U.N. Links Afghan Reconstruction Aid To Formation of Central Government
By Daniel Pearl

With a global full-court press this week, the international community will struggle to shape Afghanistan's future without feeding the factional rivalries that threaten to tear the country apart again.

In Islamabad, Pakistan, where a conference begins on Afghanistan reconstruction Tuesday, World Bank and United Nations officials are making clear that billions of dollars of expected reconstruction funds won't start flowing until a new central government is formed to replace the reeling Taliban. Representatives of the U.S. and other donor countries will discuss a proposal to pool their money and spend it centrally to avoid strengthening individual commanders who have taken control of different regions in Afghanistan.

In Bonn, Germany, meanwhile, dozens of senior diplomats and intelligence agents from leading Western countries and Afghanistan's neighbors are expected to monitor a U.N.-led meeting, which begins today, of Afghan leaders on the country's political future. The U.S., Britain and the U.N. Security Council hope the meeting will help produce a new transitional government, but leaders of the Northern Alliance, Afghanistan's most powerful faction, say that is more likely to happen later, in Kabul, which the Alliance controls.

"The expectations of the Western alliance are perhaps a little too much," Abdullah Abdullah, the Alliance Foreign Minister said in an interview. He said the Northern Alliance, dominated by Uzbek, Tajik and Hazar minorities from the north, is looking for "partners" in the south, but "so far we see only one or two individuals who can play that role." Afghanistan's 87-year-old king, Zahir Shah, is a possibility, but "he will have to be more active," Dr. Abdullah said.

Even on the question of how to provide short-term security for Afghanistan, the U.N. has stepped into squabbling among Afghan factions. The Northern Alliance is securing Kabul with 4,000 of its own troops, but other Afghan groups want a demilitarized Kabul policed by foreign troops before foreign meetings are held there. The U.N. and other international relief agencies are also demanding the presence of foreign troops in order to maintain greater security for food distribution. U.N. agencies have sent dozens of their top officials to Kabul in recent days to discuss security with the Alliance so that their international staff can return and resume full relief operations.

The U.N. put the issue on top of the Bonn agenda, but Mohammad Natiqi, a member of the 11-strong Northern Alliance delegation in Bonn, was skeptical about a possible deployment of an international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan. "If we need them, we'll ask the United Nations," said Mr. Natiqi.

One big limitation on the Bonn and Islamabad meetings is the war. Fighting continues in the south around Kandahar. Most significantly, the vast southern Pashtun belt is still in chaos and badly fragmented. And any hint of a breakdown in Bonn would only encourage the Taliban and
the remnants of al Qaeda -- the terrorist network led by Osama bin Laden -- to hang on in the south, and could nudge wavering Pashtun tribes to rejoin the Taliban.

Every Pashtun town in the south that isn't in Taliban hands is disputed by several rival warlords, making it impossible for the U.N. to designate which Pashtun commanders should attend the Bonn meeting. Also, Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun tribal chief who has backing from Pakistan, told The Wall Street Journal by satellite telephone that he couldn't leave for the moment because of the tense situation around Kandahar, where U.S. marines arrived Sunday night as part of an effort to pressure the Taliban to surrender its last major stronghold.

Another problem is that the interests of surrounding countries are shifting. Pakistan initially supported the Taliban to try to protect trade routes and maintain stability on its border. Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan supported the Northern Alliance as a buffer against the Taliban. Now that the Taliban is retreating, other rivalries are coming into play. Iran is worried the U.S. is establishing a permanent military presence on its border. Pakistan is alarmed by rival India's speedy establishment of a diplomatic mission in Kabul.

The Northern Alliance is suspicious of Pakistan. "We also require that our neighbors cease interfering inside Afghanistan and respect our territorial integrity so that we can respect theirs," said Younis Qanuni, the Alliance's Interior Minister, who is leading the Alliance delegation to Bonn. The Northern Alliance has said it will demand that the U.N. impose sanctions on countries that continue to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs. But Monday, Alliance leader President Burhanuddin Rabbani made a surprise stop in the United Arab Emirates to consult with officials of that country, which supported the Taliban until recently.

U.N. officials fear that any country unsatisfied with a new government in Kabul could play spoiler in the peace process.

Although it has said only Afghans will decide the country's future, the U.N. was being drawn into the middle of disputes even before the Bonn meeting began. Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, had called on five Afghan groups to send delegations to the Bonn meeting, with 10 representatives each from the Northern Alliance and from Zahir Shah. Smaller delegations would come from the Iranian-backed Cyprus process, the Pakistan-backed Peshawar process and the pro-king Loya Pakhtia movement.

After a daylong meeting on Saturday to decide whom to send, Alliance leaders were furious to hear that night that the king was sending 18 representatives, and other groups were exceeding their allotments. "Now we will have to decide whether to send more than 10 -- it is a matter of our honor," said an Alliance leader. U.N. sources said Mr. Brahimi will stick to the original formula and force extra Afghans to sit outside the meeting.

The U.N. and funding organizations are likely to step into similar disputes when they try to help rebuild Afghanistan's devastated infrastructure -- not only roads, power stations and telephone
lines but also government institutions that suffered from neglect as the Taliban concentrated on its military battles and religious extremism.

"We need a genuinely Afghan-led process of reconstruction," says Knut Ostby, deputy resident representative for Afghanistan of the United Nations Development Program. He said international organizations need to work with legitimate governments. The trouble is that governments are already taking shape in provinces. In Nangarhar province in the east, for example, Pashtun tribesmen selected a government representing a coalition of past military and political leaders.

"The regions and provinces might have a more quick political consensus on who is going to be governor" than Kabul will, Mr. Ostby acknowledged. But funding power stations in regions may only make it harder for a strong government to emerge in Kabul.

"What we want is for aid to be part of the solution, not part of the problem," says William Byrd, acting country manager in Afghanistan for the World Bank. The World Bank is promoting the idea of a "trust fund" to keep aid from being Balkanized as various charities and donors rush into Afghanistan. A special organization would collect the money from donors and spend it according to list of priorities. "It's like having a government budget," Mr. Byrd said, adding that Afghanistan's own government would take over that task once it starts raising its own money.

Some versions of trust funds were used to help disburse funds in East Timor and in Gaza, but charities that receive much of the money don't necessarily like the idea of a single funding source. And donors tend to worry they won't get credit for the projects they fund. "If we can get a trust fund that distributes 20%-30% of the total, that will be a major step forward for the international community," a U.N. official said.

Afghanistan is so poor that international agencies and charities run the risk of dominating the country's economy just by showing up, thus channeling coveted resources -- trucks, good salaries, rent -- into areas where they might serve to bolster local warlords. The UNDP, for example, will probably expand from a staff of about 3,000 to more than 10,000 in Afghanistan, Mr. Ostby said, though he said the agency would try to employ local staff as much as possible.

Afghanistan already has a rich array of nongovernmental organizations, many based in Pakistan, most with meager funding. They are already getting more attention now, though. In an international meeting scheduled to start Friday in Bonn, German and Swiss think tanks are bringing together Afghan politicians, professionals, technocrats, women's groups and Afghan nongovernmental organizations, based in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. For any other country, such a meeting might not be remarkable, but it will mark the first formal encounter between Afghanistan's warlord-politicians and the country's civil society.

"The challenge in Bonn is to develop a process where the warlords become representatives of their populations," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Monday in London.
But whether that can be done outside Afghanistan is under debate. A European Union official said the United Kingdom initially pushed to have the conference in Kabul, rather than Europe, precisely out of fear that only lower-level Afghan leaders would be dispatched to Bonn and would be unable to cut a deal. A Kabul meeting "would have symbolized a transition to a new Afghanistan," says John Chipman, director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London think tank.

Having been rebuffed, the EU official said, the British are now pushing for a follow-up meeting in Kabul. At the Bonn meeting, he said, he expects the parties to agree to a broad-based government and a timetable to set up an "interim executive" body to act as a stop-gap executive before a more formal government could be constituted. He also expects a statement would be issued saying that women will be involved in a new regime. Three women are among the some 30 delegates attending the conference.

Bob Davis contributed to this article