

Donors Pledge Less Aid to Afghanistan During a Violent Chapter

Intense violence, including a deadly market bombing on Tuesday in one of the few remaining Afghan havens, Bamiyan, has Afghan officials pleading for continued assistance.

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HERAT, Afghanistan — In one city, a gilded hall filled with suited Afghan and Western officials served as a forum to discuss the need for a lasting peace in Afghanistan, even as donors there lowered aid targets for the country out of concern about corruption and uncertainty.

In another, a bazaar crowded with poor farmers and shopkeepers turned into a stage for carnage when twinned bombs exploded at dusk, killing at least 14 people and shattering the sense that any place in Afghanistan could be a haven from violence.

The two scenes on Tuesday — playing out between an international donors' conference in Geneva, Switzerland, and the deadliest bombing in more than a decade in Bamiyan, one of the last relatively safe places in Afghanistan — cut to the heart of the wrenching crisis facing Afghans in a particularly hazardous moment.

American troops are leaving more quickly than expected, despite intensified fighting that has seen the Taliban strengthening its hold on the countryside. Peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have been stalled for weeks, with Afghan officials accusing the insurgency of seeming little interested in progress. And Afghan civilians are being killed in attack after attack, in the meantime.

The Taliban denied carrying out the attack in Bamiyan. The province is home to mostly Shiite Hazaras, a religious and ethnic minority group that has been repeatedly targeted by Islamic State loyalists in the country. The terrorist group is seen by many as a spoiler group for any lasting peace settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Just a 30-minute flight from Kabul, Bamiyan is a tourist destination for Afghans and international visitors alike, who often travel there to see what remains of the ancient Buddha statues that were destroyed by the Taliban before the U.S. invasion in 2001. The province is one of the few places left in the country where people can walk about without constant fear of being killed, and it has served as a refuge from violence for people who are unable to leave the country.

But fighting in the province has intensified in recent years, and the roads into Bamiyan are frequently patrolled by the Taliban, who often pull people out of their vehicles for questioning, or worse.

November has been a bloody month for civilians in Afghanistan, with at least 164 killed so far, according to data compiled by The New York Times.

But as the one public hospital in Bamiyan city quickly filled with wounded from Tuesday's blast, Afghan officials in Kabul and Geneva braced themselves for news that they would receive less international aid than in years past.



President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan speaking before Parliament last month. He recently established a new anti-corruption commission, years after he pledged to do so following his election in 2014. Mariam Zuhaib/Associated Press

The last two pledging conferences — in Tokyo in 2012, and in Brussels in 2016 — promised more than \$16 billion and more than \$15 billion in aid, respectively. More than 50 percent of the Afghan government’s national budget is made of international funds.

On Tuesday, ministers and diplomats from more than 60 countries promised around \$12 billion over the next four years — a reduced pledge, with harder conditions attached, including tangible progress toward a peace deal.

“The choices made in peace negotiations will affect the size and scope of future international support and assistance,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, addressing the Geneva conference by video.

With the American troop force in Afghanistan expected to come down to around 2,500 by the end of January, donors are trying to position international aid as a check against the Taliban’s aggression on the battlefield.

The peace process “requires more signs of trust and commitment to peace by the Taliban. Violence must stop, not tomorrow, but right now,” Josep Borrell Fontelles, the European Union’s foreign affairs and security chief. In a message aimed at Taliban leaders, he added that “any attempt to restore an Islamic emirate would have an impact on our future engagement.”

Afghanistan’s foreign minister, Mohammed Hanif Atmar, welcomed these announcements, along with donor insistence that the Taliban respect the need for a peace that preserves gains in education, and protects the rights of women and minorities whom the insurgency oppressed while in power. The insurgency “must listen to the demands made by the entire world today,” he told reporters.

But donors were equally insistent that continued aid was contingent on effective reforms to tackle the scourge of corruption. The Afghan government “must do its part to implement essential elements of stability and security,” Mr. Pompeo warned, emphasizing the need for economic reforms and more efforts to fight corruption.

Faced with the possibility of less money this time, Afghan officials have emphasized their commitment to human rights improvements and to the peace negotiations as reason enough for continued foreign backing. Addressing the Geneva conference from Kabul by video conference on Tuesday, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan asked the international community “to help us do more with less.”

“Financial resources — aid — will continue to be critical to our growth for the foreseeable future, even as we have balanced that dependency markedly over the past six years,” he said.

Just days before the Geneva conference, Mr. Ghani established a new anti-corruption commission, years after he pledged to do so following his election in 2014. Anti-corruption experts in Afghanistan see the commission as the latest in a repeated number of such bodies set up over the past two decades, and it is riddled with troubling issues, including a lack of independent oversight, and staffed with people close to Mr. Ghani’s office.

The Taliban, pointing to the Afghan government's endemic corruption, said the funds from the Geneva conference should be given directly to the people or to the Taliban for the sake of transparency. The insurgent group has long-used the government's shortcomings for propaganda purposes, especially its inability to secure the capital, Kabul.

Aside from the Taliban insurgency wreaking havoc in almost every corner of the country and killing dozens almost daily, the coronavirus has set back Afghanistan's economic growth by years, according to a recent United Nations report.

International diplomats, whose countries' economies are also suffering from the pandemic, have grown openly weary of the 19-year-old war, and frustrated by the Afghan government's repeated promises to combat corruption without fully following through.

"There has always been shortsightedness on the part of the international community," said Sayed Ikram Afzali, the executive director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan. "And that has been exploited by the government to the maximum extent."

Thomas Gibbons-Neff reported from Herat, Afghanistan, and Nick Cumming-Bruce from Geneva, Switzerland. Fahim Abed contributed reporting from Kabul, and Fatima Faizi from Herat.