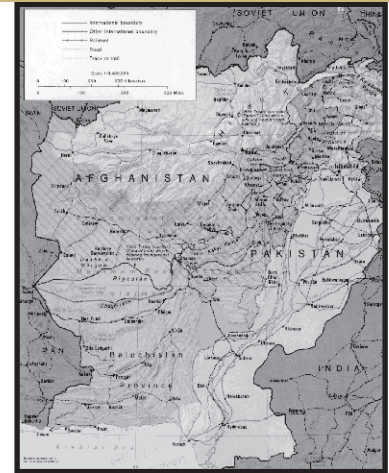


Warlords and Weapons Gunpowder for Afghanistan I



Powerful warlords and smaller commanders in Afghanistan's relatively calm north and west are a latent threat to the fragile government because of their stockpiles of arms, officials and analysts say.

President Hamid Karzai, facing a crippling insurgency in the south and east, has used the offer of jobs to draw into his shaky administration an array of potentially destabilising players. They range from one-time members of the extremist Taliban and the Islamist party of fugitive ex-premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to leaders of the Northern Alliance that helped remove the Taliban from government in 2001. Many of the men in this troubled alliance were on-and-off-again enemies or allies in the 30 years of war that wrecked Afghanistan.

And if they claim to have put away their arms, the reality appears to be something else, according to officials. The UN's Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) programme launched in 2005 around Kabul and the north and west "does not work as well as it should," said spokesman Ahmad Jan Nawzadi.

Regional commanders, some under the thumb of commanders of the resistance to the 1979-1989 Soviet invasion who today have positions in government or parliament, "are using the pretext of the insurgency in the south to not disarm," he added.

The armed groups that are not part of the Taliban-led insurgency -- estimated to number about 2,000 two years ago -- "do not stop growing because they have been broken up," says Nawzadi, without being able to give figures.

"It is a threat for the government, for everyone. The problem is that people are not interested in seeing a strong army and police force," he says, referring to certain anti-Soviet "warlords" whom he did not name.

The north and the west have in the past few months seen several deadly clashes between rival militias, including some that have officially surrendered their arms, according to the police.

Under the DIAG about 63,000 combatants have officially been demobilised and 34,000 weapons "confiscated" -- a drop in the ocean of weapons floating around a country more used to war than peace. About 5,000 weapons have been collected in the

northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, capital of Balkh province. There was no financial compensation, leading some commanders to opt to sell their weapons to insurgents in the south, says Mazar DIAG official Hamid Quraishi.

"The price of weapons on the black market has doubled, maybe tripled, which backs reports that weapons are being smuggled from the north to the south," he says. Balkh governor and ex-Tajik commander in the Northern Alliance Atta Mohammed claims to have given up "all his arms and his tanks" despite "not very friendly relations" with the other northern strongman, Abdul Rashid Dostum.

"I do not need guns to make myself heard," says the governor, who has the face of a boxer, in his Mazar-i-Sharif "palace". But there are still reports from time to time of his men being involved in clashes, including with Dostum's men. In his own opulent villa in Kabul, "professor" Burhanuddin Rabbani, former president and head of the Jamiat-e-Islami party in which several commanders fought, says the "warlords" are not going away.

The leaders of the anti-Soviet jihad (holy war) -- when the mujahedin gained power, money and fame as heroes of the resistance -- "will be active, influential and powerful for a long, long time yet," he says. "All attempts to weaken the mujahedin will have a negative result. It will not happen," says Rabbani, now a parliamentarian. His point is perhaps illustrated by the warlord-dominated parliament's recent approval of a controversial amnesty law for war crimes committed by groups and parties.

Several leaders of the jihad -- most of them from the Northern Alliance that toppled the Taliban in 2001 with US help -- have also recently formed a new coalition, the United National Front, with Rabbani at the helm.

"Fighting is not the solution," Rabbani says. "The mujahedin have given up most of their arms. But we are present in all the regions and if someone wants to pick a fight, there is no shortage of ways to find weapons."