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A prophetic voice on Taliban calls out again

By Jane Perlez

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**LAHORE, Pakistan:** Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani expert on the Taliban, who until 9/11 knew them better than almost any outsider, has over the decades turned out to be something of a prophet in the region, though mostly of the Cassandra type.

A longtime critic of the Taliban who raised alarms about the group back in the mid-1990s, Rashid, 59, has just come out with his fourth book: "Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia" (Viking, 2008), a caustic compendium of the mistakes by the Bush administration and, by extension, its regional allies, in tackling Islamic militancy.

His central argument is not original: that the money and blood spent on Iraq should have been invested instead in Afghanistan, rebuilding the country after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 drove the Taliban from power, in order to prevent the Taliban resurgence so much in evidence now. Since that was not done, Rashid says, the options for stabilizing Afghanistan have dwindled to one: Pakistan must cut its ties to the Afghan Taliban.

Rashid, who has been roaming the wilds of Afghanistan and western Pakistan since the 1960s, distinguishes between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, the latter a force that is helping to shelter Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda cells in the lawless tribal areas of Pakistan.

"The Pakistani Army needs to make a strategic decision to dump support for the Afghan Taliban leadership in Quetta," he said, referring to the desert city in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan where the Afghan Taliban keep a rear base. "The Afghan Taliban can be quietly arrested and put under house arrest."

Only after that, he says, will Pakistan, and by extension, the United States, be able to reduce the threat from Al Qaeda and their brethren, the Pakistani Taliban who operate out of the tribal lands. If the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan are not eliminated, the United States and its NATO allies will find it impossible to win what has turned out to be an unexpectedly prolonged war in Afghanistan, he argues.

Pakistani intelligence and military officials deny that there are any Afghan Taliban in Pakistani territory, but that does not stop Rashid from taking them on. Nor is he shy about pointing out what he considers the mistakes of the Bush administration and its failure to be tougher on the Pakistani government.

For too long, he insists, the Pakistan Army and the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency have protected the Afghan Taliban as a future "strategic asset" against rival India in the event the United States - widely considered a fair-weather friend - withdraws its patronage from Pakistan.

He says the Bush administration was too gentle with President Pervez Musharraf after the Pakistani leader gave his commitment to the campaign against terror following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. "The Americans never said strongly enough that Pakistan had to stop supporting the Taliban - that was because Musharraf was giving them the Al Qaeda types," he said, a reference to the capture of top Al Qaeda operatives who were captured by the Pakistanis and handed over to the United States. Bush should have insisted that Musharraf quash the Taliban too, he said.

The son of a military officer, Rashid got his first taste of guerrilla warfare after graduating from Cambridge in the late 1960s. Steeped in the era's favorites, Marx, Mao and Che, he took off for the hills of Baluchistan. He stayed for 10 years.

He was a guerrilla fighter and political organizer, and with a couple of like-minded Pakistani friends led peasants fighting for autonomy against the Pakistani government and army, with its helicopters and well-armed men.

After bouts of hepatitis and malaria and lost teeth, he emerged not exactly disillusioned, but defeated, he recalled from the comfort of his study overlooking a garden of palms.

The experience proved to be the launching pad for his real career: the prolific chronicler in books, magazines and newspaper columns of Afghanistan, Central Asia, and his homeland, Pakistan, all places that Western writers have found difficult to gain access to, let alone comprehend in their full depth and complexity.

He got to know Afghanistan when he was still behind the lines in Baluchistan in the late 1970s. The Afghan president at the time, Mohammed Daoud, provided sanctuary to Baluch refugees from the separatist movement, and in 1978, Rashid was in Kabul for the Communist coup. He was in Kandahar a year later when the Soviet military rolled in.

"I saw the invasion when all the Soviet tanks came from the town of Herat into the bazaar in Kandahar," he said. "The soldiers got off their tanks and asked for tea. There was no tension."

The tanks continued on to Kabul.

With his perfect English and his British education, he became what he calls the "intellectual repository" for Western journalists who parachuted into the Afghan capital for the Soviet Union's last big invasion. They found Afghanistan the end of the world, and trusted Rashid as their political and cultural interpreter.

It is a role he has played on a larger canvas ever since as a writer and, occasionally, a behind-the-scenes adviser to diplomats who have grappled with what to do about the Taliban.

His book "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia" (Yale University Press, 2001), an account of the rise of the mullahs in Afghanistan, was published just before the Sept. 11 attacks and has sold 1.5 million copies in English, an astonishing number for an academic press.

He was the first foreign journalist, he said, to visit the Taliban in 1994 as they emerged from the debris of civil strife in Afghanistan after the Soviets left.

"I persuaded an ABC television journalist to come with me to Kandahar, and I was shocked they wouldn't allow us to take pictures," he said. "I'd been living with the mujahedeen who loved publicity. When these guys in Kandahar wouldn't be photographed, I suddenly realized this was a completely new thing."

Intrigued, he joined their battle groups and, with his nose for being in the right place at the right time, he was in Kabul with the Taliban when they captured the capital in 1996. In his reporting, for *The Far Eastern Economic Review* and the British newspaper *The Independent*, he warned against Pakistan's decision in the mid-1990s to support the Taliban. "I wrote that it meant a continuation of the Afghan civil war."

He eventually wore out his welcome with the Taliban with the publication of his book. These days, he is more likely to be found around the dining table of his Lahore home, which is known for its fine cuisine.

Rashid is sought after for advice by diplomats in Islamabad and Kabul, and by policy makers in NATO capitals and Washington. When she was Pakistani prime minister, Benazir Bhutto asked whether he would be interested in becoming ambassador to Afghanistan, but he declined, preferring the rough and tumble of frontier reporting.

His writings have never sat well with the Inter-Services Intelligence, a subject he says he does not want to discuss beyond saying he is "unpopular." Like many Pakistanis, he has watched the unraveling of Musharraf, but he declined to predict his moment of exit.

He is on good terms with Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's widower, leader of the dominant Pakistan People's Party and regarded as the most powerful man in the country. But after a two-hour lunch with Zardari recently, Rashid said that he worried the new government "has no clue" about the "multilayered terrorist cake" that flourishes in the tribal areas.

Of the new government's attitude to the Islamic militants, he says, "They are not briefed, and I am deeply concerned."

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