

AFGHANISTAN: A SCAN OF CURRENT PEACE EFFORTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is a peace process in Afghanistan possible? Findings from 58 interviews carried out in January and February 2008 in Afghanistan indicate that nascent peace efforts are already under way. Peace initiatives are currently being carried out by the government of Afghanistan and Afghan civil society organizations, but these peace efforts are not receiving enough support from the international community and are disconnected, limiting their impact.

There are multiple tracks to current peace initiatives. One track focuses on political outreach and reconciliation with Taliban and other anti-government groups. The aim of this “political outreach and reconciliation” is to persuade combatants to leave the insurgency and accept the Afghan government. Another, largely civil society-based track focuses on transitional justice through symbolic measures, institutional reform, truth-seeking and documentation, and reconciliation between communities. Unfortunately, work on transitional justice has not received much support. The *Action Plan on Peace, Justice and Reconciliation*, developed by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, however clearly sets out what could be done. Talks with Pakistan through the Peace Jirga, and recommendations to “dialogue” with “the opposition”, seem to be gaining some acceptance by the Afghan government and parliament. Efforts to disband militias linked to government officials, and support to community based peace-building initiatives are also underway. These elements suggest some prerequisites exist for a future peace process.

The question remains, why hasn't a systematic peace process emerged? And what more is needed to support more coordinated peace efforts? Findings from this research study suggest that certain prerequisites are still lacking, namely cohesion and capacity within the Afghan government and parliament to carry out a more structured process. The degree to which various opposition groups are committed to consider peace options is uncertain. The international community also needs to clearly commit to encouraging peace efforts with the government and “the opposition”. A first step would be a clear peace-making and reconciliation mandate for the new United Nations Envoy. And of course, the parameters around how to engage with “the opposition” need to be taken into account by all involved.

The interviewees gave competing visions of what a peace process would look like. The extent to which military force should be used to place pressure on extremists and, perhaps even more moderate elements, remains a contentious issue. Findings also reveal instances where Taliban and former combatants returning to their communities were targeted for attacks. The attacks were due either to military/political confusion caused by a lack of communication or coordination about the return of former combatants, or deliberate misinformation by those seeking revenge.

Most interestingly, findings strongly indicate that negotiations between government and opposition groups are not necessarily the only or even dominant aspect of a peace process. Interviewees said that the legitimacy of any peace process in Afghanistan will ultimately be determined by the extent to which mechanisms for transitional justice are sufficiently addressed. While blanket amnesty clauses for warring parties were condemned, a trials approach to past war crimes was discouraged, fearing such trials could spark revenge attacks. Instead, Afghans interviewed called for documentation and eventual acknowledgement of past war crimes, compensation, and social reconciliation.

Links were noted between corruption, criminality and illegal armed groups. Interviewees stressed the importance of boosting efforts to disband militias in the lead-up to the 2009 elections.

Interviewees had differing opinions about the effectiveness of talks with Pakistan through the Peace Jirga. At best, some saw engagement with Pakistan as a step forward. At worst, the outcomes were seen as symbolic with little practical value. Findings showed that a military response in southern Afghanistan or north western Pakistan was not likely to increase security if fighters simply sought refuge by moving back and forth between the two countries. A political solution to the conflict is needed on both sides of the border.

The work of local civil society organizations is key to a lasting peace. Afghan NGOs are supporting community peace-building through traditional decision-making bodies such as *jirgas* and *shuras*. While *jirgas* and *shuras* were often more positively viewed than government courts, *shuras* and *jirgas* are seen, by some interviewees, to favour those in power to the detriment of marginalized actors, including women.

In the absence of a systematic peace process, Afghans have been and are still working on a number of peace initiatives. Clear strategies, however, to achieve peace and reconciliation, including transitional justice, will not evolve on their own. The prospect for peace grows more remote as violence continues unabated, and no concerted efforts are made to engage all parties in a dialogue for peace.

Summary of Recommendations

Canada should advocate for peace in Afghanistan by:

- ❑ Re-balancing its diplomatic, development and military strategies to place greater emphasis on building conditions necessary for an eventual peace process.
- ❑ Encouraging the international community and Afghan government to strengthen conditions for a future peace process and coordinate current efforts for peace.
- ❑ Supporting women's participation in ongoing peace efforts and in any eventual peace process.
- ❑ Promoting a "peace-making and national reconciliation" role for the new UN Envoy.

- ❑ Investing, financially and technically, in the Government of Afghanistan's peace efforts, including national efforts at establishing a shared vision on political reforms and national reconciliation.
- ❑ Supporting a re-commitment to the *Action Plan on Peace, Justice and Reconciliation* and advocating for the appropriate inclusion of transitional justice, women's rights and human rights in peace efforts.
- ❑ Discouraging blanket amnesty agreements.
- ❑ Supporting security sector reform efforts, including the disbandment of illegal armed groups.
- ❑ Ensuring diplomatic strategies in Pakistan and Afghanistan are complimentary and encourage confidence-building and political cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- ❑ Funding innovative and independent channels (outside the PRTs) for peace-building work including human and women's rights strengthening, access to justice and judicial reform, peace education, ethnic and language rights, land and water rights, and the reintegration of refugees and displaced communities.