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Afghanistan Seeks to Disband Militias It Armed

By Ray Rivera

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Government officials seeking to break up hundreds of small independent militias in the volatile northern province of Kunduz have ordered more than 4,000 members to surrender their weapons within 20 days or face a military crackdown, threatening more violence in a region where security has steadily eroded over the last two years.

The militias in many cases piggybacked on an officially sanctioned, American-financed program to recruit local men for police patrols to fight off the Taliban, an effort that has been tried in other parts of the country over the last couple of years with varying degrees of success.

In Kunduz, where the government has armed and equipped about 1,500 militiamen, thousands of others have joined the proliferating independent groups, or *arbakai*. Some are as small as a dozen or two men, while others number in the hundreds. But officials say they are little more than gangs that wreak havoc, frequently clashing with each other and collecting illegal taxes from local residents. The new order is focused on Khan Abad district in the southeast of Kunduz, where officials say the concentration of the independent militias is highest. The decision came after a gathering there on Saturday of tribal elders, army and police officials and some militia leaders.

Military officials say they will begin going house to house to collect the weapons if the militia members do not comply by the deadline.

“The existence of these illegally armed groups has created serious problems in bringing peace,” said Mohammad Zaman Waziri, First Brigade commander of the Afghan National Army’s 209th Corps. “These people take money from people in the name of religious tax, disturb locals and they have also fought among each other many times.”

But the province has only grown more dangerous in recent years, and militia leaders say turning over their weapons — which include rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns and mortars — would leave them vulnerable to the Taliban they claim to be fighting.

“There are still many Taliban in our areas,” said Hussain, an arbakai commander who goes by one name. “If our weapons are taken from us, the Taliban will kill us.”

Others say instead of being rewarded with local police jobs for their efforts to push out the Taliban, they are being punished.

“I am ready to surrender my weapons to the government,” said another commander, Mohammad Omar. “But the condition is that I should get hired in the local police.”

Many of the officially recognized militiamen in Kunduz are to be absorbed into the Afghan Local Police through the American-financed program, which aims to convert insurgents and other residents of remote areas into village defense forces until the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police can be built up enough to protect the entire country.

But Kunduz has only 1,200 local police slots available, and the process of screening and training has been slow. To date, only 105 militiamen have become officers. Khan Abad district has only 550 slots available, said Col. Abdul Rahman Aqtash, deputy police chief of Kunduz.

The problems in Kunduz reflect growing concern over the local police program. Launched a year ago, it had trained about 6,200 officers in 41 districts by mid-June with the goal of recruiting 30,000 in 100 districts by the end of the year. But aid workers and United Nations officials warn that the program risks empowering local strongmen who have little regard for human rights and legal procedure.

Other areas of concern include weak oversight, recruit vetting and issues of command and control over the forces, which are supposed to fall under the local police chief but who often remain loyal to their former bosses. A recent study by Oxfam and three other nongovernment groups concluded that that the program had failed to provide effective policing and instead produced forces that are “feared by the communities they are supposed to protect.”

The controversy in Kunduz began during the spring harvest as new arbakai began demanding what they deemed an Islamic tax from the farmers, amounting to 10 percent of their harvest. Payments were also demanded from others. In June, two arbakai commanders with 30 armed men stormed a girls school in Kunduz City and beat the headmaster and assistant headmaster after they refused to pay, leaving both men in comas.

At least 50 families in Khan Abad say that groups have taken their homes to use as military compounds, and clashes between groups in the last few months have left at least six people dead and several more wounded, said Mr. Aqtash.

“We get reports and complaints about arbakai forces almost every day,” he said.

The Taliban, meanwhile, have remained active in the province. At 4 a.m. on Tuesday insurgents attacked a guesthouse in Kunduz City frequented by foreign aid workers and private security contractors, leaving four people dead.

The attack began when a suicide bomber rammed a Toyota Corolla packed with explosives into the front entrance of the guesthouse compound, killing the four guards at the gate. Two other attackers armed with light weapons and wearing explosive-laced vests ran into the compound before police arrived, leading to a three-hour firefight before one of the attackers was shot and killed and the other detonated his vest, killing himself as police closed in, said Mr. Aqtash.

Nine civilians and a police officer were wounded, he said.

An Afghan employee of The New York Times contributed reporting from Kunduz Province.