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Taliban buying guns from former warlords

By Abdul Latif Sahak
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MAZAR-E-SHARIF, northern Afghanistan - Evidence is mounting that Taliban insurgents are purchasing the weapons they need to fight government and international forces from their former and perhaps future opponents: the warlords who controlled Afghanistan during the mujahideen period that followed the collapse of the communist-backed regime of president Mohammad Najibullah in 1992.

The Afghan government and Western forces alike are concerned about the huge caches of weapons belonging to former militiamen and the failure to neutralize them.

General Ghulam Mujtaba Patang, commander of the 303 Pamir Police Zone in northern Afghanistan, confirms the existence of weapons caches in the north, saying that they present a great threat to security.

"We do not have exact figures on weapons," he said. "But we know there are still big depots belonging to former commanders in the north."

Some major weapons caches had been found in the far northern province of Badakhshan, he pointed out.

"The existence of weapons is a matter of concern in terms of ensuring security," Patang said. "These weapons are trafficked to the enemies of peace and stability in Afghanistan. We can say that these weapons are a good source of supply for the Taliban as well."

General Frank Leidenberger, commander of the northern region for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), also expressed alarm at the surfeit of weapons in northern Afghanistan.

"These weapons are an added threat to our forces," he said. "The armed opposition simply use these weapons against the government and ISAF forces. We will spare no effort to collect weapons, but we will take action only when the Afghan government asks for our assistance in this respect."

A weapons smuggler provided IWPR with an insight into how the arms are delivered to the Taliban.

"I buy weapons in Jowzjan province from former militia members, commanders and even people who now have high-ranking positions in the government. I then hand them over to a bigger smuggler who takes them to the Taliban, in both the north and the south," he said.

The prices are rising almost on a daily basis, he continued, as the war expands and the need for weapons increases, "I can sell one Kalashnikov for US\$300-400. A PK [machine gun] is worth \$1,500 and a rocket launcher goes for \$2,000. But prices are rising quickly."

The Taliban prefer Russian-made weapons, he added, although they are now also buying the new American-made guns that are being issued to the army and the national police.

Northern Afghanistan is awash with weapons left over from nearly three decades of war. Huge stocks came in during the jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Najibullah regime, guns and other ordnance continued to flow into Afghanistan as neighboring countries, including Russia and Iran, tried to shore up the Northern Alliance in its battle with the Taliban.

The United Nations has tried to disarm the population but has little in the way of hardware to show for a multi-million dollar program that has been running for five years.

The Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) program has consumed over \$100 million since its inception in January 2005, but has confiscated fewer than 50,000 pieces of weaponry, according to reports issued by the United Nations.

"Although we have disarmed more than 150 illegal armed groups in the north over the past five years, the number of weapons has been very small," said General Abdulmanan Abed, a representative of the ministry of defense and the head of the DIAG program for northern Afghanistan.

"We have seized just 7,000 weapons. We have not been able to find the depots belonging to commanders."

The problem is the political patronage involved in protecting the weapons, he added.

"Political groups in the north have control over these depots, and we are concerned that they may

want to use them for political purposes," Abed said. "They have maintained these weapons caches in order to exert pressure on the government and the people. They are also a good resource for supplying the Taliban."

Militia commanders acquired most of these arms during the chaotic civil war years, and secreted them away.

A large number ended up with Uzbek strongman General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who commanded a large army in the north, and rival commander Atta Mohammad Noor, now governor of Balkh province, according to an officer who had formerly worked in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, (DDR) program, which sought to return militia members to civilian life.

"The 8th Army Corps of General Dostum and Atta Mohammad's 7th Corps had more than 35,000 weapons of various kinds," he told IWPR, speaking on condition of anonymity. "But they handed over only 7,000 to the commission and the rest are all in hidden depots belonging to commanders."

The American-led coalition forces, who helped with DDR and DIAG, were looking mainly for heavy weapons, he said, but did not pay enough attention to light arms, resulting in the huge problem that exists now.

Both Dostum and Atta deny that they have any arms stored.

Dostum is the currently chief-of-staff to the Afghan army's commander-in-chief, a largely ceremonial position that nevertheless gives him power and prestige. Kinja Kagar, spokesman for his political faction, Junbesh-e Milli, told IWPR that Dostum had no weapons at all.

"He handed all of his weapons over to the DDR commission," Kagar said. "This is why our party was given a license by the Ministry of Justice to carry out political activity."

Munir Ahmad Farhad, spokesman for the Balkh governor, insisted that Atta, too, was weapons-free.

"Atta is very proud of the weapons collection process, because he was the first person to hand all of his in," Farhad said. "He dissolved the 7th Army Corps."

But some are not convinced. Mohammad Hashem Zareh, governor of Jowzjan province, while not naming Atta or Dostum directly, hinted quite broadly that these individuals had not cooperated fully with the disarmament programs.

"Commanders who were responsible for tens of thousands of soldiers say they do not have even one weapon, which is just not credible," he said. It was the lack of cooperation by major commanders that had slowed the disarmament process and given the insurgents the opportunity to purchase some of the excess guns and ammunition, he said.

It will not be easy to get the weapons, said retired Colonel Abdullah Khan, a military expert in the north.

"Collecting weapons is going to be impossible as long as these commanders hold high-ranking political positions within the government," he said. "How can a governor assist with DIAG or DDR when he himself has illegal armed men and weapons?"

According to Khan, there are more than 100,000 pieces of weaponry between Dostum and Atta at present.

"But no one can collect them while these men are in power," he said.

Residents of the north are also worried by the abundance of guns and other types of weapons in their backyard.

"Those who had weapons depots in the past have now been recruited into the police," Rauf Khan, a resident of Jowzjan province, said. "They hand over old Kalashnikovs but protect their real caches. They will use these weapons against the government and the people whenever they find an opportunity. The government should take decisive action against these commanders so that the people can feel safe."