



Quick Impact, Quick Collapse

The Dangers of Militarized Aid in Afghanistan¹

Every half hour, an average of one Afghan woman dies from pregnancy-related complications, another dies of tuberculosis and 14 children die, largely from preventable causes. Eight years after the fall of the Taliban, the humanitarian and development needs in Afghanistan remain acute.

Undoubtedly, Afghans have seen some improvements, particularly in the expansion of access to healthcare and education. While it costs approximately \$1 million a year to support the deployment of one US soldier in Afghanistan, an average of just \$93 in development aid has been spent per Afghan per year over the past seven years.² Far too much aid has focused on “quick fixes” and band-aid approaches rather than on what will produce positive and lasting results for Afghans over the long term.

As political pressures to “show results” in troop contributing countries intensify, more and more assistance is being channelled through military actors to “win hearts and minds” while efforts to address the underlying causes of poverty and repair the destruction wrought by three decades of conflict and disorder are being sidelined. Development projects implemented with military money or through military-dominated structures aim to achieve fast results but are often poorly executed, inappropriate and do not have sufficient community involvement to make them sustainable. There is little evidence this approach is generating stability and, in some cases, military involvement in development activities is, paradoxically, putting Afghan lives further at risk as these projects quickly become targeted by anti-government elements.

As eight non-governmental organizations, working in Afghanistan for up to fifty years and currently serving over 5 million Afghans across the country, we are deeply concerned about the harmful effects of this increasingly militarized aid strategy. As leaders from 70 nations gather in London to debate the future of Afghanistan, we urge them to reevaluate this approach to development and reconstruction.

Aid as a Weapons System?

Military-dominated institutions, such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), often lack the capacity to manage effective development initiatives, even where civilians are inserted into these structures. They are unable to achieve the level of local trust, engagement and community ownership required to achieve positive and lasting improvements to Afghan lives. In many cases, PRTs in insecure areas rely on local contracting companies that have limited capacities, weak links to communities and are widely seen as wasteful, ineffective and corrupt.³

Part of the problem is that the militarized aid approach focuses not on alleviating poverty but on winning the loyalty of Afghans through the provision of aid. In “Commanders’ Guide to Money as a Weapons System,” a US army manual for troops in Afghanistan and Iraq,

aid is defined as “a nonlethal weapon” that is utilized to “win the hearts and minds of the indigenous population to facilitate defeating the insurgents.”⁴

In a country where some 6,000 schools are needed, it is difficult to argue that those with the resources should refrain from building them. However, this approach to assistance is more likely to create dependencies rather than increase the self-sufficiency of communities. And given that it is so often poorly implemented, it is highly unlikely to achieve even its intended security objectives.

One school constructed by a PRT in Kapisa province was found to have problems with its structural integrity and serious design flaws, with latrines emptying just above a stream that the community used as a water source. Another PRT-constructed school in the same province was found to have “design and safety issues” and “presented an unsafe environment in its current state” due to the absence of a retaining wall to prevent potential rock and mudslides.⁵

Achieving sustainability and local ownership is also a challenge: a review of PRTs by the US Congress found that “the lack of planning led PRTs to pursue short-term ‘feel good’ projects (with success measured by money spent or satisfaction of the local governor) without consideration of larger strategic and capacity-building implications.”⁶ Schools, for example, require much more than just buildings to function. They must have trained male and female teachers, relevant textbooks and curricula, a safe environment to enable children (especially girls) to attend and a sense of community ownership as well as links with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to ensure sustainability.

PRTs, however, are scarcely equipped to provide anything beyond basic infrastructure, particularly given that the Commanders’ Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds, which support the assistance activities of US PRTs and battalions, are explicitly prohibited from being used for project maintenance or upkeep.⁷ In the words of one tribal leader from Paktia, “we have a common saying, it is better to have less from a sustainable source than having a great deal just once...we really do not need somebody to distribute biscuits to us and do not need construction projects that fall down after a year.”⁸

Although more than a billion dollars has been spent so far, the true impact of “hearts and minds” projects is largely unknown, despite nascent efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation. A recent US government audit of CERP-funded projects found that there is insufficient monitoring of the impact of projects and expressed concern about the lack of financial oversight. CERP project managers told auditors that their focus “was on obligating funds for projects rather than monitoring their implementation.”⁹ There is no centralized system for tracking how CERP money is spent and physical and electronic project files are either “incomplete or non-existent.”¹⁰

While some PRT projects have helped address immediate needs and contributed to reconstruction efforts, they have also slowed the process of rebuilding Afghan institutions. In assuming some of the responsibilities that the Afghan government should be fulfilling, PRTs may weaken government accountability to the Afghan people.

The military does have a role to play in providing assistance to save lives and alleviate suffering in situations where no civilian actor is able to do so, but it must be provided impartially and on the basis of need. The Civil Military Guidelines, agreed upon by ISAF and the UN, state that only “in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort, military assets...may be deployed for the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance.” PRT

Policy Note 3 also specifically states that humanitarian assistance “must not be used for the purpose of political gain, relationship building or ‘winning hearts and minds’...and must uphold the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality.”¹¹

There is also increasing evidence that military involvement in development activities may be putting Afghans on the frontlines of the conflict. A recent report released by CARE, the MoE and the World Bank found that schools supported or constructed by PRTs were perceived by Afghans to be at higher risk of being attacked.¹² With anti-government elements increasingly targeting education, schools built by the military in insecure areas are putting teachers and students at even greater risk.¹³ Many fear that, by extension, the same applies to health clinics and other community facilities constructed by PRTs or other military actors. As one aid worker said, “We try to keep PRTs away from our offices and do not interact with them because it brings threats from insurgents and suspicion from our target communities.”¹⁴

A related concern is that with so much international assistance directed towards counter-insurgency and military objectives, vulnerable populations are being forgotten. Chief among these are returning refugees from Pakistan and Iran and internally displaced people have been forced to flee their homes due to natural disasters or conflict. This problem will likely be exacerbated by the potential escalation of the conflict in 2010.

Another practice that is putting civilians at risk is the use of aid as an incentive to extract information. US commanders are authorized to offer rewards “paid in cash or in the form of like-kind benefits such as food, local amenities, necessities, vehicles or communal rewards” to individuals who they believe can provide valuable intelligence.¹⁵ Offering food and other aid in exchange for information in a country where a third of the population is at risk of hunger is not only unethical, it puts Afghans in potential danger of being targeted by anti-government groups. In 2009, nine Afghans, including at least one community leader, were assassinated each week – nearly double the rate of assassinations in 2008.¹⁶

Funding Sources

Though no reliable militarized aid figures are publicly available or reported to the Afghan government, an estimated \$1.7 billion of humanitarian and development aid has been delivered by international military forces.¹⁷ This is projected to rapidly expand. Over \$1 billion – more than the Afghan national annual budgets for agriculture, health and education combined – has been committed to CERP for this year alone.

Under pressure to spend allocated funds quickly and show results, some argue that aid money should go through the military because they can spend it faster than civilian institutions. However, US PRTs have actually had significant difficulty spending funds on time: just 58% of CERP funds allocated between 2004 and 2009 have been disbursed.¹⁸

Regional Disparities

While the focus of some donors is increasingly on providing aid to areas that are insecure or where foreign forces are present, more stable – but desperately poor – parts of the country are being overlooked. This approach neglects provinces in the north, center and west of the country where the security and development conditions are more permissive but humanitarian needs are urgent due to chronic food insecurity, drought and floods.

One-third of CERP funds for the coming year (approximately \$400 million, or \$285 per capita) are reportedly earmarked for Helmand province, while more secure provinces will

receive just a fraction of this assistance through civilian institutions.¹⁹ By comparison, Takhar province received just an average of \$43 per capita annually from USAID in recent years. To some extent, this is understandable given the higher programming costs in more insecure areas. However, the scale of such disparities and the earmarking of funds by donors for the provinces where their troops are deployed is creating inequities and fuelling resentment among Afghans in areas that have received fewer resources.

Military-led assistance can create perverse incentives and force Afghans to make an impossible choice between aid and security. In the relatively secure province of Daikundi, US Special Forces are reportedly assessing the viability of establishing a PRT in the province and have begun assessing and implementing assistance projects including repairing the central mosque and distributing clothing and food items.

Daikundi is one of the poorest provinces in the country, but often overlooked by donors. Less than 1% of schools have buildings and there are no paved roads. Despite these dire conditions, some people in Daikundi still have mixed feelings about the military doing development. As one local official said, "We are very poor and need development projects but we know that wherever the international forces go, the Taliban follow them."²⁰

Development that Works

Effective and responsible development prioritizes those activities that will yield the best outcomes for Afghans, not what will achieve short-term political objectives in donor countries.

The Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), managed by the Ministry of Public Health and introduced in 2003, seeks to ensure that basic health services are available at the community level and that they are integrated into a national structure of healthcare provision. Tackling the health challenges facing many Afghans, particularly in remote and insecure areas, remains a formidable task but BPHS, working through local and international partners, has helped expand access to healthcare services to 85% of the population, including several districts in Helmand province.²¹

Community-based education is another area where civilian-led development efforts have been successful in providing basic services in areas where the government is not yet able. In a partnership focused on both meeting immediate needs and ensuring sustainability over the long term, non-governmental organizations are working with the MoE and communities to establish 1,000 schools serving 93,000 students across 20 provinces. These schools are located in areas where Ministry of Education presence is particularly weak or hard to establish, with the built-in plan to transfer these schools into the formal education system as and when there is government capacity to absorb them.

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) also demonstrates the positive impact that community-led development can have. Largely funded by the international donors, NSP is managed by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and implemented by local and international organizations. NSP seeks to create and empower elected community governing councils to identify local reconstruction projects and provides block grants of up to \$60,000 for councils to implement each project. But within NSP, the long-term process of building the capacity and transparency of local institutions is almost as important as the outcomes of these small projects. To date, NSP has expended \$1 billion on community development in 22,480 villages across all 34 provinces in Afghanistan.²² While others have argued that programs like these cannot be implemented in truly insecure areas or meet the immediate needs of Afghans as well as military-implemented projects,²³

the emphasis on short term, militarized spending risks undermining support for and the success of independent humanitarian and development programs.

Conclusion

There are no quick fixes in Afghanistan. The militarized aid approach is not working for Afghans, and more of the same is unlikely to yield different results. The unrealistic goal of achieving dramatic, demonstrable development results within the next year has led to a continued emphasis on short-term projects and the same short sightedness that has plagued the international aid effort in Afghanistan since 2001.

The overemphasis on military issues at the expense of efforts to promote genuine development and good government matters not only because of the resulting human cost, but also because poverty, unemployment and weak, corrupt government are important drivers of conflict.²⁴ Ultimately, these factors must be effectively addressed if there is to be any sustainable improvement in security and a lasting peace for Afghans.

In order to address the problems of militarized aid and focus on solutions that work for Afghans, we urge world leaders meeting in London to:

- Provide stronger support for successful programming like the BPHS, NSP and Community-Based Education. Ensure that these programs remain separate from the PRT's work and are not recipients of military funding.
- Establish and implement a plan to gradually phase out PRT-provided and other militarized forms of aid, enabling military institutions to return to a focus on security and security sector reform. At the same time, the capacity of and funding for national and international civilian organizations should be increased.
- Donors and international non-governmental organizations must also do more to increase the ability of local organizations to design and implement development projects – and not just simply function as implementing partners.
- Ensure that aid is equitably delivered throughout the country based on development and humanitarian needs, and in line with national development plans.
- Improve the capacity, responsiveness and transparency of local government. Afghans overwhelmingly want a government capable of delivering basic services and the rule of law, yet these systems remain weak and largely ineffective at the local level.
- Support the UN to take on a greater role in delivering and coordinating aid. While it is positive that the UN is continuing to expand its field presence and coordination role, this should be accompanied by increased programming by UN agencies and their partners, particularly in under-resourced provinces and districts. The UN must also be more forceful in coordinating aid efforts, preserving their independence and improving their effectiveness, accountability and transparency.

In a country that is now second only to Niger at the bottom of world's human development rankings, addressing the problems of poverty and governance is a moral and political imperative. While aid is critical to this effort, it must be spent more responsibly and effectively. To do this, Afghan needs and interests must be at the heart of efforts to rebuild Afghanistan.

Notes

¹ “Quick impact, quick collapse” is paraphrased from a speech given by Kai Eide to the UN Security Council on January 3, 2010, available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1741&ctl=Details&mid=1882&ItemID=7100>. The signatories to this paper are: Action Aid, Afghanaid, CARE, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam and Trocaire. Author contact details: Ashley Jackson, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Oxfam International, +93 (0)700 278 657, ajackson@oxfam.org.uk.

² Dan De Luce, “US Troop Buildup Carries High Costs,” Agence France Presse, November 25, 2009; Development aid per capita estimates based on figures from the Afghan Ministry of Finance, with \$17 billion in development assistance (excluding assistance to security forces) delivered to Afghanistan over the past 7 years. Per capita aid figures are calculated based on a population estimate of 26 million. Comparing overall military figures with development spending, the US alone has spent \$227 billion on military operations in Afghanistan since 2001, while all donors together have spent less than 10% of this amount on development aid. See Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” Congressional Research Services, 2009, available at: <http://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>.

³ British Agencies in Afghanistan Group (BAAG), “Afghan Hearts, Afghan Minds: Exploring Afghan Perceptions of Civil-Military Relations,” 2008.

⁴ US Army Combined Arms Center, “Commanders’ Guide to Money as a Weapons System: Tactics, techniques and Procedures,” April 2009.

⁵ Secretary Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), “Quarterly Report to US Congress,” October 30, 2009.

⁶ US House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, Sub-Committee on Oversight and Investigations, “Agency Stovepipes versus Strategic Agility,” April 2008.

⁷ SIGAR, 2009.

⁸ BAAG, “Aid and Civil-Military Relations in Afghanistan (policy brief),” January 2009.

⁹ SIGAR, Oct 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ PRT Executive Steering Committee, “PRT Policy Note 3: PRT Coordination and Intervention in Humanitarian Assistance,” February 22, 2007, available at: <http://www.unamagroups.org/kabulprtworkinggroup>.

¹² Marit Glad, “Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation,” CARE/Ministry of Education/World Bank, November 2009, available at: http://www.care.ca/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Knowledge_on_fire_attacks_%20schools.pdf.

¹³ Between January and November of 2009, there were 613 school-related security incidents – almost double the number recorded during the same period in 2008 – while nearly 70% of schools in Helmand and 80% of schools in Zabul were closed due to insecurity. For more information, see UNAMA Human Rights, Afghanistan Annual Report on Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2009, January 2010.

¹⁴ BAAG, January 2009.

¹⁵ Ibid. Afghan National Security Forces are also being trained to trade aid for information; see “ARSIC and ANA Travel Outside Boundaries to Deliver Aid,” NATO Press Release, December 23, 2007, available at: <http://ocha-qwapps1.unog.ch/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/PANA-7A7FC7?OpenDocument>.

¹⁶ UNAMA Human Rights, “Afghanistan Annual Report on Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2009,” January 2010.

¹⁷ Government of Afghanistan Ministry of Finance, “Donor Financial Review,” November 2009.

¹⁸ SIGAR, Oct 2009.

¹⁹ Conversation with a British government official, January 2010. Per capita calculations based on a population estimate for Helmand province of 1.4 million.

²⁰ Conversation with local official in Daikundi, November 2009.

²¹ Government of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office, “Summary of the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, 2007/8,” 2009, available at: <http://nrva.cso.gov.af>.

²² For an additional assessment of NSP, see “Testimony of Andrew Wilder,” Hearing on US Aid to Pakistan: Planning and Accountability, US Congress House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, December 9, 2009, available at: <http://content.hks.harvard.edu/carr/cchrp/research/articles.php>.

²³ Carter Malkasian and Gerald Meyerle, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams: How Do We Know They Work?” US Army War College, March 2009, available at: <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil>.

²⁴ When asked what the major drivers of the current conflict were, a recent Oxfam survey of 14 provinces found that 70% of respondents believed that poverty and unemployment was a major factor while 48% pointed to the corruption and ineffectiveness of the government. For more information, see Ashley Jackson, “The Cost of War: Afghan Experience of Conflict, 1978 – 2009,” A Joint Paper by 9 Non-Governmental Organizations Working in Afghanistan, November 2009, available at: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/cost-war-afghanistan-experiences>.