

Spring means joy, refreshment and happiness for most us after many cold, arduous months of winter. But so for the Taliban in Afghanistan, who vow revenge and aim to drive NATO-ISAF and American forces from the country by creating chaos, destruction and the shedding of blood. The Taliban, who were driven from power in the last months of 2001 by America and its Afghan allies, have been more vociferous lately in their pledge to drive out foreign forces and seize control of Afghanistan, this time relying not just on conventional guerrilla tactics but also on suicide attacks, which were unseen in Afghanistan until two years ago.

In fact, Afghanistan has never been a theatre for suicide bombers even during the brutal and bloody Soviet occupation. Afghanistan has had no tradition of suicide attacks throughout its history compared to other parts of the world.

This being so, the country has not been spared of contemporary suicide attacks, which various insurgent, militant groups and movements are increasingly adopting and employing mercilessly and indiscriminately to defeat their opponents. They show no respect for the lives of ordinary people who bear the brunt of the cost of innocent lives lost, injured and maimed.

In this context, Taliban commanders are once again threatening foreign and Afghan security forces with a wave of suicide attacks this spring. Mullah Dadullah, in charge of the Taliban's day-to-day operations, told Britain's Channel Four television in a rare interview that his forces had assembled a strong army of hundreds of suicide bombers poised for a spring offensive against NATO and American troops in Afghanistan.

"The Americans have sown a seed. They will reap the crop for quite a long time. We will get our revenge on them, whether in Afghanistan or outside....The suicide

Bloody Spring

martyrs, those willing to blow themselves up, are countless. Hundreds have registered their names already and are ready to go and have hundreds more on the waiting list. Each is anxious to be the first to be sent."

Before his Channel Four interview, Mullah Dadullah had told Al-Jazeera television on Feb. 22 that 6,000 Taliban fighters are now deployed across Afghanistan and ready to carry out more guerrilla and suicide attacks.

"This year will prove to be the bloodiest for the foreign troops. It is not just a threat: we will prove it. Taliban's war preparations are going on caves and in mountains. Our 6,000 fighters are ready for attacks on foreign troops after the change in weather and as it becomes warmer. We have new weaponry including armaments capable of bringing down coalition helicopters."

With these statements Mullah Dadullah heralds the upcoming bloody spring offensive that may have already begun with many attacks in various regions of Afghanistan. Musa Qala, in Helmand Province was attacked and seized by Taliban forces on Feb. 2, which is still in Taliban control. Bakwa, a remote district in the western Farah Province was overrun by several hundred Taliban fighters on Feb. 19. But it was evacuated by them after 24 hours, possibly to regroup for another target.

Coming on top of these and other attacks was the audacious suicide bombing at the gates of Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, targeting the visiting US Vice President Dick Cheney, in which 20 Afghans died, including a 12-year-old boy, along with an American and South Korean soldier and a contractor.

Spring should be hope, renewal and peace for all, not revenge, blood and pain. Let us hope the Taliban may also come to understand what spring stand for.

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Afghan policemen stand guard near a damaged car in Herat, March 3.

Merkel Presiding Over Lightning Europe Gloom

When Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, took over the chair of the European Council on January 1, she was anxious not to raise any exaggerated expectations about what she could achieve in the six-month presidency of the European Union. She was also determined to give some sense of purpose back to the EU, after nearly two years of "pausing for reflection" following the Dutch and French No votes to the EU constitutional treaty.

It is still early days to reach a judgment, but partly through luck and partly through sensible pragmatism, the chancellor seems to be getting her way, and presiding over a distinct lightening of Europe's recent gloom.

The EU spring summit in Brussels looks like being a more productive occasion than in previous years. In addition to taking the temperature of the European economy, and its progress with structural reform, the meeting is likely to make some brave decisions about reducing greenhouse gases, to slow down the pace of global warming. If Mrs Merkel can persuade her fellow leaders to do that, she will have made a very good start on the process of getting global agreement on a post-Kyoto accord in the Group of Eight industrialised nations, whose summit she also chairs in the summer.

One essential element in the improved European atmosphere is the pick-up in economic performance, with Germany itself making a vital contribution. Growth of gross domestic product in the euro-zone last year topped 3 per cent, and unemployment declined to an average 7.5 per cent. Germany's own growth rate of 2.7 per cent may not be stellar in global terms, but it was the most improved member of the zone, and it is once again performing

its essential role of locomotive for the rest of the European economy.

Some tough bargaining remains to be done to persuade all 27 EU members to agree on binding targets for greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, backed up by a firm commitment to raise renewable energy production to 20 per cent of the total by the same date. Other difficult decisions, including energy market liberalisation, are being postponed. There are deep differences between EU members on the future role of nuclear energy: Mrs Merkel's own government is split down the middle on that score. But a clear decision on climate change will be an important signal.

Will it help the chancellor to crack the other tough nut of her EU presidency—to get the constitutional reform process back on track? She wants to save as much of the becalmed constitutional treaty as possible. Others, including Britain's Tony Blair and France's Nicolas Sarkozy, front-runner in the French presidential election, want something much more modest. Mrs Merkel has already shown that she can be pragmatic. She wants an outcome, not a trainwreck. She is demonstrating the power of quiet persuasion: a vital European quality.

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How to Stop Genocide in Iraq

Those who support remaining in Iraq increasingly can be heard invoking the specter of genocide as grounds for staying. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) warned that, if U.S. troops leave, "You'll see a bloodletting in Baghdad that makes Srebrenica look like a Sunday school picnic." Some defenders of President Bush's approach, having backed the Iraq war from the start, have now settled on genocide warnings after each of their original justifications for being in Iraq—weapons of mass destruction, terrorism prevention, energy diversification, regional stabilization and democracy promotion—has crumbled one by one.

Other proponents of remaining in Iraq are not, in fact, looking to redeem their own faulty judgment. They are genuinely frightened that, as ferocious as the civil war there has become, a U.S. withdrawal could unleash an all-out slaughter. With increasing numbers of civilian corpses piling up every day, they have reason to worry.

Although critics of withdrawal do a masterful job of painting a grim picture of the apocalypse that awaits, they offer no account of how U.S. forces in Iraq will do more than preserve a status quo that is already deteriorating into wholesale ethnic cleansing. Although more than 115,000 U.S. troops have been in Iraq for the last four years, about 3.8 million Iraqis have fled their homes and at least 50,000 Iraqis are fleeing each month. It would be nice to think the surge of troops to Baghdad would help to staunch the flow. But with only one-third of the new troops on duty at any given time in a city of 6 million people, they will have no more success deterring the militias intent on carving out homogeneous Shiite or Sunni neighborhoods than U.S. forces have had to date. About 74% of Shiites polled and 91% of Sunnis—the people who have the most to fear from genocide—would like to see U.S. forces gone by the end of the year.

First, although it has a familiar and thus unsatisfying ring to it, the most viable long-term route to preventing mass atrocities is to use remaining U.S. leverage to bring about a political compromise that makes Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds feel economically stable, physically secure and adequately represented in political structures. This is consistent with the position of leading U.S. generals and the members of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, who have stressed that there is no military solution to Iraq's

meltdown and urged the administration, the Iraqis and regional players to reopen broad-ranging political negotiations.

Instead of simply lining up behind Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's government in the hopes that it will one day decide to stop ethnic cleansing, recent withdrawal proposals in Congress use the leverage of the proposed redeployment to press Iraqis to reach a political solution. A plan put forth by Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has come under neo-conservative fire for setting a target departure date, but it provides for flexibility to suspend the U.S. drawdown if Iraqis meet the key economic, political and security benchmarks they have committed to achieve this year. The plan would also retain some U.S. forces in Iraq and the region to help deter atrocities by sectarian militias and aggression from Iraq's neighbors.

However, if this political pressure fails and U.S. forces remain unable to stave off an ever-widening civil war, the U.S. should go further and announce its willingness to assist in the voluntary transport and relocation of Iraqi civilians in peril. If Iraqis tell us that they would feel safer in religiously homogeneous neighborhoods, and we lack the means to protect them where they are, we should support and protect them in their voluntary, peaceful evacuation—a means, one might say, to preempt genocide in advance of our departure.

Finally, if we are serious about preventing further sectarian horrors, the U.S. must send a clear signal to the militias and political leaders who order or carry out atrocities that they will be brought to justice for their crimes. That means offering belated U.S. support to the International Criminal Court, the only credible, independent body with the jurisdiction to prosecute crimes against humanity and genocide.

Many of those who say U.S. troops should stay in Iraq to prevent genocide are the same people who for political reasons refuse to acknowledge the gravity of the calamity unfolding on our watch. The same people who modeled a war on best-case scenarios are now resisting ending a war by invoking worst-case scenarios. But after years of using the alleged needs of the Iraqi people to justify U.S. political postures, it is long past time to use the leverage we still have to actually advance Iraqi welfare.

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Dirty Money

It's a gripping story of skulduggery at the heart of government, dripping out into the public domain to the embarrassment of all concerned. But it exposes how the people at the top really work, and may well hang over Tony Blair's reputation forever.

I'm not talking about the cash-for-peages investigation, but about a far more serious revelation, brought to us by the BBC's Michael Cockerell, that Tony Blair offered to hand over the premiership during his second term in return for Gordon Brown letting him join the euro. That would have cemented Blair's legacy once and for all, and enabled him to make the transition with good grace.

This startling attempt to find a deal was outlined by the former cabinet minister Clare Short in the last programme in Cockerell's excellent series on the Blair years, Blair: The Inside Story. Short tells of a conversation with Blair in which he said that he didn't really want to serve a third term anyway, and would be prepared to hand over to Brown if his assessment of the five economic tests was positive enough for Britain to join the euro.

Short volunteered to pass the "offer" on to Brown and duly did so at a lunch. Brown had already heard of the offer from two other sources, but refused, adding that he wouldn't trust Blair not to renege on the deal anyway. Not long afterwards he announced that the economic conditions were not right ... and the

rest is history. The whole episode speaks volumes about the dysfunctional nature of the Blair/Brown relationship, which is already well documented. As Sir Stephen Wall, Blair's adviser on Europe pointed out, on some issues Blair could only go so far as Brown would allow him to.

But it also gives us a glimpse of the shocking way in which personal animosities have affected government policy during the Blair years. Greatly to Brown's credit, he refused the deal, but just think of the consequences if he had not: Britain would have joined the euro, not because it was right for the country's economic wellbeing, but because of a grubby deal over who should be prime minister.

As it was, there was precious little debate over the whole issue. Any attempts to help the electorate understand the issue and spark public discussion were quickly closed down by reference to the five economic tests. Even the cabinet was kept out of the full, genuine decision-making process.

When the historians look back over the Blair years, they will remember this extraordinary attempt to barter Britain's currency for a job title as a more shameful and eloquent example of what went wrong with British politics—even more so than the current Agatha Christie farce over cash for honours and attempts to trip up passing policemen.

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Win-Win Foreign Policy

harmonious world where peace, stability and prosperity are enjoyed by all.

President Hu unveiled China's idea of building a harmonious world at the United Nations Summit in 2005.

Chinese leaders' frequent overseas travel is part of the country's approach to implement a harmonious world.

The country upholds multilateralism, mutually beneficial cooperation and the spirit of inclu-

siveness. China has joined with the rest of the world to handle regional and global issues by upholding multilateralism.

Also, China has suggested that the international community work for mutually beneficial cooperation to achieve common prosperity.

China has been encouraging the efforts to peacefully settle international disputes through consultations and negoti-

ations. Under China's mediation, the Six-Party Talks have been moving forward to maintain a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. To build a harmonious world, countries around the globe should follow the spirit of inclusiveness. Diversity of civilizations is a basic feature of humanity and an important driving force behind human progress. China's diplomacy has

been heading toward maturity, rationality and flexibility.

While diplomacy along its borders was a major concern last year, China kept close contact with more distant countries including the African nations.

Under the principle of putting aside disputes, China has not only maintained cooperative relations with its neighbors but also advanced step-by-step solutions to

boundary issues. The largest developing country in the world, China has assumed more responsibilities in international affairs. Dispatching 5,915 military personnel to join 16 UN peace-keeping missions, China is the largest contributor of peace

keepers among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. China has been working to build a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefit by developing win-win cooperation with the rest of the world.

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