

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

AP News

Reckless private security companies anger Afghans

SEBASTIAN ABBOT

April 30, 2010

Private Afghan security guards protecting NATO supply convoys in southern Kandahar province regularly fire wildly into villages they pass, hindering coalition efforts to build local support ahead of this summer's planned offensive in the area, U.S. and Afghan officials say.

The guards shoot into the villages to intimidate any potential militants, the officials say, but also cause the kind of civilian casualties that the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan has tried repeatedly to stop.

"Especially as they go through the populated areas, they tend to squeeze the trigger first and ask questions later," said Capt. Matt Quiggle, a member of the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker brigade tasked with patrolling Highway One, which connects Afghanistan's major cities.

The troops say they have complained to senior coalition officials and have even detained some guards to lecture them about their conduct, but the problem has continued.

Many suspect there has been little response because the security companies are owned by or connected to some of the province's most powerful figures.

"The government doesn't care about us," said Sher Mohammed, whose 25-year-old brother, Suleiman, was shot and killed in mid-March by gunmen protecting a NATO convoy as it traveled through the Maiwand district of Kandahar. "Strong people in Kandahar control the companies and they don't care about the poor people."

Mohammed said two other of his relatives had been wounded in similar incidents in the past eight months, one a 12-year-old boy. He and many others have traveled to Maiwand's district center, Hotal, to complain to the local governor, Obaidullah Bawari.

"This is a big problem not only in Maiwand but all over Kandahar," said Bawari. "They create problems for everyone by shooting at innocent people for no reason."

Public anger is directed at the Afghan government and coalition forces, making it more difficult for the U.S. and others to convince locals that they should look to them for protection rather than the Taliban, said Lt. Col. Dave Abrahams, deputy commander of a Stryker battalion that patrols the stretch of Highway One where Suleiman was shot.

"The irresponsible actions of these companies" are jeopardizing NATO's attempts to gain the support of local villagers, Abrahams wrote in an e-mail to his superiors late last year.

"They are armed, wearing uniforms, escorting U.S. convoys, and indiscriminately shooting into villages," said Abrahams, deputy commander of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division.

But some private guards deny they act improperly.

"The NATO force trusts us," said Jalad Khan, who works for a private security company that helps move NATO supplies in Kandahar province, adding that NATO hires and trains them.

He insisted indiscriminate gunfire happened rarely — if ever. "Mostly we take action only after someone attacks us, or if NATO forces start firing," Khan said.

Some villagers also accuse the private guards of shooting at them when they are actually defending the convoy from thieves or armed people who appear to be threatening.

The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, has repeatedly stressed that avoiding civilian casualties must be a primary focus of coalition forces and their allies if they want to win over the people.

Local support in Kandahar is particularly critical as the U.S. plans to pour thousands of additional troops into the province in the coming months to wrestle it from the Taliban militants.

Abrahams, the deputy battalion commander, tried to address the problem in November by stopping two convoys as they passed his base.

"We basically detained their entire security force, and I sat down to talk to their leaders to tell them not to shoot without reason and basically threatened" to take away their certification to work for NATO, said Abrahams. "But we haven't been able to make good on it, which is part of our frustration."

Many of the gunmen have little or no training and many are also high on either heroin or hashish, Afghan and U.S. officials said.

The gunmen who allegedly shot Suleiman at a gas station turned out to be Afghan police from neighboring Zhari district moonlighting as convoy security guards, said Abrahams. They were turned over to the Zhari police chief and "are back on the street," he said.

A recent report by the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said it is common for police commanders in Kandahar to have their men work for private security companies to collect a second salary.

Although it is extremely rare for victims of private security company shootings to receive compensation, the Zhari district governor recently sent 100,000 Pakistani rupees (\$1,150) to his counterpart in Maiwand for Suleiman's family. The payment came after significant U.S. pressure.

Local power brokers in Kandahar have worked to maintain this revenue stream by keeping the police force weak, forcing coalition forces to rely on private security companies for protection, the Institute of the Study of War report said.

That is precisely the type of behavior by local officials that has alienated residents and provided an opening for the Taliban to establish effective control over much of the province.

Abrahams said he has tried to tell locals that he understands their plight, but he is consistently undermined by the wild shooting.

"Actions speak louder than words, and the locals see these drugged-out thugs with guns and trucks with 'The United States' painted on the side," said Abrahams.