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### Foreign Taleban Rile Helmand Residents

Afghans in the troubled province say many of the insurgents are not Pashtuns but incomers from other countries who behave in a high-handed and aggressive way towards local civilians.

By IWPR trainees in Helmand (ARR No. 271, 30-Oct-07)

Abduljalil is still angry at the rough treatment the Taleban meted out to him while he was on way home to the Khaneshin district from the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah.

"I went to the city on business, said Abduljalil (not his real name). "I was stopped by the Taleban on the way back. They searched me, accused me of spying, and then took me to their base. They asked me a lot of questions and said I was a spy for the government. They warned me that they'd kill me if I ever came to Lashkar Gah again."

The young man insists his captors were foreigners rather than Afghans, as were most of the insurgent fighters at the Taleban base where they took him.

"Many of them were [Pakistani] Punjabis," he said. "The rest were from somewhere else. I wouldn't be so angry if they had been Afghan, but now foreigners are playing with us."

Once at the insurgents' base, he said, he was lucky enough to run into a local member of the Taleban who knew him and helped secure his release.

The presence of foreign fighters is an explosive issue in war-ravaged Helmand, where fierce battles between the insurgents and the international forces take place almost continuously, and suicide attacks occur on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. Most residents agree that security is their biggest problem.

People in Helmand claim much of the trouble stems not from Afghan Taleban, but from insurgents trained in Pakistan who flow in through the porous border. Religious schools and training centres in Pakistani cities such as Quetta and Peshawar turn out suicide bombers and jihadi fighters who then come to Afghanistan to cause mischief.

The issue has soured the already tense relationship between Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. Presidents Hamed Karzai and Pervez Musharraf have traded accusations in public, with the Afghan president condemning his Pakistani counterpart for failing to crack down on the extremists, and Musharraf in turn alleging that Karzai is turning a blind eye to problems in his own country.

Iran has also come in for its share of criticism, most recently for allegedly supplying arms to the Taleban. Now Helmand residents say that fighters from the Sistan-Balochistan province of southeast Iran, bordering on Afghanistan, are infiltrating the province. The Balochi people are Sunni Muslims, unlike the Shia majority in Iran.

Afghans are convinced that Tehran is deliberately helping to destabilise the situation with a view towards keeping the international forces pinned down, and hence unable to mount an attack on Iran as the nuclear dispute escalates.

In Helmand, people say foreign rather than Afghan militants predominate in those parts of the province that are under Taleban control.

The districts that border Pakistan – Garmseer and Deshu, as well as adjoining Khaneshin, are now overrun with foreign Taleban who often outnumber the local insurgents, say locals.

People living in these areas claim they are badly mistreated by these outsiders, who include Pakistanis, Chechens, Uzbeks and Balochis.

Residents who have to travel into Afghan government-controlled areas on business say they face many difficulties on their way back home. The foreign Taleban, stop them and accuse them of spying for the government. Many claim they have been detained for days until their relatives can come up with the money to buy their release.

"All the power lies with the foreign Taleban, and they can carry out any act of cruelty they like against residents of this district," said 25-year-old Rahmatullah, from Khaneshin.

"There is a limited number of Pashtun Taleban here in Khaneshin. Mostly they're Punjabi or Balochi, and they treat the local people very badly. If anyone goes to Lashkar Gah, they seize him the day after he comes back. They take him to their base, accuse him of spying, and then beat him. They may take money as a fine and then release him."

Faced with risk, many people are trying to avoid contact with the foreign militants.

"My brother has been at home for about six months now," said Rahmatullah. "He doesn't go out of the house. If he did, God knows what would happen to him."

A Taleban commander, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed that foreign fighters were in the area.

"They come for the sacred purpose of jihad," he said. "They fight according to Sharia law. No foreign fighter can serve as a Taleban commander."

The commander did, however, acknowledge that there were incidents of abuse.

"These things can happen, especially in the areas like Khaneshin and Deshu that border Pakistan," he said. "People should tell us so that we can combat such atrocious actions. We will not allow people to run wild. We have a system, and we will question anyone who's accused of bad behaviour."

But on the ground, this system of control does not seem to be working.

"The Afghan Taleban treat us nicely, and we like them," said Momo Khan, 35, a resident of Deshu district. "But these Punjabis and Balochis are very bad. They take our money, they beat us, and they put us in their jails."

The situation has resulted in the Deshu district being all but cut off from normal life, he said. "When businessmen, merchants, even well-diggers come to us and offer their services, they are caught by these foreign Taleban and charged with spying for NATO or the Afghan government," said Momo Khan. "They face the death penalty."

There have been several well-publicised extrajudicial executions in Taleban-dominated areas, including the beheading of Kabul-based translator Ajmal Naqshbandi in Nad Ali in April and the recent hanging of a 15-year-old in Greshk. Reports of multiple public hangings have filtered in from Musa Qala, Sangin, Greshk and other districts, although security problems and the difficulty of reaching remote areas make it impossible to verify this information.

According to Momo Khan, it is the foreign fighters who are responsible for most of the arbitrary violence.

"There are very few Afghan Taleban in our district," he said. "I would do anything for them, because whatever may happen, they are Afghans."

While the bulk of the foreign presence may be in the southern part of Helmand province, there are fighters finding their way to other districts.

Musa Qala, in Helmand's north, has been under the white Taleban flag since February, and for several months enjoyed a respite from the fighting and crime that has ravaged much of the rest of the province. During the summer, many residents were expressing satisfaction with the Taleban administration, saying that the security it brought more than made up for the restrictions it imposed.

But increasingly, northerly districts like Musa Qala are being infiltrated by foreign Taleban, say residents of these areas.

The top Afghan army commander in Helmand, Brigadier-General Ghulam Mohammad Ghori, has told the Associated Press news agency that there are foreign fighters were in Musa Qala, and may be obstructing peace negotiations between local tribal chiefs and the Afghan government.

"We have begun negotiating with tribal leaders to take over Musa Qala from the Taleban," he said in the AP interview. "The tribal leaders are also worried about these Taleban, because the foreign fighters - Arabs, Chechens, Balochis and Uzbeks - are in Musa Qala."

IWPR is implementing a journalism training and reporting project in Helmand. This article is by one of the trainees, whose name has been withheld for security reasons.

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