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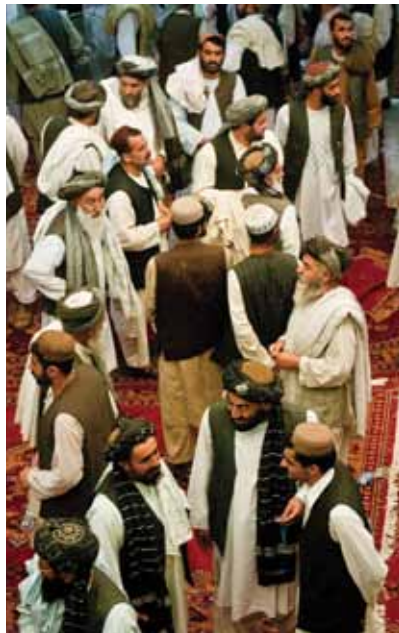
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Afghan Experience Calls for Innovative Approach to DDR

Criminal activities, illegal arms trading and violence against civilians continue threatening Afghanistan's stability and security, and hinder the work of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. As a result, potential investors are discouraged from making heavy capital investments, and NGOs cannot implement projects that could dramatically improve the socioeconomic condition of civilians. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration appear to be crucial steps for the success of post-conflict recovery in Afghanistan. Conducting DDR in the complex and turbulent Afghan environment has proven difficult, and this article explores past attempts at DDR in Afghanistan to draw lessons for future efforts.

The Bonn Agreement was a power-sharing arrangement between Northern Alliance factions and militias that assisted in U.S.-backed efforts against the Taliban.¹ Over time, these groups have become largely self-sufficient. Many of these groups were founded in direct opposition to the central government in Kabul, some along ideological lines. According to a 2009 report on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in Afghanistan published by the Small Arms Survey, Afghanistan's various interest groups include "multiple *Mujahedeen* parties, tribal militias, warlords, paramilitary organizations, a trained state officer corps, armed intelligence services, and both mono-ethnic and multi-ethnic armed groups and alliances."² Established under the Bonn Agreement, the government was comprised of many autonomous groups whose allegiance to the state and one another was questionable.²

The disarmament process reflected these divisions, and as a tentative agreement between volatile allies, the process was slow. Strict disarmament efforts were viewed as a risk to the new state's authority and solidarity, as many of the leaders who drafted the Bonn Agreement were



Tribal and religious leaders gather following a *shura* held by Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kandahar, Afghanistan.
Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O'Donald.

involved with armed groups. The Bonn Agreement called for the *Mujahedeen* militias of the Northern Alliance and the other armed groups outside the government to be dissolved, reorganized as the Afghan Military Forces and brought under the auspices of the Afghan Ministry of Defense. However, the agreement did little to determine the actual disarmament process.¹

In 2002, the government established the Afghan National Army and dismantled the Afghan Military Forces.³ With limited effort in January 2003, the government established the National Disarmament Commission, an oversight body tasked with implementing the internationally led disarmament effort—the Afghan New Beginnings Programme. President Hamid Karzai and his administration moved quickly to bolster the National Disarmament Commission, expanding its initial mandate to include the collection, stockpiling and eventual transfer of one million weapons to the Afghan Ministry of Defense depot in Kabul. Viewed by many as an effort to preempt any international disarmament effort, the program displayed a lack of transparency, and a host of questionable dealings led many observers to doubt its legitimacy. The government has yet to release the program's final figures.¹

International pressure mounted against the expansion of the National Disarmament Commission. In March 2003, the international community pushed the Afghan government to establish the Afghan New Beginnings Programme, led by the United Nations Development Programme. The National

Disarmament Commission and its tasks were integrated into the new program, which then began its own DDR program. Initially, the organization's goal was collecting weapons from 100,000 Afghan Military Forces combatants, but the number was not calculated on the basis of a thorough needs assessment. Spontaneous demobilization and fluctuating membership is characteristic of Afghan militias, and after one year of operation, estimates were lowered to 60,000 participants.⁴ In fact, the Small Arms Survey notes that virtually no standard preparatory and investigatory measures were taken to determine needs, capacities or best practices before the launch of the Afghan New Beginnings Programme.¹

AMF groups submitted a list of fighters to the Ministry of Defense in Kabul. Ministry of Defense staff verified these lists, and trusted community leaders received them for approval. If the fighters met eligibility criteria—essentially, if they had at least eight months of prior service and the ability to submit a serviceable weapon upon disarmament—then they surrendered their weapons and started the process of reintegration. The reintegration process began with a meeting between a combatant and a case worker, in which the case worker recommended possible avenues of reintegration—i.e., future education, vocational training, etc. Afterward, militiamen were discharged under the condition that they swear off violence. In the program's first phases, militiamen were given cash payments, but this ended after authorities discovered that former commanders seized these funds.¹

Though the program began successfully, issues of fraud and pilfering surrounded it. In some cases, commanders were suspected of providing their least loyal and most poorly trained fighters for disarmament, which happened in previous National Disarmament Commission programs.⁴ Moreover, cash incentives led many to register under falsified identification. Old lines of patronage and loyalty still existed, threatening government legitimacy, authority and the rule of law. To address these problems, the Afghan New Beginnings Programme began the Commander Incentive Programme in 2004 and offered a generous package to commanders willing to comply with DDR efforts. A new law prohibiting political ties to militia groups, which effectively banned politically ambitious commanders from upcoming elections, and according to *Small Arms Survey*, a shift in U.S. policy toward promoting DDR efforts created a climate for success.¹ By mid-2006, 460 commanders of the 550 identified had participated in the program.¹

In 2006, the DDR mandates expired, and the final participants gave up their weapons in a ceremony with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.⁵ The removal of Afghan Military



Members of a combined Afghan and coalition security force collected a cache of weapons after clearing a known Haqqani network foreign fighter encampment site in Paktika province, Afghanistan. The insurgents had stockpiled weapons, including rocket-propelled grenade launchers, heavy machine guns and AK-47 assault rifles.
Photo courtesy of International Security Assistance Force.

Forces from the Ministry of Defense budget, the disbandment of militia checkpoints and the restriction of commander privileges positively affected Afghan civilians, former combatants and security forces within Afghanistan. By significantly reducing militia arsenals and optimistically reintegrating former soldiers, the program has fostered a more stable environment in the country. However, the situation remains tenuous, and observers worry that, if tensions escalate, the decommissioned units could quickly remobilize.¹ Furthermore, Afghan New Beginnings Programme's efforts only addressed AMF personnel and did not disband armed groups outside of the Northern Alliance.

Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups

During the formal DDR of Afghan Military Forces members, President Karzai issued a decree making all non-AMF militias in Afghanistan illegal. In 2005, the Canadian government offered a grant to establish the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program, charged with fostering, promoting and conducting disarmament and disbandment of armed groups outside of the government. At first, officials estimated that more than 1,800 illegal militias with over 100,000 members existed in Afghanistan. Not only do these militias pose a threat to the government's authority and legitimacy, but they engage in the illegal arms and drug trade, further promoting black-market activities and supporting violent criminal factions within Afghanistan.^{1,6} According to the *Programme of Action Implementation Support System*, the United Nations' informational resource for countering the illegal sale of small arms and light weapons, the new Disbandment of Illegal

Armed Groups program focused on two main initiatives:^{1,7}

1. To improve security through the disarmament and disbandment of illegal armed groups
2. To provide basic development support to communities freed from the threats of illegal armed groups

These two interrelated initiatives were intended to provide an impetus for communities to disarm and reduce the need for illegal activities as a means of socioeconomic empowerment. However, benefits encouraging disarmament were provided at the community level, not at the individual level. Unlike the initial DDR programs, which were based largely on these individual incentives to promote disarmament, the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program activities primarily took a law-enforcement perspective.¹ Problems similar to those faced in earlier DDR efforts encircled the project: Commanders submitted their least serviceable weapons and would often “disarm” militias that had already been through the DDR process.¹ Thus, Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups’ efforts did not adequately reduce the militia arsenals, failed to provide support to ex-combatants seeking reintegration and could not create a viable security situation for disarmed communities. Because of these shortcomings, many regions deemed in compliance to the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program’s demands slipped back into violence. In 2010 alone, six compliant districts relapsed into insurgency, while only 12 were brought into compliance.⁸ However, in spite of its logistical issues and brief mandate, the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program curbed the influence of illegal armed groups and militia leaders on the government.¹

Current Situation and Future Obstacles

Afghanistan remains a country in conflict, and insurgent activities fuel the robust industry of its illegal black market. Militia leaders derive their authority from the pervasion of weapons and traditional patronage networks, which keeps Afghanistan in tumult and prevents many international actors from investing in capital-intensive projects. Security is an overwhelming concern for civilians and government and hinders the progress of development projects, economic enterprises and the rule of law.^{1,6,9,10} Arms and conflict proliferation also prevents NGOs in the country from effectively providing assistance.

As of 2006, Afghanistan was considered the “most dangerous country in the world for aid agencies.”¹⁰ NGOs in Afghanistan became targets for insurgent groups that view internationally coordinated aid agencies and government-supported Afghan NGOs as forms of external interference, even though staff are predominantly Afghan nationals. The

security situation is too volatile for many organizations to extend their efforts outside of the capital in Kabul. For fear of attacks by insurgent groups, NGOs are often forced to settle for less ambitious projects and half-measures.¹⁰

Though small-arms proliferation escalates the violence, hindering NGO work, the disarmament of Afghan militias and civilians proved immensely difficult under a weapons-centric approach, as it addresses only the symptoms of underlying problems—i.e., the deep-rooted patronage culture and the appeal of illegal-commodity markets for poor civilians without viable alternatives.^{1,9,11} One solution may be to focus on incentivizing disarmament with development assistance, an approach that was previously pursued in limited ways. By providing development assistance to distressed communities, international and domestic actors can provide alternatives to the violent cycle of crime and insurgency.^{1,11}



At a forward operating base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, explosive ordnance disposal personnel prepare charges to blow up stockpiled bombs left behind by fleeing al-Qaeda troops. Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, Chief Photographer’s Mate Johnny Bivera.

On the other hand, coupling DDR with development assistance can lead insurgent groups to improperly connect humanitarian NGOs that deliver development assistance without political or military ties with Coalition forces, and this puts the NGOs in peril. One of the primary avenues for development assistance and local capacity-building is the NGO community, and various Afghan NGOs often deliver the development assistance. Yet, the more these NGOs associate with the Afghan Government, foreign security forces and their disarmament mission, the more insurgents view them as foreign occupiers and targets for insurgent violence. U.S. and Coalition forces further distorted this association between NGOs and foreign military forces when they established Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These Provincial Reconstruction Teams operate like humanitarian NGOs

but are extensions of the foreign military forces and thus have strategic and political ends.¹⁰

Conclusion

The struggle to disband armed groups is one of Afghanistan’s most prevalent problems, threatening civilians, NGOs, commercial actors and the government. Despite numerous efforts, developing effective programs for confronting illegal armed groups and the black market activities supporting them have yet to occur. However, some important lessons from the past can guide and focus future efforts:

1. Reintegration and economic development are essential components to discourage illegal armed groups, and demobilized militia members must be provided with alternative opportunities.
2. Weapons collection cannot serve as the focal point for Afghanistan’s

DDR. It neither addresses the underlying causes for armed insurgency nor weakens the arsenals of these militias, and commanders generally hand over their weakest weapons and least trained fighters.

3. Disarmament practitioners must provide illegal armed groups with disbandment incentives but must be careful to maintain the distinction between humanitarian NGOs and foreign military actors. Also, development assistance designed to encourage DDR must be publicly distinguished from nonpartisan, unaffiliated humanitarian work that other NGOs provide.

These three lessons are not easily applied, but if properly implemented, they could lead to a more stable and secure Afghanistan. By using development and not weapons collection as the driving force behind DDR in Afghanistan, practitioners

can provide alternatives to illegal activities. Furthermore, practitioners can provide an impetus to disarm without alienating Afghan civilians who may see gun ownership as a necessity in a volatile security situation. By rejecting the weapons-centric mentality, actors involved with DDR can focus on more tangible measures of success, such as the extent to which DDR activities reduce Afghanistan’s overall level of violence and illegal activity. Work focused primarily on removing the motivation to participate in illegal armed groups more easily accommodates the complex Afghan cultural identity and adapts to the long history of violent conflict in the country. ☺

~ Jeremiah Smith, CISR staff

See endnotes page 81

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News Brief

Agnès Marcaillou Appointed UNMAS Director

In March 2012, the United Nations Mine Action Service appointed Agnès Marcaillou as Director.¹ Marcaillou replaced Justin Brady, who served as Acting Director from 11 April 2011 to 19 March 2012. Brady became Head of Office for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for Somalia.

Previously Chief of the Regional Disarmament Branch in the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, Marcaillou worked for Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, as the U.N. Deputy Spokesperson. She also worked for the American Division of the Department of Political Affairs as a Special Representative of the Secretary-General Akashi and at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.² Notably, Marcaillou served as Chief of Staff for the first Executive Secretary of the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Hague.²

A long-time women’s-rights advocate, Marcaillou is a former President of the Group on Equal Rights for Women at the United Nations.² Similarly, she pioneered the first Gender Action Plan of the U.N. Secretariat.¹ Marcaillou is a laureate of the NATO and U.N. Programme of Fellowship on Disarmament and a Fellow of the French *Institut de Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale* (Institute of Higher National Defense Studies).²

UNMAS is responsible for U.N. mine clearance around the world. As Director, Marcaillou will bring her extensive experience in political affairs, conflict prevention and post-conflict interventions, disarmament and non-proliferation.² ☺

~ Blake Williamson, CISR staff
see endnotes page 81



Photo courtesy of UNMAS.