

Wednesday, Feb 18, 2009

Posted on Mon, Feb. 16, 2009

Afghanistan requires different kind of surge

By MARY SANCHEZ
The Kansas City Star

Remember Afghanistan, the lair of Osama bin Laden, where the war on terror was launched? With all the economic trouble that the Obama administration and Congress are dealing with, it's easy to forget this ticking time bomb in Asia.

The U.S.-led coalition forces have failed to check the resurgence of the Taliban, and our remote-strike tactics have killed thousands of civilians, turning many Afghans against America. And the conflict is destabilizing Pakistan, the nuclear power next door.

One of the foremost American authorities on Afghanistan is Thomas E. Gouttierre, dean of International Studies and director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Ever since the horrific days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when I first spoke with him, Gouttierre had said that our mission in Afghanistan was going to be more fraught with peril and hardship than U.S. leaders were willing to admit. "We are in for a long and unfortunate kind of war," Gouttierre said in 2001.

Gouttierre has lived and worked in Afghanistan for the better part of five decades. Beginning in 1996, he tracked Osama bin Laden on behalf of the U.N. peacekeeping mission there. In September 2001, Gouttierre said that the historic tribal and ethnic splits in the country needed to be understood, and that the various factions that were fighting the Taliban could just as easily turn against the U.S. efforts.

He worried that the use of remote bombings would lead to the deaths of civilians and inflame passions against foreign military efforts. Our strategic priority, he argued at the time, should be building Afghan military and police forces. He spoke of developing a Marshall Plan of sorts for the country, but one that employed Afghans primarily rather than the usual for-profit "reconstruction" poorly coordinated by donor nations.

Finally, he always spoke of the abiding obligation of the U.S. to right an old wrong with Afghanistan: The U.S., when it pulled aid out of Afghanistan after the Soviets were defeated in 1989, helped create a vacuum of political power the Taliban later filled.

Lots of interested parties, from the U.S. State Department to international journalists, asked Gouttierre about Afghanistan, but few seem to have listened. Our greatest asset, he said repeatedly over the years, is the average Afghan, who was willing to wait and see what America was going to do to help his country. "It's been frustrating to see all of this occur over the last seven years," he said this month, caught by cell phone as he traveled through Moscow. "The Afghans are dismayed by our inept approach."

This month, Gen. David Petraeus warned America of "a downward spiral of security" in Afghanistan and noted that efforts now might be too little too late.

Richard C. Holbrooke, special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, concurred, describing the situation in Afghanistan as tougher than Iraq.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates concluded that "we are lost" if our military cannot stop killing so many Afghan civilians. And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chastised the massive private contracts that have been let to U.S. firms for work in Afghanistan. They are poorly coordinated and have essentially wasted billions of dollars, she said, quoting recent government audits.

The guiding principles for our involvement in Afghanistan should have been simple: Help Afghans help themselves. Ideally that would have happened after the U.S.-backed defeat of the Soviet occupation. But at least in recent days, leaders such as Petraeus have begun calling for a different kind of surge, one that will invest Afghans in rebuilding their own country. Finally, Gouttierre's message is finding a chorus.

Gouttierre said, "Let's hope that with new opportunities, we can serve ourselves and the Afghans better."

Distributed by Tribune Media Services