

Is a 'debacle' on the horizon for Afghanistan?

Alan Philps, Associate Editor . The National, UAE.

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Ahmed Rashid, a best-selling author, fears the next nine months in Afghanistan will be 'the grimmest in the region since 2001'. Jonathan Player for The National

London // The West should be prepared for a "debacle" in Afghanistan in the coming months as the resurgent Taliban seek to take advantage of George W Bush's lame duck status, says a leading Pakistani observer.

The seepage of power in Washington as Mr Bush winds up his final year in power is mirrored in the region, where the new Pakistani government has yet to find its feet, and Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, has failed to extend his authority much beyond the capital.

"There is a leadership vacuum in too many places. I fear that the next nine months are going to be the grimmest in the region since 2001," said Ahmed Rashid, who has chronicled the Taliban since the 1990s.

He predicts the Taliban will try to win a psychological victory by taking over a town in Afghanistan, where they could declare an alternative government and scuttle plans for next year's elections.

They believe they are also likely to target one of the weaker Nato allies – such as Italy, Spain or the Netherlands – where public opinion has scant support for deployment of troops in Afghanistan, and force a withdrawal.

"They clearly want to create a debacle in the next six to nine months. This does not mean taking Kandahar – Nato would not allow that city to fall. The issue is to create mayhem and chaos, and to demoralise the state structure," Mr Rashid said in an interview in London, where he is launching his latest book, *Descent Into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*.

Mr Rashid is a master of timing: his latest book is published just as the Taliban and their allies are on the offensive on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, the first time in seven years they have been strong enough to move on two fronts.

The Pakistani government has mobilised 5,000 members of its security forces to drive away Islamic warlords from around the city of Peshawar, amid warnings of the "Talibanisation" of the frontier region, although many are critical of the operation's soft touch. A Pentagon report has just confirmed that the Taliban forces in Afghanistan have now coalesced into a "resilient insurgency".

Mr Rashid's central thesis is that the Iraq war, launched by Mr Bush in 2003, was a reckless sideshow, diverting resources from the real battle to stabilise Afghanistan and hunt down Osama bin Laden, the al Qa'eda leader, and Mullah Omar, the Taliban chief, who are believed to be hiding in Pakistan.

This argument is bolstered by casualty figures released this week: in June, more western soldiers died in Afghanistan (46) than in Iraq (31), confirming a trend that first appeared in May.

Mr Rashid's earlier book, *Taliban*, published in 2000, was propelled to the best-seller lists by the September 11 attacks the following year, and became required reading for every diplomat and journalist trying to understand the regime that harboured bin Laden.

Mr Rashid sees the military action around Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, as of no consequence, a "little game" played by the army. The militias are retreating, not being dismantled and will return for the next crisis, which he believes will be sparked by soaring food and fuel prices.

The militias are, in any case, not strong enough to take Peshawar, a city of three million. But while attention is focused there, they are quietly spreading through towns and villages in a process of "creeping Talibanisation".

His new book is written in anger – at the Bush administration for throwing away a chance to bring peace to Afghanistan; at Pervez Musharraf, the president of Pakistan, for allowing the Taliban leaders to establish themselves on his territory; and at Mr Karzai, for failing to modernise the state and relying instead on Afghan warlords.

He speaks with the force of a man whose stories of the continuing links between Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Taliban were largely ignored – until western casualties began to mount in Afghanistan.

A central theme is that the Americans have never understood Pakistan, even though the countries were allied in the Cold War and after September 11. The Americans have always seen Pakistan as an "appendage" in fighting the Russians and then the Taliban, failing to see that for Islamabad, these were never the real enemies: its basic conflict is with India.

Even though Mr Musharraf committed Pakistan to defeating the Taliban in 2001, the military decided the national interest required the opposite, Mr Rashid argues in his book. The military worked to protect the Taliban as a proxy force in case the Americans left, and the country returned to anarchy or fell under the control of pro-Indian forces.

The US-backed Northern Alliance – which drove the Taliban out of Kabul – is regarded with deep suspicion in Pakistan for its links with India. Even Mr Karzai, who studied at an Indian university, is seen as a potential Trojan horse.

Failure to understand this has led the Nato alliance, with 38,000 troops in Afghanistan, into a quagmire. The forces fighting in the south – particularly the

British in Helmand province and the Canadians in Kandahar – find they are fighting an enemy that is constantly resupplied and reinforced from over the Pakistan border. They are now fighting an unwinnable war – though the use of air power ensures they can hold the cities and major towns.

Nato's problems stem from its mistake in seeing Afghanistan as a conflict apart.

“You cannot understand Afghanistan as a box with four walls. This is a regional war. It spreads into Iran and Central Asia, and into Pakistan and India,” Mr Rashid said.

The next US administration will have to engage in some complex diplomacy. To dismantle Taliban safe havens in Pakistan will require action by the Pakistani military. But the generals will not do that until India has made peace over the disputed territory of Kashmir, a problem which has festered for 60 years.

“The new policymakers in Washington will have to take all this into account. This war will not be solved in the way that Bush tried, when he brought Karzai and Musharraf to dinner and asked them to patch up their differences. There are much deeper issues at stake here.”

For once, after all his doomsaying, Mr Rashid has something positive to say as he points a way forward. But when you look at the list of countries from Iran to India that will have to join the diplomatic dance, it would be a rash US president who would embark on such an enormous task.

But if Mr Rashid is right, then the military solution is already a lost cause and there is no alternative. Indeed, he believes Mr Musharraf is waiting for the time – which has not yet come – when the United States comes to him begging to open talks with the Taliban leadership holed up in the mountains of Pakistan.