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Warlords Re-emerging in North

Revival of militia activity in Balkh linked to looming political power struggle.

By IWPR-trained reporters in Balkh

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Baz Mohammad, a shopkeeper in the Charbolak district of Balkh province, is a worried man. Security in this formerly stable province is becoming increasingly fragile, and he is concerned that fighting could break out.

But he does not blame the Taliban or other insurgent groups for the problems. Instead, he is afraid that former militia commanders from the area are jostling for power because they sense the provincial governor's position is up for grabs.

"I have never seen the Taliban in this district," he said. "But I do see the former warlords walking around with their weapons."

According to Baz Mohammad, the situation in Balkh has been declining steadily since the provincial governor, Atta Mohammad Noor, broke with President Hamed Karzai.

Atta supported Karzai's chief rival, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, in the presidential election held in August. Atta and Abdullah are both identified with ethnic Tajik political forces in the north.

"If these two do not mend relations, things will get even worse," Baz Mohammad said. "The police and security forces cannot even patrol in our district at night any more."

Balkh has become more and more unstable since the results of the elections were announced in October. Karzai was declared the winner, and Atta's position has come under question.

There are strong rumours that Karzai will try and replace him, and residents are worried that this could precipitate violence if the powerful governor makes a bid to hold on to his seat.

Over the past six weeks, more than 20 people have been killed in the province, including police. Attacks on foreign forces have also increased. This is a new phenomenon for Balkh, which had been fairly calm in recent years.

Local residents like Baz Mohammad say that the violence is not the work of the Taliban; instead, they point to groups associated with former warlords becoming more visible and aggressive.

General Murad Ali Murad, commander of the Afghan army's 209th Corps which is headquartered in Balkh, confirmed that armed groups not linked to the insurgency have become active in the region over the past few weeks.

"We will eliminate these groups, no matter to whom they belong," he said. "We will not let them destabilise Balkh."

When IWPR interviewed the general, he refused to speculate as to who was behind these groups, saying only that it was too soon to start mentioning names.

But in an interview with the Wall Street Journal in early November, Murad said he was seeing evidence that Atta was arming men in anticipation of a showdown with Karzai.

Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai, spokesman for the police force in the north, commented, "In many districts, those who made their living at the barrel of a gun are trying to do so again." But he insisted that his men – part of the national police force – were fully capable of dealing with the threat.

Atta's spokesman, Munir Ahmad Farhad, confirmed there were armed groups not linked with the Taliban, but denied they had any connection with the governor.

For his part, Atta has publicly accused the interior and defence ministries of sending weapons to the north to arm various groups, allegations that have been strongly denied in Kabul.

Balkh, in the north of Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan, is one of Afghanistan's key provinces. Hairatan, a port on the Amu Darya river, brings in more than 100 million US dollars per year in customs revenues, according to government sources.

Atta is not unopposed in the area. Three Karzai allies have power bases in Balkh or surrounding provinces. The Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Junbesh movement, has almost total control in Jowzjan and is a bitter foe of Atta; the Pashtun Juma Khan Hamdard, although currently the governor of Paktia in the south, also has deep roots in Balkh and has reportedly been working against Atta. Finally, Mohammad Mohaqeq, leader of the Hazara group Wahdat-e Islami, is fairly strong in Balkh too, and has made no secret of his opposition to Atta.

Spokesmen for Dostum, Hamdard and Mohaqeq have denied that their groups control any armed men in Balkh. Nonetheless, there is speculation that each of the three is vying to put one of his own men in as governor of Balkh.

All three plus Atta led armed factions that took part in the brutal civil war of the early Nineties, as rival forces battled for control of Afghanistan following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government.

Many of Balkh's residents are worried that their province may once again become a battleground.