less on support in combating terrorism. In this context, the international community has to ask itself how it intends to deal with the warlords. Instead of rewar-



Destroyed house in Kabul

ding them for political manoeuvres, as has often been the case during the last few years, realistic strategies ought to be developed to overcome the problem of warlordism. Since a stronger military involvement of the international community can hardly be reckoned with, the only remaining option is to turn the warlords into "peacelords" by applying a stick and carrot approach. Thus, on the one hand, clear rules ought to be set that are linked to definite sanctions, while on the other, the warlords should be offered specific prospects for the future that do not entail considerable economic losses or a loss of face.

Two-thirds of the opium world-wide comes from Afghanistan

One key obstacle is the dominance of civil war economies and, in particular, growing and trading opium. Two-thirds of the opium world-wide comes from Afghanistan. Opium poppy cultivation is the sole survival strategy of many farmers. Attempts to combat drugs in Afghanistan so far have shown that buying off farmers only results in their expanding their crops. One significant problem here is that knowledge of the struc-

tures, dependences and process in the opium economy is scant. This is why it is necessary to develop more complex concepts that give much more consideration to the local structures in society and are better adapted to the needs of the population. Propagating alternative crops (e.g. saffron) and creating lucrative markets for these alternative products should be just as important an element of this concept as stressing Islamic values branding the cultivating of opium immoral.

With the democratically legitimised assumption of government responsibilities next summer, Afghanistan is facing a further crucial stage on its long route to peace. Thus the date of the Afghanistan Conference appears to be well-chosen to co-ordinate further activities and international efforts. With this initiative, the international community is showing that it intends to continue its support of Afghanistan on this route. In order for the Conference to go beyond such a symbolic gesture, it has to clearly identify the necessary steps and come up with substantial commitments to provide the financial foundations they require. ■

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Money changer in the bazar



Bazar close to Pul-i Khumri

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