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Afghan governor turned 3,000 men over to Taliban

Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, the former governor of Afghanistan's Helmand province, has revealed he turned thousands of his followers over to the Taliban after he was sacked from the job under pressure from British officials.

By Damien McElroy

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Sher Mohammed Akhundzada Photo: RICHARD MILLS

He was accused of being linked to the opium trade and lost his position in 2005 to pave the way for UK soldiers to be deployed to the region.

In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* at his Kabul home, Mr Akhundzada said that after losing office he encouraged up to 3,000 followers to take up Taliban offers of money.

The move coincided with a huge upsurge in the number of British deaths in Afghanistan, Before British forces moved into Helmand province in 2006, they had suffered 5 deaths, since then the death toll has risen to 235, including 98 dead this year.

"When I was no longer governor the government stopped paying for the people who supported me," he said. "I sent 3,000 of them off to the Taliban because I could not afford to support them but the Taliban was making payments.

"Lots of people, including my family members, went back to the Taliban because they had lost respect for the government. The British bore the brunt of this because the Taliban became the defenders of Helmand, where the local tradition doesn't allow foreigners to go into people's homes."

Mr Akhundzada, a former mujahideen fighter against the Russians, was governor of Helmand from 2001 to 2005 until he was dismissed.

He was a member of a prominent southern Afghan clan and was tainted by association with the drug industry. Nine tons of opium were found in his cellars in 2005.

After being removed, Mr Akhundzada claims he had no choice but to stop cash handouts to his substantial support base and said they would be better off with the Taliban.

Brigadier Ed Butler, who commanded the Helmand Task Force in 2006, confirmed hundreds of Mr Akhundzada's followers had been involved in clashes with British troops.

"There was a force of fighters who had lost one powerful leader, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, and had decided to support the next most powerful warlord – in this case, the Taliban and not the Nato force commander," he said.

"These fighters would have been well equipped, well armed and turned out to be hard fighters. Our forces no doubt engaged in the ensuing battles with some of them over the long hot summer of 2006."

Popular support for Mr Akhundzada in Helmand has grown in his absence, according to another foreign diplomat, because people look back to the relatively stability.

President Karzai is known to share the view that Mr Akhundzada's removal was a disaster and has publicly praised the senator for holding the Taliban at bay.

"We removed Akhundzada on the allegation of drug-running, and delivered the province to drug runners, the Taliban, to terrorists, to a threefold increase of drugs and poppy cultivation," Mr Karzai declared three years ago.

Mr Karzai is now rumoured to be considering restoring Mr Akhundzada, who is now an Afghan senator, to his old job in a forthcoming reshuffle. Experts believe he is one of a

number of former warlords promised a post in return for supporting him in the August election.

Mr Akhundzada attempted to reassure Nato commanders by claiming they had at last settled on the right formula to blunt the Taliban threat in the province.

"People will be very happy for the British Army to stay in Helmand if it is making payments to support their lives and the development of its economy," he said.

"The Taliban is only liked because the British are interfering without providing anything in return but the common people can be happy with the British Army if its role changes."

Nato plans to fund job creation schemes for Taliban members ready to defect in an effort to drain support from the militant factions through a reintegration scheme from early next year.