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Hero on horseback, or mass murderer?

By Jean MacKenzie
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Why an Afghan warlord, once backed by the CIA and with a reputation for shocking brutality, is back in the news.



KABUL — The name of General Abdul Rashid Dostum evokes fear or awe, depending on where you're coming from. In Afghanistan, heroes and villains are often fungible.

The burly warlord has a reputation for the fierce defense of his fellow Uzbeks and for medieval brutality in dispatching his enemies. His repertoire of atrocities extends from the early 1990s to the U.S.-led invasion of 2001. It is alleged to include leaving war prisoners to perish in metal containers left out in the desert sun, and ripping victims in two by strapping them to tanks headed in opposite directions.

None of that prevented the United States from turning to Dostum for help in 2001, when they

needed him, and others in the Northern Alliance, to dispatch the Taliban.

Karzai was also not bothered by the general's past when he enlisted his help in his increasingly whimsical campaign to retain his office. Dostum, from his exile in Turkey, where he has spent much of the past year, has publicly come out in support of Karzai. He was slated to come back right about now to give the president a boost in the polls.

Dostum remains wildly popular with Uzbeks, who make up 6 to 7 percent of the population, based largely in Afghanistan's northern provinces that share a border with Uzbekistan. They see him as a hero of Afghanistan's multiple wars over the past 20 years, an interesting fact since he changed sides often, was famous for double-dealing, and ran away from the Taliban when they reached his northern stronghold in the late 1990s.

In return for wiping the slate clean on some nasty criminal charges, Karzai was to receive Dostum's unbridled support. It goes without saying that the general was expected to deliver his Uzbek constituency, giving Karzai a leg up in the north.

He may even have been reinstated as chief of staff to the commander in chief, and perhaps receive an even juicier post in a new Karzai cabinet.

But a month out from the election, reports have resurfaced exposing the general's unsavory past and accusing him of ordering the murder of as many as 3,400 Taliban prisoners of war in 2001, potentially casting a shadow over the prospect of a triumphal return. And the publication of satellite maps showing a purported mass grave in Afghanistan have brought renewed focus to investigations surrounding the general and his alleged atrocities.

The charges against Dostum have been mounting for some time. Several groups, including Physicians for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, have documented the case extensively.

The facts are fairly straightforward. In Kunduz, right after the fall of the Taliban regime, up to 8,000 war prisoners were handed over to Dostum, to be transported to his base in his home province of Jowzjan. An agreement had been brokered between the Uzbek general and the Taliban: Afghan fighters were to be allowed to go home to their provinces, while foreign Taliban, including Pakistanis, Saudis and Chechens, were to be handed over to the United Nations.

Out of the 8,000, only 4,600 ever made it as far as Shiberghan, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The rest disappeared, with the assumption being that most were killed along the way.

Survivors tell horrific tales of hundreds of Taliban being stuffed into metal containers, then left in the desert, under the baking sun, until they suffocated. Some say that guards shot the containers full of holes when the prisoners begged for air. One young Taliban who fought in Kunduz told of containers full of prisoners being sunk in the Amu River.

All of these atrocities are alleged to have been committed on the orders of Dostum.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of bodies were dumped in the Dasht-e-Leili, a desert in Jowzjan. Those remains have begun to disappear, as the pressure mounts to bring Dostum to justice.

Now, years after the fact, the charges have surfaced again, in connection with calls for the Obama administration to investigate claims that his predecessor blocked an inquiry into Dostum's crimes.

The timing is not coincidental: Karzai's attempt to bring Dostum back into power almost certainly precipitated the renewed coverage, say people close to the case.

"At the end of the day, it does not serve the Afghan people well to be governed by individuals who have allegations of mass atrocities against them," said Susannah Sirkin, deputy director of Physicians for Human Rights, which has been at the forefront of the drive to open up the investigation into what happened at Dasht-e-Leili.

Dostum has few supporters in Kabul these days. The last shreds of patience snapped in February 2008, when the general viciously assaulted a former ally, Mohammad Akbar Bai, and then publicly defied the police when they came to arrest him.

Most Afghans remember the television coverage of an obviously inebriated Dostum on the roof of his garish pink palace in Kabul, shaking his fist, and what looked suspiciously like a pistol, at the police below.

Karzai was finally forced to remove Dostum from his post as chief of staff to the commander in chief, and Dostum went abroad "for his health." The fiction may not have been complete: Dostum is suffering from diabetes, and his penchant for alcohol is not conducive to good health.

The latest Dostum scandal is unlikely to do Karzai any good, either at home or abroad. In fact, to world-weary Kabul watchers, it all looks suspiciously like a ploy by the Americans to rock Karzai's suddenly shaky electoral boat.

Just a few days ago the incumbent's victory seemed all but certain; now observers are beginning to talk, albeit in whispers, of a possible win for Dr. Abdullah, Karzai's former foreign minister, who has mounted a spirited campaign, and is also, reportedly, spending quite a bit of time at the U.S. Embassy.

Over the past week, Karzai has taken several hits from a variety of sources.

Colonel David Haight, a top U.S. army officer, gave an interview to The Guardian in which he warned of possible violence if Karzai were to be re-elected. His colorful remarks were widely quoted: "The bottom line is people are going to be thinking 'four more years of this crap?'"

Such a candid assessment from the normally taciturn U.S. military could very well signal a shift

in Karzai's political fortunes. His main asset now is the general conviction that he has the election sewn up. No governor, tribal leader or former warlord wants to be on the losing side if he can help it.

But the president is widely unpopular with his electorate; if cracks begin to appear in his formerly impenetrable façade, his support could evaporate quite quickly.

Even the media monitoring commission, a body created to survey coverage of the elections, has warned that the state media are giving undue advantage to Karzai; the matter may well be on its way to the Electoral Complaints Commission, where it could cause Candidate Karzai some problems.

This is not to say that Karzai is spiraling downwards — just that his grip on the presidential palace may not be quite as secure as is commonly expected.

Where does that leave Dostum? For the foreseeable future, stuck in Ankara, thinking about his glory days. For most Afghans, that is very good news indeed.