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Iran to step up Afghan presence

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Within days of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Kabul, Iran has decided to increase its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan's sensitive border province of Nimroz.

Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency (FNA) is reporting that Tehran is planning to establish its consulate, during the Iranian New Year, starting from March 21.

“According to our country's Foreign Minister, Iran's consulate in Afghanistan's Nimroz province will be opened in the near future,” an Iranian official was quoted as saying.

Iran has a special security interest in Nimroz, which borders the country's turbulent Sistan-Balochistan province. Analysts say Iran has been badly hit by cross-border movement of drugs and militants into the Sistan-Balochistan province, which borders Afghanistan and Pakistan. Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz province, is also important for Iran's trade with Afghanistan. Goods from the Iranian port of Chabahar, after being ferried through Iranian territory, can be taken inside Afghanistan across a 215 km India-built highway from Zaranj to Delaram, a key junction connected to major Afghan cities.

Last month Iran captured Abdolmalek Rigi, leader of the Jundallah group which has been accused of masterminding several militant attacks including assassination of senior Iranian military commanders in Sistan-Balochistan.

Observers say Iran's diplomatic assertion in Afghanistan acquired high visibility during the visit on March 10 to Kabul by Mr. Ahmadinejad.

The visit has been followed up by a flurry of diplomatic activity involving Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran's Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar is set to meet his counterparts from Afghanistan and Pakistan in Islamabad this month. Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki has said a summit of the leaders from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan is also on the anvil. Iran's state-run Press TV quoted Mr. Mottaki as saying the idea was discussed during Mr. Ahmadinejad's visit to Kabul, just before Mr. Karzai left for Islamabad on an official visit.