On the ground in Kabul, peace remains elusive

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RELATIVE calm was perceptible on the streets of Kabul this summer. Even as new areas witnessed rising violence levels caused by the Taliban insurgency, the fortified capital appeared to have become some sort of a green zone. Only six attacks took place in Kabul in the first six months of this year, compared with 13 such attacks in the same period last year.

During my visits to Afghanistan this summer, it was encouraging to see the construction of shopping centres, large numbers of girls going to schools, crowded streets and bazaars traffic jams – providing visible signs of progress in the capital of the war-torn country.

With more Afghan forces manning the security checkpoints in Kabul, the possibility of transition from the international forces to Afghan hands seemed more real than ever before. It appeared that the country could be well on its road to recovery and normalcy.

With this background, Tuesday’s attack on the Intercontinental hotel came as a stark reminder that the achievements and gains made thus far remain fragile and reversible. In the attack, which had parallels with the November 2008 attacks on the Marriott hotels, nine armed Taliban fighters entered the hilltop hotel without much opposition and created mayhem that ended with 21 deaths. Response to the unexpected attack, which lasted over six hours, appeared to be beyond the capacities of the Afghan forces, before a Nato helicopter carried out a raid, killing some of the attackers.

The timing appears to have been carefully chosen to coincide with the presence of foreigners and Afghan governmental officials in Kabul for a conference on transition. Only a day earlier, a meeting of the Afghan Contact Group, consisting of the special envoys of 50 countries, had finalised the preparations for Bonn-2, an international foreign ministers’ level conference to be held in December.

Quite naturally, doubts on the capacity of the Afghan forces to take charge of security have resurfaced. Few are willing to go by the optimistic assessments of the United States and Nato forces that the Taliban is now a much weaker force.

Soon in the context of last week’s announcement by US President Barack Obama detailing the withdrawal of 33,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of next year, Tuesday’s attack is viewed as the beginning of a violent campaign of intimidation to drive out the “infidels”. This way, to the ordinary Afghans, the US drawdown would resemble a retreat, enforced by rising Taliban assaults.

The Taliban is reiterating its capacity to choose targets at will. In the past months, it has systematically targeted and eliminated provincial governors, police chiefs and security force recruits in different parts of the country. Although unconfirmed, the role played by possible Taliban infiltrators and rogue soldiers within the Afghan security forces has emerged as a new threat for the international community. Since March 2009, at least 57 foreign troops, including 32 Americans, have been killed in 10 attacks by Afghan service members.

Tuesday’s attack further indicates that relative peace in Kabul was some sort of an oxymoron. Kabul could not have been peaceful for long, when insurgent networks have succeeded in reasserting their gains in provinces and districts in proximity. The Taliban is not only winning new areas for itself, but even non-Pashtun tribes are joining its forces, making the movement more broad-based and geographically expansive.

All these pose fresh challenges for the Hamid Karzai administration and also the US. Both appear to rely a great deal on the reconciliation process, the success of which is linked critically to the transition plan for Afghanistan.

However, the process has yet to rope in the Taliban leadership, let alone gather momentum. Considering that a genuine process of reconciliation would have to include various ethnic groups – inside both Afghanistan and its neighbours – apart from the Taliban, the project has a long ground to cover.

The Taliban, on the other hand, appears to be on no hurry. Pressure on its bases in Pakistan has risen in recent times, but has not reached a critical point. Losses of cadres have been rather easy to fill by recruiting within the tribal areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border. And it continues to possess a large number of suicide bombers, motivated and trained, to be launched repeatedly as and when required.

In one sense of the term, the future appears to be not too optimistic. The diminished US footprint will call for a reorientation of the war-fighting strategy. With the formalisation of the US-Afghan strategic partnership, the stationing of limited US troops in joint facilities (strategic bases) could allow the Taliban to bare its fangs along large swaths of Afghanistan’s rural areas.

In short, Afghanistan’s long-term stabilisation, without addressing the sources of instability, would remain a distant dream.

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