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Afghan Former Militants Rejoin Insurgency

By Zia Ahmadi

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Fighters in Herat defect after government fails to fulfill promises of work and development.

Militants in Herat province of eastern Afghanistan who laid down their weapons in response to government offers of aid and amnesty are rejoining the insurgency after officials failed to deliver on their promises.

A senior security official told IWPR that about half the 1,000 militants who had surrendered in the last year were now back fighting against the government.

Both the Afghan government and the international community have made it a priority to persuade members of the Taliban and allied armed groups to defect, and this was the focus of a “peace jirga” or assembly hosted by President Hamid Karzai in the capital Kabul in June.

Efforts have focused on winning over small groups in return for protection from legal investigations, the provision of jobs and reconstruction projects for their home areas.

However, in a telephone interview with IWPR, Nur Gul, a Taliban commander who

surrendered with his 20 armed men last October, said none of the promises he received beforehand had been translated into action.

Nur Gul, 38, was originally part of the Jamiat-e Islami faction, which fought against the Taleban in northern Afghanistan in the Nineties. But then he switched allegiances and joined his former Taleban enemies, before being persuaded to come over to the government side.

“The day we surrendered, the Italian PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] gave each of us one sack of rice, a can of cooking oil and a winter jacket,” he said. “They showed this on TV, which we found very humiliating, as most people might think we’d been fighting only for some rice or cooking oil.”

Nur Gul said his men were being harassed by Afghan security officers, had not been given jobs and had seen no reconstruction work.

“We thought we had an independent government, but [now] we realise it’s the foreigners who have the bigger say in this country, not the Afghan government,” he said.

Now he is back with the Taleban.

“This time I will fight against the government and the foreign occupying forces to the last drop of blood,” he said.

Arbab Zaman Gul, 40, from the Keshk Kuhna district, was a commander in Hezb-e Islami, an insurgent group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and allied with the Taleban, surrendered to Herat provincial police together with his 30 fighters this May.

But he too has returned to violence, accusing the government of reneging on its promises.

“After we surrendered and received a letter of protection from the government, four of my men were killed within the next ten days,” he said. He accuses “government elements” of the killings.

“The reason we surrendered was not in order to be harassed or tortured by government security forces, but to help restore peace and security,” Zaman Gul said. “We wanted our area to be rebuilt and we wanted job opportunities to be created so that we would have a chance to get work. But the government has reneged on all its commitments.

“So we have had to go out, pick up our weapons and fight them again. If the government continues with its lies, not only will no one want to surrender, but the number of people opposing it will increase.

Mullah Mustafa, a former Taleban commander who surrendered and joined the peace process along with his 50 fighters, told IWPR that he had not yet returned to the armed

struggle. But he warned that if the government failed to deliver on promises, his men would take up arms again.

Officials acknowledge that there have been problems with the reconciliation process, pointing to a lack of resources and the conflicting priorities of different government agencies.

The effort to persuade militants to turn away from violence has been led by the National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission, NPRC, founded in 2005. Sharif Mojaddidi, who heads the NPRC's division for western Afghanistan, says between 5,000 to 7,000 insurgents across the country have joined the peace process in the last five years.

He said the government provides militants who surrender with letters of protection, and promises them it will create jobs and launch reconstruction efforts in the areas they come from.

Mojaddidi acknowledged that some insurgents had gone back to the other side due to budgetary constraints which prevented some pledges being delivered on, and also to what he described as "inattentiveness" on the part of some senior government officials.

Herat provincial police chief Mohammad Salim Ehsas said the militants who join the peace process had unrealistic expectations – they wanted reconstruction, job creation and the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan, all in the very near future.

Siawash, a political analyst in Herat province, said he believed that most of those who join the peace process were simply armed criminals, rather than part of the opposition. Once they realised they were no longer able to make a living out of crime, he said, they came to the government and claimed to be militants willing to surrender. Then they would turn back to crime again.

According to Siawash, the real opposition has an ideological agenda which makes it harder to persuade members to surrender just to get money or jobs.

A high-ranking official for the western security zone, speaking on condition of anonymity, estimated that out of the more than 1,000 armed men who had handed in their weapons over the last year, "500 are back fighting the government and the international forces".

He said those who had resumed militant activity mainly came from the Bala Murghab and Qades districts of Badghis province, and the Keshk Kuhna, Guzra, Adreskan and Shindand districts of Herat province.

The official was among those who have accused officers of the National Directorate of Security, NDS, of harassing former militants and alienating them from the reconciliation process.

Even though men who surrendered were generally issued with a letter of protection, the NDS frequently interrogated them.

General Ekramuddin Yawar, chief of police for the western security zone, agreed that intelligence service had put pressure on former militants in an attempt to extract information from them. On some occasions, he said, this had driven the gunmen to defect again.

“Some of those who had joined the peace process have gone back... and resumed their activities against Afghan and international security forces,” he said.

An NDS official in Herat province, who declined to be named, said that the agency had to interrogate those who surrendered in order to identify their associates. He insisted those interrogated were not tortured or imprisoned.

Sharif Ahmad, a former militant, said in a telephone interview that NDS questioning had prompted him to go back to the insurgents.

“Although I surrendered all the arms I had to the government, I was still put under pressure by NDS officers, who wanted me to hand in more weapons,” he said.

He said that when he found out that the NDS was going to detain him again, he rejoined the insurgents.