

Saving Afghanistan

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

When U.S.-led NATO forces attacked the Taliban in Afghanistan six years ago, most of the world stood behind the effort. Clearly, al-Qaida forces there and their enabler, the Taliban-controlled government, deserved punishment for the cowardly Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The intervening six years have not been easy going for the military and the rebuilding effort, and the reasons are fairly clear. First, the Taliban, with a safe haven in western Pakistan, still is able to regroup and attack NATO forces. Second, the government of Hamid Karzai is weak. Its control extends not much farther than the capital, Kabul. Third, corruption is widespread, much of it because of the opium trade. Afghanistan produces about 92 percent of the world's opium for illicit drugs.

Even with the focus of Americans mostly on Iraq since 2003, the efforts in Afghanistan are still generally supported in the United States. That is not necessarily so among our NATO allies, most of which have insisted that their troops stay out of the extremely dangerous southern provinces. In Canada, for instance, opposition parties are calling for their country's mission in Afghanistan to end by February 2009, at the latest. In Germany and Italy, troop deployments in the NATO mission have become a big political issue.

But the conflict there is far from ending. Rebuilding Afghanistan, which suffered through a brutal Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989, will take many years and billions more dollars in aid. Currently, the United States provides 26,000 of the 54,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan.

For months now, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other U.S. officials have been attempting to persuade the NATO allies to send more soldiers to combat the resurgent Taliban. Meeting resistance because of the NATO nations' domestic political concerns, the United States last week decided to send an additional 3,000 Marines to Afghanistan, where another spring offensive is believed likely and violence is generally on the rise. Overall, according to Pentagon data, attacks in the southern provinces are up 27 percent over the past year.

As the additional American forces are being deployed, the Bush administration is reassessing its strategy in Afghanistan. It is wise to do so if the mission there is to succeed in the long run. Even with allied resistance to sending in more of their forces, there is no danger that the NATO mission will collapse or become American only, at least not for the foreseeable future. But Afghanistan has to become - and this already is happening - far more than a military mission. Force alone will not solve the problems of the nation of nearly 32 million.

Efforts to build up the military and police forces must be accelerated. The goal is to create a force of from 70,000 to 80,000. At the same time the interconnected problems of corruption and opium production have to be addressed more intensely. Eradication efforts favored by some in the Bush administration are a

double-edged sword, solving part of the problem immediately but creating resistance in the population at the same time.

The mission in Afghanistan is too important to fail. A formula for permanent peace in an economically self-sustaining nation must be found.

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