

Special Report

Iraq in miniature

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May 13, 2005—Spring has arrived in Afghanistan and after the coldest winter in a decade, the sun is shining, the poppies are blooming, and the casualties are mounting.

Back on February 20, the Associated Press reported that the bitter winter, blamed for the deaths of more than 120 Afghan children, had curtailed Taliban operations in Afghanistan. U.S. military commanders boasted that they did not take winters off. Five days later, Taliban insurgents launched three separate attacks throughout southeastern Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of nine Afghan soldiers and a wounded U.S. soldier.

Throughout March, Taliban fighters and insurgent rebels continued to launch attacks against U.S. and coalition forces, as well as against Afghan soldiers, police, and civilians. U.S. military personnel were killed and wounded in ambushes by Taliban militants, as well as by land mines, roadside bombs, and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs). An Afghan couple providing medical care in southwestern Afghanistan were killed by unidentified gunmen and scores more Afghan civilians were killed and wounded in roadside bombings.

According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), throughout Afghanistan there were at least 20 attacks in March, as well as in April. There were only 10 such attacks in February.

In what was surely pure coincidence, Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced in March that the parliamentary elections would be pushed back from May until September.

The resurgence of violence led Lieutenant General David Barno, outgoing commander of Combined Forces Command in Afghanistan, to predict on April 16, that there would be "high profile" attacks by the Taliban in the coming months.

He didn't know how right he was.

The next day, Taliban fighters attacked the main U.S. military base in Kandahar by exploding a loaded fuel tanker parked outside the base's perimeter. The explosion set off a chain reaction, detonating four more tankers. The following week, insurgents fired rockets at the U.S. military's forward operating base in eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border. According to a U.S. military spokeswoman on April 23, the attacks on U.S. military installations demonstrated increased coordination among Taliban fighters.

In the past week alone, the upsurge in violence throughout Afghanistan has resulted in the deaths of more than 100 people. While many of the casualties were Taliban militants, Afghan soldiers, policemen, and numerous civilians were also killed and wounded. On Monday, two U.S. Marines were killed in a five-hour gun battle with Taliban fighters in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Only days earlier, six U.S. soldiers were wounded when their unit was ambushed by Taliban fighters. Two lost their legs.

In the midst of the recent violence, the Taliban declared that it had stepped up its attacks on coalition forces, targeting U.S. forces first. In addition to its declaration of increased violence, the Taliban rejected

the Afghan government's offer of amnesty, over U.S. objections, to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Simultaneous with the Taliban's re-emergence is a rise in violent crime throughout Afghanistan. Afghans have witnessed a sharp increase in armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, and murder. Evidence suggests that members of Afghanistan's police force are involved in the crime wave.

Most disturbing is the rise in kidnapped and murdered children. In Kandahar, four to five children a day are kidnapped for ransom then frequently mutilated, raped, and murdered after desperate families pay the ransom.

Things are so bad in Kandahar that people there are longing for "the good old days" under the Taliban. Indeed, according to one of several urban legends regarding the rise of the Taliban, it was a rash of kidnappings in Kandahar that caused the Taliban and its strict form of Islam to be welcomed by residents of the city.

The growing instability in Afghanistan is reflected in a report released on Tuesday, by CARE International and the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office. Entitled "NGO Insecurity in Afghanistan," the report concludes that "escalating violence" throughout Afghanistan has resulted in an "unprecedented number" of NGO (non-governmental organization) fatalities. Things there are so bad that CARE and ANSO estimate that the NGO fatality rate in Afghanistan is higher than "almost any other conflict or post-conflict setting." In fact, earlier this month, three Afghan women were found beaten to death for working with foreign NGOs.

All of these recent events in Afghanistan should strike a familiar chord in those familiar with the history of post-Saddam Iraq. In both cases, the U.S. propped-up brutal regimes only to forcibly remove them, at great civilian cost, once they ceased to serve U.S. interests. The remnants of those regimes, displeased with their ouster, as well as militants offended by Muslim subjugation to U.S. imperialism, instigate insurgencies against the occupying militaries and those who support them. The U.S., not about to be shown up by a bunch of "thugs," embarks upon a counter-insurgency, resulting in "collateral" deaths too numerous and inconsequential to be counted. Enraged by the United States' callous disregard for the lives of those it purports to liberate, Iraqis, Afghans, and those sympathetic to their plights, join the ranks of the insurgencies or, perhaps, terrorist organizations.

Round and round we go. . . .

While Afghanistan may currently be Iraq in miniature, if things there continue to destabilize, particularly at their current rate, that will not long remain the case.