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Battle for Balkh

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Events currently unfolding in Afghanistan's northern province of Balkh may be a preview for the future.

Balkh's governor, Atta Mohammad Noor, has accused the Ministry of Interior of distributing weapons to powerful warlords in Balkh in an attempt to undermine his power in the region because of his support to rival presidential candidate Dr. Abdullah Abdullah against incumbent President Hamid Karzai.

At a Martyrs Week ceremony this month, he told the gathering: "Our people are aware of the distribution of weapons to local commanders. The responsibility for any violence and conflict in Balkh [falls on] the people who distributed these illegal weapons."

In a conversation with Killid Weekly, Noor's spokesman, Munir Farhad elaborated on the charges, saying that the warlords are using the weapons to intimidate the residents of Balkh.

"This is against the Afghan constitution and the central government doesn't have the right to distribute weapons to these people who are illiterate, unprofessional and unqualified. These armed commanders are using weapons supplied by the government against Afghan national solidarity and interests. These are not professional security organs," Farhad said. "They are warlords."

A spokesperson from the Ministry of Interior denied that there was a government effort to arm warlords in Balkh and emphasised that Noor's complaint has been referred to the Attorney General's office and National Security Council for investigation.

Fazel Ahmad Faqir Yar, deputy and acting attorney general, said that "a mixed commission should be assigned to evaluate whether [these allegations are] true or not. If it is true, clearly there will be an investigation."

But political observers say that if these warlords are being armed by the Karzai government, there is a much broader political purpose behind the action.

Noor supported Abdullah over Karzai in the Aug. 20 presidential election. A government programme that disrupts security in Balkh could be an attempt to make Noor's position in the province untenable and force the governor's resignation.

"This is politics," said Farhad. "It has a deep root in political issues. The government is not working for security, their goal is political."

But some analysts say that it is Noor, an ethnic Tajik, who has created extra-legal power in Balkh. "Ata Muhammad Noor has established a small kingdom," said Fazal Rahman Oria, a Kabul-based political observer. "He follows his own rules and principles and does not obey the central government."

Rohulla Samun, spokesperson for Governor Juma Khan Hamdard of Paktia Province (and the former governor of Balkh) said that there is no weapons distribution programme and that Noor is, "just using this as an excuse to kill Pashtun tribal leaders he doesn't like."

It is rumored that Karzai once offered Noor a position in his cabinet in exchange for Noor's abandoning support for Abdullah, an offer that Noor declined. Marshal Mohammad Fahim, a Northern Alliance comrade of both Abdullah and governor Noor, accepted a similar offer and is now Karzai's running mate. That defection led to a blood-feud between the candidates and resulted in numerous incidents of violence on the campaign trail.

The latest accusations from the Balkh governor come amid a backdrop of tension as Afghans await results of the presidential election.

As the outcome hangs in limbo, Karzai has manoeuvred behind the scenes to try and prevent a possible runoff vote. It is rumored that he has offered Abdullah 12 ministry chairs, to be filled by him and his supporters, in exchange for a withdrawal of the challenger's candidacy. It is unclear whether Abdullah will accept the offer, though in public statements he has stridently rejected any such compromise.

Regardless, the current situation in Balkh shows the weakness of the central government to maintain security through constitutional means.

"The [statements] of the Interior Ministry show the weakness of Afghan police, that police do not have the ability to enforce the law," said the analyst Oria Rahman. He added that the very fact that the allegations had to be referred to an authority outside the Interior Ministry shows the weakness of that body.

Local police commander General Mujtaba Patang rejected this sentiment at a press conference, both denying that weapons were being distributed in his area and asserting that his men had security well in hand

"Weapons haven't been distributed in north of Afghanistan, we are the government and we are armed. I assure you that no one has the ability [to act outside] the government's authority," he said.

Meanwhile, people in Balkh are caught between a governor who does not appear to have the confidence of the president and increasingly well armed warlords. All sides have called for calm and expressed hope that the situation will not further escalate into actual armed conflict.

"The governor has asked the people to remain calm," said Noor's spokesperson Farhad. "Let the security organs deal with the armed warlords. Do not take matters into your own hands."

Still, he lamented, "This will make the situation worse across Afghanistan and not just in Balkh. This will create problems for Afghan civilians." (Published under an agreement with The Killid Group.