

'Price for exit might have to be paid by Afghan women' - On the situation in Afghanistan

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President of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, SCA, Ann Wilkens has served as Swedish ambassador to Pakistan and Afghanistan (2003-07). Before embarking upon a diplomatic career, Ann Wilkens worked as editor at the leading Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet's* foreign desk. As a prominent expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan, she is frequently quoted in Swedish media. In an interview with Viewpoint, she analyses the unfolding situation in Afghanistan. Read on:

Farooq Sulehria - Do you think talks with Taliban indicate US defeat in Afghanistan or is it an attempt to co-opt them in order to stabilize the situation?

Ann Wilkens - It is not possible, in my opinion, for the USA to co-opt the Taliban. I see these talks as a way out of Afghanistan. Now, everybody more or less wants to leave. Also, there is no point in going on. It's going from bad to worse and ambitions have already been scaled down. However, one wants to leave in a sort of honourable way- impossible as it is, in my opinion - and here, deals with the Taliban will pave the way.

Your opinion on talks with Taliban and concerns being expressed about women rights?

There was a lot of talk about the way the Taliban treated women when they were in power. There were pressure groups on this issue in the USA. Still, I don't think the USA would have attacked Afghanistan for the sake of women's rights. There would not have been any attack without September 11. And at this stage, there is a real risk that gender issues will be sold out. Now when everybody is keen to leave, they are lowering the standards regarding what to accept. The price for the exit might have to be paid by the Afghan women.

Do you think the Taliban stand a chance to triumphantly return to Kabul?

No. I don't think so. I don't think the Afghan people, nor the international community, would let that happen. A more likely scenario will be that Taliban will more or less take the South. The North will go to the warlords. In Kabul one will have remnants of international forces, sort of keeping the North and the South apart and maintaining stability in Kabul. That is an outcome I would imagine in the

shorter term.

What about India, Iran, Pakistan? Will these countries reconcile with this situation?

We more or less know how it plays out. Pakistan is seeking what it calls strategic depth in Afghanistan, which means they want to have an influence in Kabul, whereas India, Iran and Russia will resist a Taliban come-back. All the regional countries have multiple agendas. Iran, for example, will run its own horses in the race. We stand the risk of having a regional conflict.

The Nato alliance fell apart in Iraq. To hold Nato together is, it is said, one of the reasons for continued Afghan war. Now the Netherlands has decisively walked out. Does this mean Nato is unraveling?

I am not in favour of conspiracy theories. After the Bonn Conference, there was a pretty genuine motivation to go to Kabul. People thought they would stabilize and even democratize Afghanistan. I think Afghanistan was a major test for Nato. It was the first out of area operation. It, therefore, risks becoming a major failure. But it will not make Nato fall apart.

WikiLeaks has yet again drew attention to the ISI-Taliban nexus. Islamabad as usual has denied. How are these denials received in diplomatic circles? Also, what is your personal assessment regarding these allegations?

All this is well known. It was not any news for anyone. We all know there was doublespeak, hidden agendas and so on. No government in Islamabad has been both willing and able to rein the entire security apparatus in. So far, WikiLeaks have only been concerned with the period up to 2009. Given the short assignments, most internationals involved will have left Afghanistan. However, I am genuinely worried about such Afghan individuals whose names have been made public because they were working with the Nato or ISAF. If I were at WikiLeaks, I would not have made these names public. They should be removed.

Does peace stand a chance in Afghanistan or will this country keep boiling?

In the short term, I am not optimistic. It will keep boiling to some extent. Sooner or later, we are likely to see more conflict. Maybe when the international forces leave, there is a lull. But conflict might well start again after a while. As a European, I think it is instructive to go back to European history. During the last century, we had big disasters in Europe. We had the First World War, followed by a bad peace agreement, which laid the ground for the Second World War, which was even worse. If there is yet another war coming to Afghanistan, I am afraid the West might not even be welcome to intervene. In 2001, we were at least welcomed. Next time, this may not be the case. This will leave the conflict in the hands of regional powers - not a very positive scenario either.

Is handing Afghanistan over to the UN any solution?

I don't think the UN has the possibility to mobilize the forces needed to take responsibility in Afghanistan. We have seen how the UN was unable to live up to its commitments in Rwanda, where UN troops stood by helplessly as massacres were carried out. The UN troops are normally intended to be peace-keeping and lack the mandate to intervene. Since then, the tendency is to transfer more responsibility to regional organizations, such as the African Union, and sub-regional organisations such as SADCC, ECOWAS or IGADD. If you think of Afghanistan and you have the UN in mind, where will the troops come from? Who are the main troop contributors to the UN? -Among them are Pakistan and Bangladesh - these troops would not be acceptable in Afghanistan. So where would you get your troops from? I don't think the West will provide them.

P.S.

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