



Afghanistan Update

23 April
2010

A twice-weekly, one-page situation report from the [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) on the latest developments affecting U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

Upcoming Events

- **President Hamid Karzai is set to visit Washington from May 10 to 13.** The proceedings and outcome of the trip will be under major scrutiny, coming in the wake of a public disagreement between Mr. Karzai and the US administration – which earlier this month had threatened to cancel the visit.
- **A consultative peace *loya jirga* (assembly of elders) is scheduled for May 20 in Kabul.** This has been billed by some commentators as a ‘make or break’ moment for President Karzai, as he seeks to draw senior insurgents and members of the Taliban leadership into peace negotiations.
- **An international conference will take place in Kabul July 20,** which follows up the London conference on Afghanistan in January. The conference will be an “affirmation of international support for the government,” according to Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior foreign officials will travel to Afghanistan to take part in the event.

Key Issue: Kandahar Offensive

- Senior alliance officials say the goal of the upcoming operation in Kandahar by U.S., NATO and Afghan forces is to **shore up a local government that nominally controls the city and break the grip of warlords and influence peddlers**, who, it is widely believed, have opened the door to the Taliban.
- The U.S. military believes the **tribal power structures in Kandahar are out of balance**, with marginalized tribes turning to the Taliban for protection and help against the dominant tribes.
- Taliban fighters recently interviewed have said they regularly enter the city and continue to interact openly with the public.
- A challenge is that **the Taliban are not universally opposed**. An [opinion survey](#) of Afghanistan’s Kandahar province – funded by the U.S. Army – has revealed that 94 percent of respondents support negotiating with the Taliban over military confrontation and 85 percent regard the Taliban as “our Afghan brothers”.
- The civilian population has been deeply impacted by violence. The international Red Cross has reported that **civilian deaths from roadside bombs in Kandahar and neighboring Helmand province soared nearly 40 percent** in the first two months of this year over the same period in 2009.

In the News

- In a [recent poll](#) conducted in Kandahar province, 91 percent of the respondents supported the convening of a ‘Loya Jirga’, or grand assembly of leaders as a way of ending the conflict, with 54 percent “strongly” supporting it, and 37 percent “somewhat” supporting it. That figure appears to reflect support for President Karzai’s proposal for a peace jirga in which the Taliban would be invited to participate.
- **Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani** said he opposes the Afghan government’s efforts to engage Taliban leaders ([Bloomberg](#)).
- Mr. Karzai and regional political leaders agreed last week to keep **two international commissioners on the Afghan Election Complaints Commission (ECC)** that uncovered widespread fraud in last year’s presidential vote. Karzai appointed a new head for the country’s election commission on Saturday, replacing a chairman accused of ignoring fraud during last year’s presidential vote. ([AP](#))
- **The supreme leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar**, has indicated that he and his followers may be willing to hold peace talks with western politicians. ([The Sunday Times](#))
- **A little more than half U.S. adults support the war in Afghanistan** while 39 percent oppose it, a poll released by [Angus Reid Public Opinion](#) on Wednesday indicated.

In Quotes

“Ten percent of the people are with the Taliban, 10 percent are with the government and 80 percent of the people are angry at the Taliban, the government and the foreigners.” **Mohammed Ishaq Khan**, a leader of the powerful Achakzai tribe. ([AP](#))

“In terms of our relationships between us and the government of Afghanistan, we feel they’re in good shape. There was a period where the waters got roiled a little bit, but that period is over.” **Richard Holbrooke**, US Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan. ([US Dept. of State](#))

Focus on Contractors

- The Pentagon said Thursday that it would solicit bids for a **\$1 billion contract to train Afghan police officers** after an oversight agency said the contract should not previously have been awarded to a North Carolina firm in a non-competitive process.
- Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. general in Afghanistan, suggested that **the coalition had become too dependent on private contractors** to carry out its mission there effectively.
- The Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) found that DynCorp, the private contractor that trains the Afghan police force, has **failed to document millions of dollars in expenses**. ([DCAA](#))
- **The Taliban has begun targeting U.S. government contractors** in Afghanistan, stepping up use of a tactic that is rattling participating firms and could undermine development projects intended to stem the insurgency, according to U.S. officials.

The [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) serves Members and staff by providing relevant and accessible information on Afghanistan. It is non-partisan. Contact ACCH@NewStrategicSecurityInitiative.org if you would like a specific issue paper or to be placed directly on the distribution list.