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New Afghan chief in Marjah has criminal record

By DEB RIECHMANN and KIRSTEN GRIESHABER
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KABUL – The man chosen to be the fresh face of good Afghan governance in a town just seized from the Taliban has a violent criminal record in Germany — a revelation NATO said Saturday would not dim support for a man "doing good work" in southern Afghanistan.

Court records and news reports in Germany show that Abdul Zahir, the man appointed as the new civilian chief in Marjah, served part of a more than four-year prison sentence for stabbing his son in 1998.

An American official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, also confirmed Zahir has a criminal record in Germany.

Zahir denies he committed any crime.

"I was not a killer. I was not a smuggler. ... I didn't commit any crime," Zahir told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Friday evening. He said allegations of a criminal record were "all a lie."

Zahir's integrity is an issue because his job is to convince residents of the town in Helmand province that the Afghan government can provide them with a better life than the Taliban, which were routed during a three-week offensive by thousands of U.S., NATO and Afghan troops. Marjah is the first major test of NATO's counterinsurgency strategy since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 new American troops to try to reverse the Taliban's momentum.

Adm. Gregory Smith, director of communications for NATO, said the international alliance strongly supports Helmand Gov. Gulab Mangal, who picked Zahir for the job. "Zahir, from our reporting, is doing good work down there," Smith said Saturday, adding that NATO is not pushing Afghan officials to oust him.

Zahir said he lived in Germany for 15 years before returning to Afghanistan in 2000. During his time in Germany, he said he worked in a hotel and at a laundry service.

Zahir, a leading member of the Alizai tribe, has lived with his family for the past four years in Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, residents of the city said. He worked there with Jilani Popal, head of the Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Government, an agency seeking to boost the effectiveness and capacity of local governments.

He said he took the job as civilian chief in Marjah because "I love my country and my country needed me. My relatives, my tribe were here."

Zahir said his adversaries in Afghanistan were trying to tarnish his reputation.

"This news is coming from those people who are against me," he said. "They are against my relations with the foreigners. They want to sabotage me. They don't want such a person to serve the people, who has good relations with Americans, British, and foreigners."

In an interview last week, Mangal, the governor of Helmand, said he wasn't aware of anything illegal in Zahir's background.

"He is not being appointed forever, but he will be here for some time," he said.

Mangal said that a request was made of Interpol to check whether the new Marjah district governor had any outstanding warrants or was being sought. He said Interpol said he was not on any watch list or wanted for any crime.

Zahir has been tasked with bringing good governance to Marjah and ensuring that the new police in the area are symbolic of a new breed of Afghan policeman that is honest and committed to bringing security to the country.

"In Marjah we have a new strategy," Mangal said. "If we don't bring security and development and if we don't solve their problems, then they will think the Taliban is better than us."

If Zahir isn't up to the task, Mangal said, "We will dismiss him. If he doesn't have the ability, if he doesn't bring law and order and security, then we will dismiss him."

In Kabul, President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Waheed Omar said he wasn't familiar with Zahir but that Marjah's residents will support the government if it brings security and an administration free of corruption.

Omar warned that poor governance could drive residents back to the Taliban.

Court and news accounts from the late 1990s provide details of Zahir's past.

Annette von Schmiedeberg, a spokeswoman for the Offenbach branch of the prosecutor's office in Darmstadt in central Germany, said Friday that an Afghan citizen with the name Abdul Z. was sentenced to four years and nine months in prison for attempted manslaughter by the county court in Darmstadt on Nov. 2, 1998. Von Schmiedeberg said that in accordance with German privacy laws she could not give the full name or details about the crime.

A person familiar with Zahir and the 1998 court sentencing in Germany identified him Friday for the AP after viewing a pair of photographs of him taken last month. He asked that his name not be published because he feared for his life.

The newspaper Darmstaedter Echo provided three archived articles to the AP that confirmed a court hearing and sentencing of an Afghan citizen at the county court in Darmstadt on the same date, Nov. 2, 1998.

In an article from Nov. 3, 1998, it said the defendant from Afghanistan was sentenced to four years and nine months in prison because "he attempted to stab his 18-year-old son to death with a kitchen knife in the kitchen of his stepdaughter in Nieder-Roden on Dec. 15, 1997, around 4:45 p.m." Nieder-Roden is part of the small town of Rodgau in the central German state of Hesse.

The newspaper said the defendant, who was 47 years old at the time of the sentencing, confessed to the allegations.

He was described as a father of 13 children and husband of two wives.

"The court's chamber assesses that the attack, in which the young man received life-threatening injuries to his liver, was a deliberate attempt of manslaughter and it is therefore sentencing the accused to four years and nine months," the Darmstaedter Echo said.

According to the newspaper's account, the accused said he had been persecuted by the Taliban in Afghanistan and moved with his family to Rodgau in 1989. The court said the man could not cope with the fact that three of his stepchildren, among them two twin sons, turned away from him and moved into their own apartment in the fall of 1996, it reported.

In August 1997, he lured them back to Afghanistan saying he wanted them to attend a wedding there, the newspaper said. But once they arrived in Afghanistan, he took away their passports and plane tickets and abandoned them, it said.

In early December, the sons returned to Germany with financial help from somebody else, the newspaper said.

Back in Rodgau, the convicted man told other Afghans that his children had been kidnapped by an "archenemy in Afghanistan," the newspaper said. However, when one of his wives told him on Dec. 15 that his sons had returned to Germany, he beat her, it said.

One of his sons consequently confronted him about the beating, and he reacted by stabbing his son with an eight-inch (21-centimeter) kitchen knife, it said.

After the incident, the accused fled via the Netherlands and the Czech Republic to the German-Polish border where he was arrested on Jan. 7, 1998, near the German town of Goerlitz, it said.

In an earlier article about the ongoing court trial in Darmstadt, the Darmstaedter Echo reported on Oct. 15, 1998, that the accused was a driver for the defense minister in his homeland and also worked as a salesman.