

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

New battleground in N Afghanistan?

Aunohita Mojumdar

October 20, 2009

At the fourth security checkpoint outside the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, a security guard cracks open almonds in a bag to check whether they are fake and possibly carrying some kind of dangerous substance.

At another checkpoint further down the road, a young Afghan constable rummages through luggage as an older officer helps him identify unfamiliar gadgets.

All travellers have to pass through seven security checkpoints to reach the airport outside this city in the north which, until recently, had been considered one of the safest and most stable regions in Afghanistan.

"But those days are gone. There is no peace any longer," one of the older constables says.

"We cannot rely on this," he says, pointing and tugging at his own uniform.

The rapid decline in security in the northern provinces is becoming the fastest changing story in Afghanistan and often one of the most under-reported.

General Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of the Balkh province, has raised alarms about the deteriorating situation in northern Afghanistan.

Noor earned his spurs fighting in the ranks of legendary fighter Ahmed Shah Masood, the late Tajik leader of the Northern Alliance – once bitter enemies of the predominantly Pashtun Taliban – who was assassinated by al-Qaeda operatives in 2001.

"I was a commander. I know the situation is becoming worse. For three years I have been telling the government about the Taliban and they don't listen. I warned them three years ago and the government did not attend to it. War will come home by home in the northern provinces," he says.

Northern troubles brewing

Compared to the rest of the country, the Balkh province remains stable but is surrounded by pockets of insecurity. There have also been numerous reports that Taliban activity has increased in the region.

"Today my area is safe but the Taliban have come up to the adjacent Samangan, Kunduz and Baghlan provinces," Khalilullah Khalil, a local police commander in Tashqurghan in Balkh province, told Al Jazeera.

"We are not sitting idle, we are [formulating] a joint strategy," he says.

His forces have jurisdiction over 140 villages in the Kholm district, which formed the frontline during decades of successive wars for the Soviets, the mujahideen and the Taliban.

Khalil says one of the most pressing challenges for his forces is the "porous", poorly-secured border, straddling three former Soviet republics, which has allowed drug and gun smuggling to finance the insurgency.

There are also fears among many in the security forces stationed in the north that they are not equipped for counter-insurgency campaigns.

Khalil and other local commanders have appealed to the government in Kabul and Nato forces to re-focus security efforts in the northern provinces.

Supply routes

In the face of increasing attacks on its supply convoys in southern Afghanistan, Nato has been looking for alternative routes from the north transiting through Russia and Afghanistan's northern neighbours.

One of the main routes connecting Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to Afghanistan runs through Balkh province.

Neighbouring Kunduz province provides an alternate route into Tajikistan via the Tajik border town of Sher Khan Bandar.

However, the alternate route has provided a new target for armed groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, who operate out of bases in Tajikistan and are known to be active in northern Afghanistan.

Thomas Ruttig, of the Afghan Analysts Network, says the routes have contributed to deteriorating security in the Kunduz province, but believes that "this [insecurity] has not happened overnight but over two to three years."

If insecurity in Kunduz increases, Balkh may become the main route for supplies. This worries Noor, Balkh's governor, who believes the use of northern supply routes will lead to a spike in violence but also believes that the convoys are not, in themselves, the root cause of the insecurity.

Increasing instability, Ruttig says, is linked to the insurgency in the south but fighters have found more accommodating conditions in the minority Pashtun pockets in the north.

Reprisal and revenge attacks on Pashtuns after the fall of the Taliban, forcible seizure of lands and long-standing grievances have fomented ethnic tensions in the north.

While the fighting in southern Afghanistan is not affected by ethnic loyalties, any increase in violence in the north could potentially be more dangerous because it could pits one ethnic community against another, says a security analyst who did not want to be named.

Operational barriers

The north is under-equipped and insufficiently prepared for such deterioration in stability. Some Nato troop contingents, including those from Germany and Sweden, deployed to northern Afghanistan because it was relatively peaceful and allowed them to opt out of offensive operations.

Germany has adamantly refused to move its troops to the more volatile regions of the country despite repeated requests from Nato and US commanders.

Now, even though the war has been brought to them, the military presence of the two countries is still characterised by the defensive operational mentality.

Security experts based in the north say this creates an inability to initiate operations and a primarily focuses on troop protection that does not tolerate casualties.

"The Germans have an elaborate process that weighs them down even in the task of patrolling the area. The air strike in Kunduz - that killed many civilians - was a result of their inability to go beyond their current operating pattern which is risk averse."

For his part, the new German commander at the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), the civil-military outposts of the international forces, has said that operations to root out insurgent's activities in Kunduz and Takhar would be increased.

However, changing the force to an offensive posture, even if this receives a political mandate, will require more than simply rewriting the rules of engagement.

"Currently there is no force projection from the German PRT. They have not been proactive. They have not challenged the insurgents," the analyst says.

Political will

Currently, there is little pressure from the Karzai government for greater resources in the North.

Noor's decision to back Karzai's main opponent in the elections, Abdullah Abdullah, has widened the chasm between central and northern Afghanistan. With governors appointed solely by presidential authority, Noor's own survival hangs in balance though he believes he has "the support of the people."

The political divide coupled with the international community's preference to send their aid largely to the provinces where their troops are stationed, has also meant that the northern provinces like Balkh have been starved of development.

Incremental economic gains are also now at risk of being reversed as a crippling drought and lack of industry has left hundreds of youths unemployed.

For Balkh and other northern provinces, the economic deprivation is clearly linked to instability. That is something that even Noor's political opponents concede.

Syed Nasruddin Mohseni, a senior leader of the Hizb-e-Wahadat-e-Milli which supported Karzai in the recent elections, says: "Youth are joining [the] Taliban because of unemployment. The province needs financial aid so that people can be given other jobs."

The province is poppy-free but analysts fear that this gain may also be reversed because of the lack of economic development.

Outside the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, on the main arterial highway, stands the Gorimar industrial park funded by USAID. Soon after [Al Jazeera's report on it last year](#) the park was inaugurated' with much fanfare.

A year later, however, it stands desolate with not a single functioning industry.

It has become a memorial of northern Afghanistan's long wait for economic and military resources which, when and if they do arrive, might be too little, too late.