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We Must Face the Frankenstein of Afghanistan

(746 words)

The Cold War created a Frankenstein in Afghanistan. The luxury of ignoring it, however, has come to an end.

Over 200,000 Iranian troops, including the elite Revolutionary Guard, are now ominously poised on Afghanistan's Western border. The Taliban, now seemingly in control of the fractured Afghan state, have responded with their own troop movements. Both Iranian and Taliban leaders have issued alarming calls for jihad, placing South and Central Asia on the verge of an unnecessary and destabilizing fratricidal civil war.

Rightfully, the people and government of Iran are outraged over the killing of nine Iranian diplomats and a journalist stationed in Northern Afghanistan. Such actions are deplorable and counter to the notions of international law, morality and Islam itself. More troubling, recent reports of thousands of noncombatants massacred in Northern Afghanistan, backed up by UN reports and Amnesty International, speak of an increasing intolerance that has overtaken Afghanistan. These heinous acts in and of themselves, however provocative, are not grounds for invading Afghanistan. Restraint and international mediation may be the better course for Tehran.

Not yet addressed in this new regional conflict, however, are the unspoken realities of the situation:

1. Elements within Pakistan, as well as those who received support from the CIA during the Cold War, created, nurtured and brought to power extremists who do not believe in Islamic compassion. Tehran is justified in asserting that Pakistan by diplomatically backing the Taliban should have influence in Kabul, and, as such, bears at least some of the blame for the current morass. Moreover, the Kashmiri insurgency over the last decade has had its own impact on militancy in Afghanistan and vice versa. This must be recognized and stemmed for it has an adverse fallout on Pakistan itself.
2. The crisis brewing around Afghanistan is also a tragic misunderstanding within the house of Islam. We, the Islamic nations, must act in concert to bridge the misunderstandings between the Sunni and Shiite communities. It is high time to convene, at the highest levels, an Islamic Summit to reduce mistrust and suspicion and increase our co-operative nature, which, after all, is the foundation of our faith and beliefs. Contrary to popular Western

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belief, Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. In any society, religious extremism is by definition intolerant, be it Christian, Judaic or Islamic. Islam is, however, very clear that there should not be any compulsion in religion.

3. The international community, in the form of the United Nations Security Council, must take immediate action to mediate this growing dispute. Pronouncements of dismay are insufficient. Delay, as in Rwanda or Bosnia, will cost many lives, and throw into further turmoil an already unsettled region newly armed with nuclear arsenals and awash in weapons. The UN can and should play an active role in reducing tension, monitoring the Afghan borders, and ensuring that all outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan is halted.

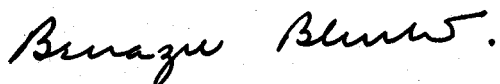
4. The Taliban leadership, now poised to form a national government, should moderate their ethnic and religious intolerance, and, first and foremost, form a broad-based government respectful of minorities. If the Taliban continue on their current path, Pakistan should consider distancing itself from Kabul and ensuring the international community plays a more prominent role in halting this budding civil war, if it this means withdrawal of diplomatic recognition.

5. Lastly, Washington should not and can not look blindly to the Frankenstein created during the Cold War with American know-how, training and dollars. As Prime Minister of Pakistan, I cautioned the Western leadership to beware their support of the extremists within Afghanistan, regardless of how well the extremists may have performed on the battlefield. For, eventually, someone would win the Afghan war.

It is time for Washington to take bold, active and concerted action in spurring the United Nations to reduce regional tensions through a multilateral process, rather than inflame them with unilateral airstrikes. Terrorism, religious extremism and narcotics have found safe haven within Afghanistan, all of which directly effect Western and Eastern interests and lives worldwide. As well, it is a cold irony that last month's American airstrikes against terrorists bombed the very training camps created by CIA dollars not a decade before.

The international community, be it Washington, Islamabad or the Gulf, can ill afford this time to ignore the monster was created to defend the interests of the Free World. If we do again turn a blind eye, our collective creation, the politics of religious zealotry, may be here to stay.

Sincerely,



Benazir Bhutto