

## ARGO INTERVIEWS

### AFGHANISTAN: ONLY INCREASED MILITARY PRESSURE COULD FORCE TALEBAN TO NEGOTIATE

**-Interview with Haroun Mir-**

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*Haroun Mir was a Special Assistant to the late Ahmad Shah Massoud; and is the Co-Founder and Deputy Director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies in Kabul*

**Q:** *What is your reaction to the US Authorities' declaration that they will deploy in a few months some 5,000 more troops in Afghanistan? In your opinion will the "surge" improve the security situation or worsen it, perhaps creating further anti-American sentiment?*

**A:** No, I don't think it will create anti-American sentiment within the population because the Afghan people in general have welcomed the presence of coalition forces in Afghanistan. And I think 5,000 soldiers will not be a surge in Afghanistan because Afghanistan is much larger than Iraq; it's a big country. I think we expect the USA to increase their forces not 5,000 but between 30 to 50 thousand more troops by the end of this year and the beginning of next because we need a surge. The only way to hold elections in Afghanistan is to make sure that the southern part of the country is secure. And hopefully there will be a surge in troops not only from the American side but also from the other NATO members that have forces in Afghanistan.

**Q:** *So you think the presence of foreign troops in general is helping the country? Some people say that the more foreign troops the more problems.*

**A:** No, this is not the case in Afghanistan because we don't have any other alternative. Either we have the presence of coalition forces that could help stabilize Afghanistan, or we have Taleban and al Qaida. And we have already experienced from 1996 to 2001 the presence of Taleban and al Qaida and it resulted in terrorist attacks in 9/11 in the US and other attacks in Europe. I think that there is no alternative, and the West cannot afford to abandon Afghanistan. Either we succeed in the mission of Afghanistan or we let al Qaida run Afghanistan.

**Q:** *You mentioned the elections. Is there a risk that they could be delayed for security reasons?*

**A:** I think the presidential elections have already been delayed. Normally it should have been in the spring, but now people are talking about holding the elections at end of summer or beginning of fall next year. So there has been a delay of a couple of months, of three to four months, but it is a technical decision. Voter registration will require some time and once that's done we could hold elections. If it is a matter of some months it's okay, but if the elections are delayed for a year or two then it becomes problematic in the country. And Mr. Karzai's government will lose its legitimacy if we do not hold elections next year.

**Q:** *Why is there not a debate on the elections discussing issues like human rights, and the future of the economy of the country? Usually when there is an election there is also a debate with a lot of positions presented.*

**A:** Although they are not transmitted or reflected in the western media, there are discussions about elections in Afghanistan. Until now we know that President Karzai will run again but we don't have any other potential candidate. And first of all we are waiting for the elections in the US. After that I hope some serious people will run for the 2009 elections and once we know the names of these people then I think a true debate will start. But the only difference that we have from other democracies is that we don't have political parties, so without having political parties it's very difficult to have a political and economic agenda. So I think the debate will be mainly on personalities and it will not be a broad debate about political platform and agenda, it will be again on personality.

**Q:** *Any prediction of candidates? Or is it too early?*

**A:** Well, we know that president Karzai will run again, there are some talks about Mr. Khalilzad, the US Ambassador to the UN, but he hasn't said anything himself, and there are some maybe smaller candidates right now but we haven't heard the big news.

**Q:** *Do you think it's possible to include the Taleban in the political process, for the election or in other contexts, or do you think that they will always look for a quarrel?*

**A:** I think the Afghan government offered an olive branch to the Taleban long ago, and invited them to join the peace process. Besides the big names that are on the UN list of people involved with the Taleban regime and the terrorism, many of them are free to join the government. We have now what's called a mutation of the Taleban movement. The older leaders are no longer influential, and we have a new generation of Taleban and they are unwilling to negotiate. And it is very difficult for the Afghan government and the international community to engage them in a peace process, because they categorically deny any talks with the government and we do not know who their true leaders are. Is Mullah Omar still the leader of the Taleban, or is there a new leader? Without knowing their leaders it will be very difficult to engage them in any negotiations.

**Q:** *Another issue widely discussed is the idea of a regional conference on Afghanistan, involving the Kabul government, the Taleban, the neighboring countries and other international actors. Do you think the Taleban will refuse the possibility of higher level talks, or if the international community pressures them they can be included in this kind of process?*

**A:** I was favouring negotiating with the Taleban, especially at least until a year or two years ago, but now it is very difficult because their actions have become much more brutal. For example beheading of people, it is new in Afghanistan, it didn't exist before. Now they are also killing those that are teaching in the schools, that are working for the Afghan government, innocent people. It is very difficult to start negotiation with these groups who know nothing besides violence and brutality. At this stage if you put more military pressure on them, if they know they will be defeated, then we might have a chance at least to get some of them to come and join the Afghan government. But right now they are in a better position. They are the ones who are fighting the Afghan government and the coalition forces, and inflicting a lot of casualties to them. If we

negotiate with them right now then we have to concede a lot to them. It is better if we could improve our position and then to start negotiations.

**Q:** *So you believe that they will be forced to join the negotiations if there is the surge you referred to?*

**A:** Of course if we have a surge in Afghanistan and, for example, the American government is doing a very effective job against the Taleban, attacking their bases, their training camps, their command infrastructures in Pakistan, they will realize that they cannot have the financial and logistical support from Pakistan. If they know that they don't have a safe haven in Pakistan then they have no choice, they can't fight forever. They might think of joining the Afghan government. But as long as we are not effective militarily against them then it will be difficult to force them to negotiate.

**Q:** *What do you think can be done to make sure the poorest people in Afghanistan benefit from the reconstruction process?*

**A:** I think the Afghan National Development Strategy is based on poverty reduction, it's based on the internationally agreed upon document which is the Millennium Development Goals. But unfortunately since we started this project in 2006, I think the rate of poverty has increased and in 2008 we witnessed an extensive drought that affected the northern regions. For 2008 our agricultural harvest was very low, and because of that I think we will have difficulties, especially in the coming winter. In this regard I think we have failed to bring development and humanitarian assistance to the poor people in Afghanistan. A number of people have received benefits, and a very small percentage of Afghan people have become very rich, but these are a minority. The rest of the population is below poverty level. There was a paper published by OXFAM a month or two ago and they say that 5 million people are on the brink of famine in Afghanistan. So it would be a huge development to deal with this issue.

**Q:** *In your opinion which should be the priorities?*

**A:** We have two priorities: one is to improve security, by improving security we can provide justice, and the other one is indeed development. I think if we could work on these two issues we could improve the situation. Without having security you cannot have development, and without development you cannot have a sustainable security in Afghanistan.

**Q:** *In this perspective what should the role of the international community be?*

**A:** I think the international community has to agree on their own policies and strategy in Afghanistan. They have to be coordinated. There are PRTs from rich countries in some provinces and PRTs from poor countries in other provinces so I think that sometimes they do uncoordinated work. Sometimes they build schools without having teachers, they build clinics without having doctors and nurses. I personally wrote an article entitled "Afghanistan Needs a Development Zone", is that someone is able to coordinate and Paddy Ashdown was the best person to become the UN General Secretary's Special Envoy to Afghanistan. It didn't happen, and we need someone really strong who can improve this and work with the Afghan government and the international community.

**Q:** *Some speculations have been made about the Afghan political system: do you think a parliamentary system is better for Afghanistan?*

**A:** I think at this stage we have to be cautious. It is our second term of presidential elections. So at this stage thinking of amending our constitution would be very dangerous, because it could open the door for other people to impose their will in Afghanistan. If we change the system of government we might not be able to control, because there is no adequate mechanism to do it smoothly without having any political problems. So I think if we can hold the election next year we have a president elected by the people and the people could trust him. Then this person could gather a *Loya Jirga* and amend the constitution. Before it could be difficult and could go out of control.

**Q:** *There is some speculation in British press that Washington could intend to shift the chain of command of ISAF from NATO to US CENTCOM. Do you think it is feasible, or a good idea?*

**A:** I think right now the burden of fighting is on Americans alone. The European NATO members are in Afghanistan, but most of them have a defensive position. They will not engage the Taleban until they are fired on so they will respond in a defensive manner. But the Americans are the only forces that try to engage Taleban and pursue them on the other side of the border. And because of that and also because the presence of American forces has increased it would be good to have a unified command, and the better unified command would be for Americans to have command of their forces and of NATO forces. I think if Americans have command in Afghanistan that would be positive, because they have all these military and financial resources in Afghanistan.

**Q:** *How are problems like collateral damage and civilian casualties of bombings and military operations influencing the image that Afghan people have of the United States of America and other NATO countries?*

**A:** I think collateral damage is very difficult to avoid in such a war when you know the Taleban, how they function. A Talib cannot be differentiated from a civilian. The only way to differentiate is that he carries a weapon with him. So it's very difficult for NATO troops to distinguish between an ordinary Afghan - a civilian, and a militant. Most of the time the strategy of the Taleban is to act within villages and houses because they want more civilian casualties since it will create a greater resentment in the civilian population. So this is their strategy. I think it's good to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible. We could always try to reduce it but it would be difficult to eliminate it. Unfortunately, as an Afghan, I know it is very difficult for us to accept our civilian population dying, but what choice do we have? There is always a payback, especially in a war situation. So either we accept the presence of the international forces, or the other alternative is the Taleban. And most of them accept sacrifices in order to defeat the Taleban and bring stability to the country.