

AFGHAN QUAGMIRE - War without end and its human cost

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WHILE France was lamenting the too few gold medals earned by the nation in the Beijing Olympics, 10 of its soldiers were killed in Afghanistan after a fierce battle with the Taliban about 50 km from Kabul.

The French commandos were part of the contingent of 70,000 serving under a 40-nation NATO coalition called the International Security Assistance Forces.

It was the deadliest attack on international troops in Afghanistan since June 2005 when 16 American soldiers were killed in their helicopter, which was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade.

The AFP report said the soldiers were hit by NATO planes that had come to help them escape the ambush. Some of the survivors complained that once they had fallen into the trap, they had to wait four hours for backup. When NATO planes arrived they may have missed their target and hit the French troops.

Nobody asked the government to immediately withdraw its troops from the embattled country, though Socialist Party Secretary Francois Hollande immediately criticised President Sarkozy's decision to increase the French contingent in Afghanistan by 700 troops (to 3,300) "just because the US had asked its NATO allies to share the burden." Le Figaro echoed the general feeling: "If the aims are just, are the tactics being used to achieve them correct?" After seeing the ten coffins covered with the tricolour, public opinion took a stronger view. A survey after the incident showed that 55 per cent of French favour a withdrawal from Afghanistan, though 48 per cent believe that the President will take the appropriate decision.

For the public the main question was: what are we doing in Afghanistan? Which price are we paying for what?

The always fast-moving Sarkozy decided to rush to Kabul and pay a tribute to the departed soldiers. During his lightning visit, he reiterated: "We have to be here." He had no regrets about sending a 700strong reinforcement force. In his typical style, Sarkozy said: "It is me who decides. I feel responsible. Europe is here with me. It is here that the peace of the world is at stake and therefore it is here that war [is waged] against terrorism, poverty, and also for human rights and for the rights of the women." He added: "If it had to be done again, I would do it." The situation in Afghanistan is not only an issue for the French or the Europeans. Canada, which sent troops to Afghanistan soon after 9/11, has lost 93 soldiers and one diplomat. US casualties have crossed 100 and the Polish just lost three men.

The question remains, what can the NATO force do? When Sarkozy met the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, the latter attributed the deteriorating situation to the fact that NATO does not do enough about the sanctuaries and training camps of the militants. He has a point. For him, the only solution is to look towards Pakistan's tribal area: "Unless we do that (pay more attention) we will continue to suffer," Karzai told Sarkozy.

Around the time of the ambush, the National Security Archives of the George Washington University published recently declassified documents on the retaliatory cruise missile strikes against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan on August 20, 1998. The lengthy report prepared by Dr Gary W Richter for the Sandia National Laboratories in 1999 remarked that the strike, "in retrospect, may have caused long-term political harm to US national security and counterterrorism interests." One of his conclusions, was "The war against terrorism will never be 'won' as terrorism will always be a global problem." According to the report, the August 20, 1998 strikes which were in retaliation for the August 7 bombings of two US embassies, "did little to help solve the problem posed by bin Laden and may ultimately prove to have done more harm than good...The risk of future attacks by Osama bin Laden or his associates using weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) is not insignificant." The latter statement proved to be prophetic; despite the strike which destroyed most of Osama bin Laden's infrastructure in Afghanistan, the Saudi terrorist was able to organise the 9/11 strike.

The report further said: "The root cause of the militant threat is the widespread and deep-seated discontent among a large segment of the Islamic world, as opposed to the actions or agitation of any one individual or group of individuals.

As such, diplomatic options are likely to be the most effective strategies at reducing the threat." Is there a chance for

the Alliance to win this war? Another pertinent question is, have the troops been posted in the correct country? These are questions that the French President currently assuming the European presidency will have to answer in the next few months.

An Indian friend of mine who recently visited Afghanistan told me that he was shocked to see that most of the foreign troops remained largely inside their fortified barracks, knowing that any outing, to any village could be a serious risk.

Though the NATO forces are technologically far superior to the Taliban, they will always be in a state of inferiority in terms of ground knowledge and intelligence gathering. In these conditions, there is no way a 'war against terrorism' can be won, especially under the aegis of a corrupt puppet government, while the terrorists continue to roam free. On July 27 in the New York Times, a former US State Department anti-narcotics official, Thomas Schweich, accused the Pentagon and the Karzai government of undermining the anti-drug efforts of the United States. He details the compromises made by the Bush administration in allowing an explosive growth of opium (Afghanistan's output has increased from 1,000 tonnes in 2001 to 8,000 tonnes today). The families of the young French soldiers (between 21 and 23) must be asking, was it worth it? It is probably not, especially as long as the sanctuaries in Pakistan remain active.

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