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The Age

Afghan warlord promoted to police chief

By Rafael Epstein and Ben Doherty

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Matiullah Khan at his home in Tarin Kowt, in Oruzgan province.

AUSTRALIA'S most vital local ally in Afghanistan, controversial warlord Matiullah Khan, has become chief of police in Oruzgan province, after years of receiving money for his fighters to work alongside Australian special forces.

Matiullah Khan and the local governor were targeted last month in one of the most serious Taliban attacks this year, which prompted concern in Canberra because Matiullah's militia and

intelligence network provide a crucial foundation for Australia's efforts in Afghanistan.

A Defence source told The Age that Canberra has been helping to "legitimise him over time ... finding ways around his corruption" and that until last year, the Australian government paid Matiullah Khan directly for his fighters to work alongside Australian special forces.

Last year there were claims that he and his men tortured and massacred dozens of their tribal rivals.

For several years, Australian officials have discussed promoting him to be either governor or chief of police in Oruzgan but earlier this year, moves to appoint him to the latter role were opposed by the former US ambassador, Karl Eikenberry.

However after Matiullah Khan and other senior Oruzgan figures were targeted by the Taliban in a suicide attack last month, he finally won the role.

"Seems like pro-government elders in [Oruzgan] felt things had gotten too much out of hand, and in their view the only one able to rein in the Taliban was Matiullah Khan," said Susanne Smeidl from the think tank, The Liaison Office.

His tribal rivals claimed Matiullah and his men tortured and then knifed to death dozens of men in the Shah Wali Kot district in Kandahar province, in June last year.

"As torture, they were first stabbed in the shoulders and legs, [then] the corpses were treated with chemicals to make them unrecognisable," claimed Mohammed Daoud, the district chief of Chora.

Matiullah has earned more than \$50 million from Australia, the US and other governments, by charging to protect NATO road convoys and winning lucrative construction projects.

Former police chief, Fazel Ahmad Shirzad, only lasted in the job for a few months, and clashed with Matiullah Khan over who should provide security on the region's roads - the police or Matiullah's men.

Another source said that while Australia's view of him had become "less favourable over time", agencies in Canberra acknowledge that not much gets done in the province without his approval or consent.

When Dutch troops were in Oruzgan, they refused to work with him, citing human rights concerns.

"Matiullah's behaviour has in many ways fuelled instability and the growth of the Taliban, so it's hard to imagine his appointment helping things," said Anand Gopal, a writer and analyst familiar with the province.

Khalid Sherzad, spokesperson for the Oruzgan administration, said Mr Khan's appointment was an important step towards the province taking control of its own security.

"This is very important for Oruzgan province [and for] the security of the people. Matiullah Khan has worked for a long time. He is very senior and respected."

There were reports Matiullah supporters took to the streets in Tarin Kowt, Oruzgan's capital, firing weapons into the air in celebration.

But the move to install Matiullah as a provincial police head is also an attempt by Afghan President Hamid Karzai to shore up his control of Afghanistan's restive south.

Since the beginning of this spring fighting season, the Taliban has been systematically assassinating the President's political allies, including his half-brother Ahmad Wali Karzai, in an effort to destroy his support in the Karzai clan's traditional base. Matiullah's uncle, the former governor of Oruzgan and key Karzai confidant, Jan Mohammad Khan, was one of those assassinated, shot by gunmen who invaded his home last month.

Nader Naderi from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission says the appointment is about short-term political gain for President Karzai and is not about effective policing.