

US and Russia pressure the Taliban

New UN sanctions worsen plight of Afghanistan's people

By Vimal Fernando and Sarath Kumara
15 February 2001

New UN-imposed sanctions came into force on Afghanistan's Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime on January 20. The UN resolution imposes an arms embargo on the Taliban, a ban on the sale of acetic anhydride used in the manufacture of heroin and extends an existing flight embargo on Afghanistan's Ariana Afghan airlines and a freeze on Taliban assets abroad. The new measures also ban all military contacts, close Taliban offices overseas and restrict travel by top Taliban officials.

The pretext for these measures, jointly sponsored by the US and Russia, is the US demand for Kabul to hand over Saudi-born billionaire Osama bin Laden, alleged to be responsible for the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The UN Security Council resolution passed last December also insisted that the Taliban close "terrorist training camps" within its territory and stop the flow of drugs from Afghanistan.

The new UN resolution applies only to the Taliban regime and not to the opposition Northern Alliance (NA), which now controls only 5 percent of Afghanistan. The NA, an amalgam of tribal factions based in the north of the country, is led by figures from the Afghani government ousted by the Taliban when it took Kabul in September 1996 and is covertly backed by Russia and Iran. The reinforced sanctions are an attempt to pressure the Taliban to reach an accommodation with the NA and to temper its support for Islamic fundamentalist groups outside Afghanistan.

The measures will compound the misery facing many Afghans, who have been hit by decades of war and are currently suffering the effects of the worst drought in half a century. An estimated half a million people have recently left their homes in search of food and water—80,000 are crowded in camps around the city of Herat, a further 150,000 have fled over the border to the Pakistani city of Peshawar and another 10,000 are trapped on the border with Tajikistan, unable to cross. There are already 1.2 million Afghani refugees in Pakistan and another 1.3 million in Iran.

According to the UN World Food Program (WFP), 480 refugees in Herat, lacking adequate clothing, shelter and fuel, froze to death when temperatures plunged to minus 25 degrees C. Most of them were children. WFP has only a month's worth of food stocks in Herat and estimates that up to one million people face starvation across Afghanistan by the end of the winter. This year it is expected that Afghanistan's farmers will produce 2.3 million tonnes of grain less than that required to feed the population.

The US and UN have continued to provide limited emergency aid to Afghanistan's refugees and to claim that the sanctions are not aimed at the population as a whole. Last week, the US ambassador to Pakistan, William Milam, posed near a shipment of US grain destined for Afghanistan and proclaimed Washington's concern for the plight of Afghans. But the UN sanctions have crippled what was already an economy in crisis.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in December, Barnett Rubin, director of the Centre for International Cooperation in New York University, questioned the purpose of the UN sanctions, saying: "What is the strategic goal of international action in Afghanistan, bearing in mind that this is a country that has had 21 years of war, that has the highest rates of infant, child and maternal mortality, the lowest life expectancy, the lowest literacy rate and the highest rate of hunger—tied with Somalia—in the world. Even with sanctions that are carefully targeted—and these are intended to be—have some negative impact on civilian populations, and the civilian population in Afghanistan does not have a margin for survival."

Erick de Mul, UN coordinator for relief work in Afghanistan, recently criticised the inadequacy of the aid from major nations: "Every year we have appeals that are never met. It's all trying to go for makeshift arrangements. In the process, people weaken further and further and lose their possessions, and their coping mechanisms are eroded, along with the social fabric that is being destroyed."

Washington's real attitude to Afghanistan was summed up by the remark of an unnamed US diplomat to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in early December: "We are determined to make life very, very difficult for the Taliban in every field—political, economic, military and in terms of their foreign relations—unless they hand over Bin Laden."

The US has closed the Taliban office in New York despite the pleas of UN officials that such an action will compound the difficulties both in providing relief and attempting to negotiate a ceasefire between the Taliban and their rivals. In fact, the latest sanctions have directly contributed to the breakdown of talks. Taliban representatives walked out of the talks, accusing the UN of bias because the measures applied selectively to Kabul and not the Northern Alliance. Pakistan, one of the few countries to recognise the Taliban regime and its closest supporter, has under pressure ordered the closure of Taliban and Ariana airline offices and the seizure of bin Laden's assets.

Moreover, there are a number of indications that the US, in concert with Russia, India and some of the Central Asian republics is considering military strikes against Afghanistan. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that US officials had met with Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abdul Jalil in Germany in mid-November and "delivered an ultimatum: Hand over bin Laden or face the consequences. The US has warned that Taliban military assets—airports, ammunition dumps and military bases—may be targeted."

While it has reacted angrily to the new measures, there are indications that the Taliban is seeking an accommodation with the US and other major powers. The regime faces growing resentment within Afghanistan itself as a result of worsening social conditions and its own repressive rule. Foreign Minister Wakil Mutawakil told a news conference in

January that the Taliban had asked its representative in New York to urge the new Bush administration to revise policies damaging the US-Afghan relations. "We have been ready to talk about that before, and even now, we are willing to do so."

Kabul has renewed its offer to have bin Laden tried by Muslim clerics in an Islamic country. According to an article in the British *Times* newspaper, Kabul has gone one step further and indicated that it would exile bin Laden to a third country if it were guaranteed international recognition as Afghanistan's legitimate government. A recent *New York Times* article cited astonished UN drug control officials who reported a dramatic drop in the amount of land devoted to opium cultivation.

US demands for the handing over of bin Laden are simply a convenient focus for broader strategic concerns about the impact of Islamic extremist groups throughout the region, particularly in the resource-rich Central Asian republics. The hypocritical character of the US administration's tirades against bin Laden and "terrorism" are underscored by the fact that in the 1980s Washington supported, trained and armed Afghani Islamic fighters to wage a war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. The Taliban and bin Laden have been variously accused by the US, Russia and India of fomenting and supporting Islamic militias in Chechnya, Central Asia and Kashmir. All of the Central Asian republics have a large Muslim population, as has China's Xinjiang province where Beijing has sought to stamp out separatist groups.

The imposition of tough new sanctions was at least in part motivated by military gains made by the Taliban in heavy fighting from July through to October last year. The Taliban have now confined the Northern Alliance to the northeastern province of Badakshan and several other small pockets in the north. In early August, the Taliban militia entered Ishkamish, in the northern Takar Province, a strategic point along the land route between opposition commander Ahmad Shah Masood's stronghold in the Panjshir Valley and NA bases in the north. In the same month, the Taliban captured Nahrin District in Baghlan Province, cutting a number of supply routes, and in early September, the key town of Taloqan, the opposition's administrative centre.

The Taliban gains brought its military forces closer to Afghanistan's northern borders with the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Speaking in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent on September 27, US General Tommy Franks, Commander-in-Chief of the US Central Command, promised to boost US aid to Uzbekistan and commented: "The fighting in Afghanistan is a threat to security in the whole region." Military analysts have noted that the fighting, which usually comes to a halt in the harsh winter months, has continued into November and December as the Taliban forces seek to press home their advantage. On January 13, Taliban officials claimed to have captured Hajajghar and Ikhanum districts near Afghanistan's northern frontier.

Faced with the possible collapse of the Northern Alliance, the US and Russia have been seeking to cobble together an anti-Taliban alliance. Both countries have held discussions with India and formed working groups on Afghanistan involving collaboration with intelligence and military officials.

Last October six former Soviet republics—Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—signed a collective security agreement "to stop the Islamists in case of a major aggression". Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov called for a plan for joint action "in the case of a direct threat from Afghanistan". About 25,000 heavily armed Russian troops and border guards are patrolling the 1,500-kilometre Tajik-Afghan frontier and the Russia government has decided to send another 50,000 soldiers in the northern spring.

The US already has military ties with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through the NATO "Partnership for Peace" program. Last year commando units from the three countries underwent training with US Special Forces in Montana and Alaska. The US delivered a shipment

of military equipment to Kyrgyzstan to help strengthen its borders and Washington pledged a further \$3 million in aid to each of the three countries. On January 18, just prior to the implementation of the UN sanctions, US deputy assistant Secretary of Defence for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, Jeffrey Starr, met with Tajikistan's Defence Minister Sherali Shairullayev in an effort to establish military ties with that country.

While the US and Russia jointly sponsored the latest UN sanctions against Afghanistan, there are sharp tensions between the two countries and with other major powers that are vying for domination in Central Asia. The region has some of the richest reserves of oil, gas and minerals in the world and has the potential to become a key link in trade and transport links between Europe and Asia. An oil deposit estimated at 50 billion barrels found last July in the Kazakhstan sector of the Caspian Sea is the largest discovery in the last 30 years.

The major powers and oil corporations have competing plans for major pipeline projects to pump oil and gas out of landlocked Central Asia. One route backed by Washington—via Azerbaijan and Turkey—cuts across tentative Russian deals with Iran and Armenia. Afghanistan and the Taliban not only pose a threat to the political stability of Central Asia but also threaten to become a focus for other rivals. One of the shortest, and therefore potentially cheapest, routes from Central Asia to seaports is via the Indian subcontinent.

In an article entitled "The 'Great Game' continued" in the July-September 2000 issue of *World Affairs*, Rahul Peter Das commented: "The US, but also many other Western States, seems to prefer links that do not have to traverse Russia, China or Iran. The option via Turkey, though viable, is at the same time also quite risky, especially because of the restless Caucasus region that must be passed through; this is apart from the fact that to avoid Russia and Iran, this route must also lead through the Caspian Sea. The only other route available is the route through South Asia, and it is obvious that this must, in such a context, assume great importance. But this route to the sea has to traverse the connecting link between Central and South Asia, namely Afghanistan"

The giant US Unocal corporation, in partnership with Saudi-based Delta Oil, drew up plans in the mid-1990s for a \$6 billion pipeline from Central Asia through northern Afghanistan to Pakistan. But the companies were forced to abandon the project in 1998 after Kabul fell to the Taliban in 1996 and fighting intensified. An article published by the eCountries web site this month reported tentative talks between the Taliban and the US company, Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry, in Turkmenistan over investment in Afghanistan's oil and gas industry and a pipeline project.

The high stakes involved and the uncertain character of all the alliances in the region are a formula for further political instability. The imposition of UN sanctions on Afghanistan is not only creating a social disaster within the country but also threatens to add to the tensions in neighbouring countries of what is already a volatile area of the globe.

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