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Afghan fury at Koran burning claims

By Abdullah Obaidi
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WARDAK, Afghanistan - Protests are sweeping Afghanistan in the wake of allegations that American forces had burned copies of the Koran during a patrol in a province near Kabul - a charge strongly denied by a United States military spokesperson.

Hundreds of students turned out in two separate demonstrations in the capital, Kabul, on October 25, one staged in front of the parliament building and another began at Kabul University and moved towards the center of town. There were no reports of casualties, although police were forced to fire warning shots in an attempt to control the crowds.

The Kabul disturbances were just the latest in a series of protests that followed rumors of a Koran-burning incident in central-eastern Wardak province. Students and residents in Wardak, Jalalabad, Khost, Logar and Kandahar also held demonstrations after reports began to circulate that US troops had burned Korans in Wardak, which borders Kabul.

The incident that sparked the unrest allegedly occurred on October 15, during a routine patrol by US forces near Khwajagan village. An American tank hit a mine, say villagers, and soldiers began a house-to-house search for insurgents. Not finding anyone, they allegedly burned copies of the Koran they found in one of the houses they had raided.

"The soldiers went to Khwaja Fazlurahman's house," said Khwaja Qandol, a resident of the village. "There were only women there at the time. When they did not find anybody, they took six copies of the Koran from the bookcase and burned them in the center of the room."

According to Qandol, the women complained to the rest of the villagers, who went to the house and saw the burned Korans.

This version of events is strongly disputed by US forces, who hint that the Taliban may have staged the incident to provoke anti-American sentiment among the population.

"There was no incident in which ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] forces

burned Korans in Wardak," said Captain Elizabeth Mathias, from the US Forces-Afghanistan public affairs office. "ISAF and Afghan forces conducted an investigation of the incident and determined that the 'enemies of Afghanistan', as reported by local authorities, were responsible for the burning."

But Shahidullah Shahid, spokesman for the governor of Wardak, pointed the finger at local hooligans rather than insurgents.

"Holy Korans have been burned in [Khwajagan]," he told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "But it was not the American forces. It was drug addicts from that village, who have since run away."

According to Shahid, the governor's office was launching an investigation into the incident.

"Americans respect our religion and culture," he insisted. "Last week, the US forces provided dozens of copies of the Holy Koran as well as prayer cloths to the local council in Jalrez district."

According to Captain Mathias, a local mullah working with the Afghan National Army unit provided some assistance by addressing the public in Wardak.

"In his comments, the mullah described how the Taliban has used this tactic of burning the Holy Koran then blaming international forces to inflame the public in several provinces," she said. "[The mullah also] said that these actions disrespect Islam and Afghanistan."

But there is no getting away from the protests that have now hit five provinces, with no end in sight.

The first demonstrations were held in Maidan Shahr, the capital of Wardak, just one day after the alleged incident. Hundreds of students and local residents blocked the main road and chanted slogans such as "Death to the Americans!" and "Death to the enemies of our religion!"

Similar scenes have been repeated throughout the country; on Sunday, October 25, in Kabul, police fired warning shots in the air as students clustered outside the parliament building, burning an effigy of US President Barack Obama and shouting angry anti-American slogans.

The protests are now gaining national and international attention, despite initial complaints by demonstrators that the media was ignoring them.

"The media reported nothing about our demonstration," said Ezatullah, the 18-year-old organizer of the Wardak protests.

Students in Nangahar also staged rallies and issued a resolution demanding that the Afghan government prosecute those responsible for the Koran burning. They called on the authorities to make foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and urged the Muslim world to support them by responding to the perceived disrespect to their religion.

"American forces show contempt for everything that is sacred, and this is not acceptable for

us," said one of the demonstrators in Nangahar. "Muslims defend their religion with their lives, and we will continue to do so."

This surge of anti-American feeling could not come at a worse time for Washington, which is now considering whether to send tens of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan.

Eight years after the US-led invasion that routed the Taliban, many Afghans see the situation as worse than ever. A growing insurgency, stalled reconstruction, a flawed presidential election and mounting disillusionment among the population are threatening to torpedo any efforts to get the country moving along the path to stability and development.

The Koran-burning incident, whoever is ultimately proven to be responsible, has tapped into a well of anger and frustration.

"I'm concerned because a rumor has gained such traction," said Mathias. It is not the first time.

In 2005, an unconfirmed report in Newsweek magazine that US forces in Guantanamo, the US detention facility in Cuba, had desecrated a Koran led to violent protests in many countries. In Afghanistan, at least four people died and dozens were injured when demonstrations broke out in Jalalabad, on the border with Pakistan.

The American military sees the present crisis as an open attempt by the insurgency to destabilize the situation in order to gain support.

"Insurgents often force people to demonstrate and propagate rumor to disrupt security," Mathias said. "We're actively engaging our Afghan National Army counterparts to speak more publicly about their role in the investigation into the allegations in Wardak and their findings that ISAF forces did not burn Korans there."