

Terror in capital brings fight to elite

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Snap analyses of the most recent attacks in Kabul, which killed five and wounded 71, view them as a Taliban victory that has ratcheted up fear in the Afghan capital at little cost to the insurgents themselves.

Despite an oppressively heavy security presence, the rural-based Taliban have proven yet again that they can sow mayhem in the city. The parallels with the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, when a small group of terrorists launched a highly sophisticated attack on carefully chosen targets were ominous.

At least in the minds of most Afghans, the violence reinforces the impression of President Hamid Karzai being incapable of delivering the most basic ingredients of the peaceful life that they so crave.

It will also strengthen that view among the representatives of 60 countries who will gather in London on January 28 to discuss how to "drive forward our campaign in Afghanistan, to match the increase in military forces with an increased political momentum, to focus the international community on a clear set of priorities across the 43-nation coalition and marshal the maximum international effort to help the Afghan government deliver".

A top priority of the conference is to agree on a new set of blandishments, including vocational training and jobs, to persuade low-level, non-ideological Taliban fighters to abandon the insurgency. A Taliban spokesman has described the attacks as violent rejection of any attempts to buy their loyalty.

US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates has said the attack probably buries any plans to buy off marginal Taliban. In fact, the only change will be one of labels. The Taliban insist that no real Talib will quit fighting in exchange for a decent job. Analysts agree that the great majority who carry arms for the insurgents are not motivated by ideology and it is these men who will be offered carrots to quit.

After the parliament's repeated rejection of most of Karzai's cabinet nominees, the London conference will begin with 11 out of 25 ministries with no approved leader. This adds greatly to the insecurity of the governments which will be asked to pledge billions in new funding, since a cornerstone of redoubled anti-corruption efforts is to hold ministers to account for the misuse of donor funding.

And according to counter-insurgency theory -- and the allies' own plan to create islands of order and to secure, build and hold more and more of them -- terror in the capital can only be a step in the wrong direction.

Yet the apparently obvious analysis of the negative effects of the attack may be wrong.

First, for a well co-ordinated attack involving two suicide bombers and five gunmen, casualties were remarkably light compared with the carnage in Mumbai. Afghan security forces, including counter-terrorist commandos, performed effectively.

Second, a recent opinion poll finds that 70 per cent of Afghans feel good about the country's direction, compared with just 40 per cent last year.

There has been no dramatic progress that could explain this surge of optimism. Instead, the public mood in Afghanistan may be benefiting from indicators that have been so bad for so long that people are rebelling against them out of psychological necessity.

The great majority of Afghans are under 25 and have never known anything but war and poverty. By their standards, the past year has not been the best ever but it was far less hellish than the worst days of the civil war that scarred many of their childhoods.

Unlike then, most of the powerful countries in the world are making significant investments of blood and treasure to support Afghanistan. Unlike during the Soviet occupation, when the superpowers battled one another through Afghan proxies, today the world is united in backing the government.

Making this government worthy of its people's loyalty and support is the key to the Western allies being able to quit Afghanistan and leave behind a durable peace. If the latest attacks have any lasting effect, it may be to end the illusion of Kabul as a safe haven and turn the entire country into what the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu called "death ground", a situation where everyone must stand and fight because there is no escape.

From outside Afghanistan, it may seem that every Afghan must already be convinced of this. But the Taliban is mostly a rural force and the vast majority of fighting has been in the villages of the south and east. Despite occasional spectacular attacks on government buildings or foreign targets, Kabul has been generally peaceful. Such is the difference between the capital and the provinces that nearly all government officials with any connections use them to get permission to stay in Kabul rather than doing their jobs in their assigned posts in the villages where most people live.

This peculiar form of nepotism results in catastrophic short staffing in all government departments in the conflict-affected provinces, crippling government performance and greatly increasing the relative appeal of the Taliban in those areas.

Kabul remains safer than the villages of the south and east. This latest attack, though, may finally have convinced the elite in Kabul that they must all hang together or they will all hang separately.

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