

Exclusive Interview with Amrullah Saleh - English Transcript



Saturday, 05 January 2008

The head of the Afghan National Security Department, Amrullah Saleh, has said the failure to root out terrorism lies in part with the international community's decision to limit the war on terror to inside Afghanistan and not tackle Pakistan properly despite it being obvious that the insurgents' commanders and "the masterminds of terrorist activities" live in their safe havens there. The national security chief said to fully defeat terrorism Afghanistan had either to be strong enough to seal and properly protect its borders or the strategy of the Coalition forces towards Pakistan needed to change. Talking about the operation to drive the Taleban out of Musa Qala in Helmand, Saleh described this as a big achievement. He also praised Afghan President Hamed Karzai's policy towards the Taleban, saying it had created splits within the group.

The following is the text of an interview with Amrullah Saleh with Tolo TV, on 27 December. [To view the video in the original Dari version, click here.](#)

The presenter/correspondent is Massood Qiam of Tolo TV.

[Presenter] Dear Tolo television viewers, peace be upon all of you. You are watching an exclusive interview with Amrullah Saleh, director-general of the National Security Department of Afghanistan.

Thank you very much for your time. Of course there are several questions to ask, but I would like to start with a general question that the people usually ask about the role of the international peacekeeping and Afghan forces in ensuring security. How are the responsibilities distributed? What is the mechanism under which the responsibilities are distributed in ensuring security?

Role of foreign forces

[Amrullah Saleh] In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. The role and contribution of the international forces in Afghanistan has witnessed changes since the beginning of the war on terror and the fall of the Taleban regime.

In the first days, they came to Afghanistan to support the mujahedin forces that were fighting the Taleban throughout Afghanistan, but had no single command.

The code of conduct of the international forces was different then. After the national army of Afghanistan was established and gradually entered the military scene in the country, the role of the [foreign] forces changed.

The international forces play a key role in Afghanistan, especially in defending the Afghan air space because we do not have air force, and they are, for the time being, responsible for this.

They are also involved in training and equipping the Afghan national army - both from a weaponry point of view and partly, a financial point of view.

The national army of Afghanistan has gained more capacity and capabilities in the past few years. The army now leads some operations with the international forces supporting it.

Also, coordination between the Afghan security forces has improved several times in comparison with the past years.

Coordination between Afghan and foreign forces

[Correspondent] Are you satisfied with the current level of coordination between Afghan and foreign troops?

[Amrullah Saleh] We cannot use the word satisfaction because there are some mistakes - some of them unpreventable.

For instance, when security forces, whether Afghans or coalition forces, come under attack in an area, it is called a tactical situation. It is very difficult to coordinate everything in a tactical

condition, and they need to react and destroy the sudden threat facing them.

Then we have planned operations, like the operation in Musa Qala, and the operation that was conducted in Konar last year.

The level of coordination in planned operations is satisfactory. But there is lower coordination in unexpected situations that come up every now and then, in which different forces have to defend themselves, open up a route, reach an area, or destroy the sudden threat they are faced with. It is difficult to coordinate in such cases as it has its own problems.

Some insurgents controlled from Pakistan

[Correspondent] Who has the lead in the war on terror and insurgents? Is it led by the foreign troops or Afghans?

[Amrullah Saleh] Look, we are engaged in a war called the war on international terrorism. A part of this war has an Afghan dimension. But it has a bigger foreign dimension too. In 2002, terrorists only lost their territory in Afghanistan. They were not defeated. They crossed the Durand Line and went to Pakistan.

The US-led international Coalition forces confined their war against the terrorists to within Afghan borders and did not cross the Durand Line [border with Pakistan].

We are faced with a force, the command centre of which is not inside Afghan soil. Their equipping, training, and command centres are not in Afghanistan. Some of these centres are in the Pakistani Baluchistan state. The Taleban have a council there. The council is called the Quetta Council and has 15 members. The Quetta Council controls operations in Helmand, Zabol and Kandahar Provinces.

There is another [Taleban] council called the Miranshah Council. It covers operations in Paktia, Paktika, Logar, and Khost Provinces.

Another council is called Peshawar Council. It covers Konar, Nurestan, Laghman, Nangarhar, and Kabul provinces.

When we arrest a terrorist or an armed man in a clash or based on intelligence, they are not senior members of the Al-Qa'idah terrorist network or the Taleban group. Their main commanders are on the other side of the border, and we cannot take measures on the other side of the Durand Line.

So, what we have been doing in the past six years has been to provide the Americans, and sometimes the government of Pakistan, intelligence about the presence of terrorists, their safe havens, hideouts, training centres, and their financial centres.

This has not been very successful till date because the government of Pakistan has so far not taken notable measures to root out these forces.

Roots of terrorism not eliminated

[Correspondent] The doctrine presented by Western policymakers, especially American ones, after the 11 September terrorist attacks, called for an international war against terrorism. The Americans are in Afghanistan today. We remember that, in the first days of the US attacks in Afghanistan, President Bush said that they would root out terrorism. Why are the roots that you spoke about not eliminated?

[Amrullah Saleh] One of the factors that have disappointed the people of Afghanistan and the country's intellectuals is exactly the point you mentioned. We believe the war on terror should know no borders. This was the first slogan by the Americans and the US-led international coalition forces. But this war has unfortunately been confined to [Afghan] borders. This means that the coalition forces do all they can to fight terrorists, who shelter or infiltrate into Afghanistan, on our borders, in Paktika, Konar, or in Helmand, but when the topic of operations on the other side of the border comes up, they try to make do with exchanges of information, and political pressure on the government of Pakistan. They try to convince the Pakistanis by offering them financial incentives or through international approaches - and in some cases - force them to take measures.

But this approach has so far not proven very effective in rooting out terrorists, or eliminating their bases and financial and logistic networks on the other side of the border.

The president of Afghanistan has on several occasions told the coalition authorities about this, and has clearly told the people of Afghanistan that we are actually fighting the [ordinary] terrorists. Their commanders and the masterminds of terrorist activities live in their safe havens on the other side of the border.

Let me give you an example. There is a man in Miranshah. He is called Mawlawi Sadeq Nur. Mawlawi Sadeq Nur is from Waziristan, and is one of those who signed the Miranshah treaty.

The government of Pakistan struck a deal with them and signed an agreement.

The evidence and intelligence that we have suggest that this Mawlawi [Sadeq Nur], all by himself, has planned several terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. They use different elements and send them into Afghanistan.

Therefore, the full defeat of terrorism requires that we either be strong enough to seal and properly protect our borders, or it requires that the strategy of the coalition forces towards Pakistan should change.

International community's lack of action

[Correspondent] Why does the international community not take measures with regard to the points you mentioned? I am sure these points have already been mentioned to them.

[Amrullah Saleh] We have shared these points with the international forces and given them intelligence based on which they could take measures.

It is above the authority of an Afghan to know why the coalition forces have so far not succeeded in forcing the government of Pakistan to take notable measures, or why they have not so far run out of patience and did not use their B52s in Miranshah.

But as far as we have seen, there has been remarkable diplomatic and political pressure on Pakistan.

At the same time, the concept has existed that if Pakistan comes under more pressure, Pakistani society might face a situation under which the government might lose control of the situation and that would then not be in favour of the situation in the region.

We disagree with this analysis in principle. The Pakistani army is an organized and powerful force. If there is a true political determination to root out terrorism, the terrorist forces that have hideouts, and are trained, on borders are not strong enough to resist against an organized force like the Pakistani army.

But the system in Pakistan has no political determination to eliminate these elements and forces. One of the ways out is that we should try, through mutual and multilateral discussions, international pressure, and political negotiations, to create a political determination to root out terrorism in Pakistan.

Iranian interference

[Correspondent] The issue of Pakistan has recently been a hot topic of discussion and the people also have comments on the issue. But recently, there are rumours suggesting that Iran is also interfering and helping insurgents and terrorists [in Afghanistan]. The accusations have mainly been levelled by leaders of Western countries, especially Britain and America. What does your intelligence suggest? Do you confirm the accusations?

[Amrullah Saleh] Our efforts have focused very much on our eastern and western borders in the past few years because we have had the highest level of vulnerability on our borders with Pakistan.

Soon after we had reports saying that some circles in Iran have contacted specific terrorist and armed groups inside Afghanistan, and after we received irregular reports of these forces [inside Afghanistan] receiving weapons and financial support [from Iranian circles], we intensified our intelligence activities in the provinces bordering Iran. We shared with the Iranian authorities some of the cases we had and the intelligence we had collected.

[Correspondent] Does the intelligence and cases you collected suggest that Iranian circles, or the government of Iran directly, contacted or offered cooperation with terrorists?

[Amrullah Saleh] We have shared the intelligence on some cases with the government of Iran. We hope they will respond to us. They have promised that they will present answers to the government of Afghanistan in this regard.

At this stage, I do not wish to make further comments on the nature of the intelligence and names of specific areas in Afghanistan that the cases belong to. We will see how the exchange of information between the two countries on this issue and the very good political relations between Afghanistan and Iran can help address these misunderstandings and issues.

President's relations with intelligence authorities

[Correspondent] At least in the past three months, the president, in his speeches, has seemed worried and has criticized the government authorities. The president's concerns and the remarks which he is making now but never used to have worried the people too. Is the president satisfied with the intelligence you present to him? Does he trust the intelligence that your department presents of the current situation?

[Amrullah Saleh] All leaders, with no exception, are always thirsty for information. The president of Afghanistan also has the same feature. He is always interested to hear and listen to precise information and act upon intelligence.

We are not the only source presenting intelligence and information to His Excellency the president of Afghanistan.

There is no country in the world with only one intelligence source. Intelligence and the issue of collection of information in Afghanistan are in general divided into two groups.

The first is what we call the open sources. This includes the media, the internet, political commentaries, remarks by civil society, and the president's meetings with [people's] representative and authorities. These are open source for collection of information.

When other departments of the government of Afghanistan hear about an issue that they think should be shared with the president, they present the information to the president. It is very natural and common anywhere in the world.

At the same time, every now and then - usually twice a month - we prepare reports on the situation. The reports sometime focus on the situation in one specific province, but sometimes they are about the political process in society. At other times, the president orders us to collect intelligence about one specific topic.

I have been the director-general of Afghanistan's National Security Department for almost four years. We have three meetings with the president every week. In all these four years, except at times when the president was abroad on official visits, I do not remember the president cancelling his meetings with the security sector or with me. This shows that the president is highly interested in hearing information. He always follows up the information. When we present intelligence to the president and promise that we will take action, the next day, the president asks us about our measures.

Especially when there are incidents and the people of Afghanistan suffer damage, or there are other incidents, the president follows the intelligence with great interest.

So I believe the fact that the esteemed president of Afghanistan speaks about different issues shows his respect for one of the principles of democracy. The people of Afghanistan have the right to be aware of the ideas of their president and the problems of their government. This is not a sign of disappointment or failure within the system. On the contrary, I believe we

should be proud that the people of Afghanistan can seek the views and comments of their authorities on any issue they want. Today, government officials do not sit behind high concrete walls doing everything without the people knowing about it.

The other characteristic of this government is that it is not dominated by a single party [Dari: Tak Hezbi]. It is a government composed of all walks of life, groups, tribes and political movements of Afghanistan.

When the president of Afghanistan speaks about an issue, he means that the responsibility of leading Afghanistan to a stage of prosperity and peace does not only lie with the president. He means all political forces of this society and country, after all the oppression and disasters, have equal responsibility in this process.

Therefore, it is not fair to always criticize that a specific demand is not met to the level of expectations because government officials have failed to work.

Afghanistan's successes

[Correspondent] It is the responsibility of society to criticize the inability and incompetence of the government. But the president criticizes himself and criticizes a system of which he himself is a member and has helped set up. He criticizes officials working within the system - officials mainly thinking about their own interests rather than the nation's interests. At the same time, the president expresses sympathy to a victim for whom he cannot promise justice.

[Amrullah Saleh] I do not agree with the understanding that you have of the president's remarks for the following reasons.

First, until the fall of the Taleban, we had several islands of power in Afghanistan. For the first time in the history of this country, we have witnessed the centralization of power without any bloodshed. This showed tolerance, patience and understanding among the people of Afghanistan.

When Mr Karzai came and was elected as the president of Afghanistan by the Loya Jerga and then by the people of Afghanistan, no force was used to centralize the islands of power in Afghanistan, and the power which was distributed into pieces in the country. Tolerance and mild approaches were used to do so. None of the local powers were suppressed by a military force. They showed tolerance through a political process and accepted the process in general. Then the power was centralized in a legal organ in Afghanistan, which is the elected organ of the people of Afghanistan and we call it the Islamic government of Afghanistan.

Therefore, in my view, we have big sources of power within this system. It does not require much academic knowledge to count all those sources.

First, the establishment of the national army was not an easy job in Afghanistan. Today, boys from Badakhshan, Helmand, Kandahar, Badghis, Nangarhar and Nurestan Provinces are standing with each other in an army unit on one of Afghanistan's borders or districts and are defending this country. The people of Afghanistan respect their uniform.

We have a parliament in Afghanistan today. We have freedom of the media in Afghanistan. We have courts in the country.

As head of Afghanistan's national security, I tell you on the basis of information, intelligence and evidence that we had several private jails or jails that belonged to parties in Afghanistan some years ago. There are no private jails or prisons belonging to parties in Afghanistan today. This is a very big achievement.

We have centralized income revenues in Afghanistan. This has happened without any use of violence against any commander who had influence on financial and custom revenue sources in any corner of the country.

This shows the tolerance and patriotism of the mujahedin, and at the same time, shows the [good] politics and prudence of the government of Afghanistan. A combination of these two elements helped establish a cover in Afghanistan called the Islamic government of Afghanistan. Everyone feels part of the system.

Security

[Correspondent] What is your assessment of the violence and clashes in the south and north of Afghanistan? How do you compare them? Recently, at least in the past one year, the north has also changed into a centre of insurgency, and this has, to a great extent, been because of the government's inability to control some northern provinces.

[Amrullah Saleh] In the current situation, the police are the main force to protect stability. Afghanistan's police are weak because the process of reform, equipping, and training of the police started very late.

With the help of the coalition forces and the national army of Afghanistan, we have managed to eliminate the military threats to a high extent. Then it is the issue of maintaining the stability in Afghanistan. We need a force familiar with the areas and who treat the people well. In addition to enforcing the law, the force should be able to prevent small guerrilla attacks, and this force should be the police of Afghanistan. Discussions on the strengthening of the police, police training and equipping were held at the end of 2005, and the practical steps were taken in the middle of 2006.

The police that we expect should be able to protect stability in local areas is still not established with the required strength.

What we see in Afghanistan is not a situation out of control. There are incidents. But our security forces and the political process of Afghanistan are going ahead on a positive direction.

This means that the system and security forces of Afghanistan have not suppressed any legitimate political organization, nor did they prevent the process of political competition.

That is why I say the political direction we are moving in is a positive one.

At the same time, almost for the first time in the history of our country, we have a framework and a law for the transfer of power and the continuation of the democratic process in Afghanistan.

The constitution has very clear provisions.

The system enjoys legitimacy. We defend this legitimacy. We do not defend a unilateral government or a specific group, political taste, region or direction. This is an encouraging element.

Yes, there are problems and attacks. Whenever there is an attack on any city of Afghanistan, it shows the failure of Afghanistan's intelligence. I will explain why.

Whenever a force or a small group manages to cross the border and infiltrate a district, it shows the failure of Afghanistan's defence forces and the police.

Disappointment is not the solution to these failures. We have several positive points in which we can invest. We should not just focus all our attention on the weak points and try to portray a big image of the problems.

[Correspondent] I have some separate questions and I would prefer to ask them at this stage of the interview.

Musa Qala operation "big achievement"

The Musa Qala operation and the recapture of Musa Qala was said to be mainly propaganda [Dari: Tablighat].

[Amrullah Saleh] No, the recapture of Musa Qala is a big achievement for us for the following reasons.

First, the people of Musa Qala called the president and sent delegations asking him to rid them from the grips of the violent, lawless and wild force. The message was brought by the elders and people of Musa Qala.

Secondly, the Taleban were campaigning very much that they were able to defend Musa Qala.

Thousands of Pakistani, foreign, and some deceived Afghan elements had gathered in the district to fight the Afghan government and coalition forces.

But with the competence and skill of the national army of Afghanistan in planning and implementing the operation, the government and Coalition forces had very low casualties, but we were able to inflict very heavy casualties on the enemy because we enjoyed the public support in the district. It was the people's demand and it was a legitimate attack. With the information the people gave us, we inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.

How do we know we are successful in Musa Qala? When you enter an area previously controlled by the enemy, and after 48 hours, the people come to you and voluntarily tell you where the remnants, the ammunition caches, and networks of the enemy were, it shows how much you are supported in the area.

This is a standard based on which we can estimate whether we are accepted or not and evaluate how many people hail the move.

After 48 hours, dozens of ordinary people of Musa Qala came and reported to the intelligence and national army and police forces the sites of the ammunition caches of the Taleban and terrorists who had left Musa Qala.

On the other hand, in only one or two of the seized narcotics centres - if we estimate the lowest price on the market - opium worth 500m dollars was destroyed. The opium did not belong to the people or shopkeepers of Musa Qala. It belonged to a few bands who exported the opium to fund terrorist networks in Musa Qala.

Musa Qala is not a mere topic for publicity [Dari: Tabglighat]. On the contrary, we believe we had shortcomings in reporting and publicizing the achievements in Musa Qala to the people of Afghanistan. We could not let the people know properly how well the process was going on there.

President's policy has created splits in Taleban

[Correspondent] But what does the defeat of the Taleban mean? Does it mean their political fronts have been defeated?

[Amrullah Saleh] Look, the Taleban have no fronts. They do not have the ability to build fronts. The fact that they come and set fire to schools, and blindly plant mines inside cities, shows the highest level of their weakness.

There is nothing called a front in Afghanistan.

[Correspondent] But the president's invitation for talks with the Taleban has granted them political recognition.

[Amrullah Saleh] When Musa Qala was cleared of terrorists, Taleban, or groups that were funded by the Quetta Council, the president of Afghanistan said the people of Musa Qala - those who had taken arms under pressure or because of the propaganda by the enemy - were not criminals. They could come back to their homes.

What is the definition of the Taleban?

The president of Afghanistan has never forgiven those who plant mines and set fire to schools.

The president of Afghanistan has always assured the people living in insecure areas that we are not fighting the people of Afghanistan. We are fighting the Quetta Council, the Miranshah Council, or the Bajor Council.

Any deceived Afghan or those who have joined their [Taleban] lines in unawareness, are invited to come back to their country. This is very legitimate.

The president of Afghanistan has never announced that he would make deals over the constitution of the country for the sake of talks with the Taleban.

On the other hand, this good policy of the president has convinced some elements within the Taleban, on different levels, to contact different departments of the government of Afghanistan.

They were thinking that we had a very vague and dry policy, and all the doors are closed to them properly.

[Correspondent] Thank you very much for your explanations.

[Amrullah Saleh] Thank you too.

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