

Advice on Afghanistan

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CBC's *Around the World* host Harry Forestell had an opportunity recently to sit down with Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist based in Lahore who writes for several newspapers including the Daily Telegraph and The Washington Post.

Rashid has written extensively on Islamic extremism in the region and is on tour promoting his newly released book, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*.

Forestell interviewed him in Toronto.

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist based in Lahore, told CBC's Harry Forestell that the Pakistan military has a policy to give sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban leadership.

(CBC)Forestell: Canadian troops are risking their lives every day in Afghanistan, fighting militants, in an effort to bring stability to that country. And yet time and time again, we hear about Pakistan's failure to control those same insurgents within its own borders. Why isn't Pakistan helping more?

Rashid: I think the military in Pakistan has had a strategic policy since 2001, to give sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban leadership. Much of that is taking place in Quetta, the town in Baluchistan, exactly opposite Kandahar, where the Canadians are based.

I think one of the mistakes the Canadians made when they deployed in Afghanistan was to take at American face value the assurance that Kandahar would be absolutely peaceful and that these militants wouldn't come across the border.

In fact, the Americans, under Canadian insistence, went to President [Pervez] Musharraf and said, 'Make sure that the Canadians are not upset and nothing happens.' The Pakistanis didn't listen.

What we've had since 2005: the big offensive in Arghandab in 2006 when up to 1,500 Taliban were killed and layers upon layers of Taliban coming in from across the border fighting Canadian troops.

Forestell: The U.S. and others have warned that if Pakistan cannot control the territory within its own borders, that the U.S. or NATO would do it for them. What kind of reaction would there be from Pakistan if that were to happen?

Rashid: I think Pakistan can control its own borders if it had the will. At the moment what we're seeing is a lack of will as far as the military regime is concerned. I think part of that failure is related to the Bush administration because it has given the Musharraf regime far too much leeway.

Right after 9/11, the Americans told Musharraf that you help us catch al-Qaeda, we don't care what happens to the Taliban. Now that was exactly what Musharraf wanted to hear. He wanted to support the Taliban but he was very helpful in getting al-Qaeda. For several years, he caught top al-Qaeda people.

Now that policy, all those chickens have come home to roost, because the real threat in the region is not necessarily al-Qaeda, it is the Taliban and (Afghan) President Hamid Karzai's outburst the other day was to demonstrate the fact that the real threat in the region was the Taliban. What is your policy regarding the Taliban?

Forestell: But the Taliban and al-Qaeda, you have said yourself, are inextricably linked, especially in the most recent attacks in Arghandab.

Rashid: They are linked in the sense that al-Qaeda is a very small outfit along the Pakistani-Afghan border. But they have enormous strategic influence.

They give the right training. I am sure the jailbreak in Kandahar was organized by al-Qaeda. It was a typical al-Qaeda operation, they probably planned it, but it wasn't implemented by them. It was implemented by the Taliban.

What al-Qaeda's role really is, it provides this gateway to Iraq. There are a lot of Taliban fighters going to Iraq and learning new tactics. It's giving expertise. Its helping in the drugs trade, earn money for the Taliban. Al-Qaeda has been playing a kind of supervisory role.

Forestell: But ultimately it's the Taliban in the Pakistani territories that are coming across the border. Now you called the (Pakistani) elections in February hopeful. What certainty is there that a truly democratic government in Pakistan is going to be any more reliable an ally in the short term in terms of helping Canadians in Afghanistan than Gen. Musharraf has been?

Rashid: Well, in the 60 years since Pakistan's birth, we've had this conflict between civil power and military power. The civilians have never controlled the army.

The army today continues to make foreign policy. It is making policy on Afghanistan and India. It doesn't share that with the civilian prime minister or the Parliament or with anyone else. These peace deals that have been conducted over the last couple of months have been conducted solely by the army and the intelligence services.

Why I say hopeful is because I hope. For the first time the Pakistani people voted for secular parties, voted out Musharraf's party, voted out the Islamic fundamentalist parties, and brought in the secular government which wants to fight terrorism on a broad front.

It wants military clout but it also wants development and reconstruction to take place side by side. I think that they have a good vision but the military and the civilians have to talk on one page, they have to be working together. The Americans are not helping this by solely supporting Musharraf and the military. The Americans have shown little inclination to support the civilian government.

Forestell: Until then, are we wasting our time in Afghanistan? Is Canada wasting its time?

Rashid: No, on the contrary. I think Canada has to be there, the international forces have to be there. But first of all, you have to deal with this insurgency in a much more strident way.

In other words, you have to have a policy toward Pakistan. Canada does not have a policy toward Pakistan. If it does, it is a very private policy. You have to have a public policy towards Pakistan.

You are one of the largest aid donors to Pakistan and Afghanistan. You have a lot of clout, you have the third-largest contingent of troops in Afghanistan, you have the highest casualty rate in Afghanistan, compared to your population.

Now all that gives you clout in NATO, in the G8, in all international forums and of course, it gives you clout in the region.

What I would like to see is Canada, perhaps not working alone, perhaps with other like-minded countries, perhaps the Brits, who are next door in Helmand or the Dutch in Uruzgan, working together to really build a proper Pakistan policy and to be public about it.