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## Big fish among the Afghan warlords

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KABUL, Afghanistan

Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum watched an emperor angelfish swim back and forth in a large tank, competing with other brightly colored fish for a few flakes of feed drifting in the saltwater.

"Do you like my fish?" the general asked. "If I introduce new fish to the tank, the others attack it, kill it and sometimes bite out their eyes."

It is a simple matter of "territory and survival," the burly Uzbek explained, his bellowing laughter bouncing off the marble floors of the foyer in his heavily guarded estate in Kabul.

Seven years after the overthrow of the Taliban, the Bush administration is struggling to come up with a new strategy to salvage Afghanistan. In that effort, Gen. Dostum and the nation's 14 other warlords are a mixed blessing. Often corrupt and clinging to 14th-century notions of justice, they are an integral part of Afghanistan's past and present and are likely to remain so in the future.

Allied forces often rely on the warlords' information and mastery of the tribal system to combat a growing Taliban insurgency. At the same time, they fear that the warlords' resurgence could doom efforts to democratize the Muslim nation of 32 million and drag Afghanistan back into all-out civil war.

Afghan President Hamid "Karzai is weak so he indulges the warlords," said Peter Tomsen, the U.S. special envoy to Afghan resistance fighters during their war against Soviet occupation two decades ago.

Many of the major warlords, including Gen. Dostum and Ismail Khan, an Iran-backed leader in western Afghanistan, have been given government jobs by Mr. Karzai in an effort to cement their allegiance.

In 2004, Mr. Karzai appointed Gen. Dostum commander in chief of the Afghan Army but had to remove him seven months ago after the general kidnapped and beat a former election manager, Akbar Bai, whom the general believed was planning to kill him. Gen. Dostum remains a member of parliament representing his Jumbesh-i-Milli Islami (Islamic National Party), which is based in the northern province of Jowzjan

Violent behavior is hardly out of character for Gen. Dostum. The quintessential warlord provided crucial help as part of a U.S.-backed Northern Alliance that toppled the Taliban in 2001, but his militia has also been accused of murdering

thousands of people — charges that have not been verified.

Mr. Tomsen said that the CIA made "some cardinal errors when we went into Afghanistan by passing out millions and millions of dollars to Dostum" and other warlords without comprehending the ramifications.

"He certainly should be sidelined and if he leaves the country we'll see greater success in reaching the people," Mr. Tomsen said. He said the Uzbek warlord's "Jowzjan militia" had "raped young girls in front of their families and killed thousands upon thousands of people."

In a recent interview with The Washington Times, Gen. Dostum claimed he had been the victim — not the perpetrator — of such crimes.

He confirmed that former members of the Northern Alliance are rearming, fearing that U.S.-led forces will not be able to stop the Taliban.

"I convey my preparedness to root out Taliban and al Qaeda, and I am waiting for action by the international community, otherwise opportunities are wasted and our country will see war on a larger scale," he said.

He said that even if the international community fails to defeat the Taliban, the "Afghan people will continue to fight for freedom."

### **Training in the old Soviet Union**

The warlords emerged in the late 1970s at the end of King Mohammed Zahir Shah's 40-year reign, said Barnett Rubin, an Afghan expert at New York University. They grew in strength as they gained support from outside powers, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, India and Pakistan, in the free-for-all that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Gen. Dostum, 54, is now a millionaire who owns Aiena Television, a local station based in his Kabul compound.

Born into poverty in the town of Khvajeh Do Kuh in Jowzjan province, he went to the former Soviet Union for military studies. He returned to Afghanistan in the mid-1970s and took a job as a foreman in the state-controlled oil fields in his home province.

He rose to power after the Soviet invasion in 1979, forming a militia made up mainly of Uzbeks, who had grown to respect his leadership supporting union workers in the oil fields. He supported the communist-run government in Kabul until 1992, when he flip-flopped and joined his former opponent Ahmad Shah Massoud. Mr. Massoud, known as the "Pansher Lion" and head of the Northern Alliance, convinced Gen. Dostum that the communists were losing ground and that he should fight for the winning side.

"Massoud gave him two options: join or die," said a former leader of the alliance who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. "His decision to join with the Northern fighters was a turning point in the war against the communists, which eventually ended in their failure to gain control of Afghanistan," the former leader

said. "He was not a communist but an opportunist, and that is how he has survived. He shouldn't be trusted, but he is a part of history that can't be ignored."

In 1994, Gen. Dostum again switched sides, joining Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a mujahadeen accused of fighting his own people more than the Soviets and who is now wanted by the U.S. for supporting al Qaeda and the Taliban. Mr. Hekmatyar also spent time in Iran and recently sent supporters to meet with Saudi King Abdullah.

Gen. Dostum's decision to join Mr. Hekmatyar was a major factor in the collapse of a government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Mr. Massoud. Yet, less than two years later, Gen. Dostum switched again, realigning with Mr. Rabbani and Ismail Khan, the warlord from Herat, to fight the ascendant Taliban regime. However, Gen. Dostum was betrayed by one of his own commanders, who sided with the Taliban. The general fled to Turkey in fear for his life.

Gen. Dostum returned in April 2001 at the urging of Mr. Massoud and reconstituted his militia to attack the Taliban in the north. Two days before the 9/11 attacks in the United States, al Qaeda suicide bombers posing as reporters killed Mr. Massoud

"I have played my role in decisive historical moments for liberty and independence of Afghanistan," Gen. Dostum said.

"During the internal crisis ... and during the Mujaheddin's government I gave refuge [in the Northern provinces and Uzbekistan] to thousands of intellectuals, experts, artists and cultural activists," he said.

During the mid-1990s, however, his militiamen — who were given lots of vodka before battles — killed many people and pillaged the capital, said a Kabul resident who gave his first name, Mohammed and is a former actor in "Bollywood"-style films produced in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and subsequent communist rule.

"Now all the former Afghan communist members or even those who worked for the communists are paupers," Mohammed said, pointing to an elderly man in front of a carpet shop on Chicken Street, a famous antique shopping district in Kabul.

"He used to be a commander in the military, now he has nothing," Mohammed said. "People like Dostum figured out how to survive the changes, this man didn't."

Although Gen. Dostum's enemies are legion and Mr. Karzai has called for his arrest, the Uzbek's support in the northern provinces has kept almost everyone at bay, Mr. Tomsen said.

At a time when southern and eastern Afghanistan are increasingly threatened by the Taliban, Mr. Karzai "worries that arresting Dostum could destabilize the relatively stable northern provinces," Mr. Tomsen said.

Defense Department officials are ambivalent about the man who helped the U.S. achieve victory in 2001.

The United States is not in a position to charge "Gen. Dostum for any of his alleged past offenses, that is only for the Afghan government, if they so choose," said a Defense official in Afghanistan who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the nature of his work.

"It's truly amazing how he has overcome death so many times," said another Defense official, working in Afghanistan, who also asked not to be named. "It's still hard to believe he's been able to keep himself alive. He's like a chess player and knows his enemies inside and out. Whether he's a criminal, well that depends on who you speak with. Everyone in Afghanistan has to do things against their nature to survive, particularly the tribal leaders and warlords — that changes a man."

Gen. David McKiernan, commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, who also served in Iraq, warned recently that Afghanistan's tribal society "is far more complex than Iraq" and will require a "sustained commitment of a variety of military and nonmilitary resources" for the U.S.-backed government to prevail.

"People generally do not feel secure, do not have freedom of movement," he told reporters in Washington on Oct. 1.

Gen. McKiernan has requested more troops and equipment to augment the 33,000 U.S. troops already in Afghanistan, while stressing that the war will not be won through military force alone. Also required, he said, is a political system that gives voice to all ethnic groups and tribes in the nation.

Many of the ethnic groups that helped overthrow the Taliban have been marginalized by an administration headed by the Pashtun president, said Saleh Mohammad Registani, a member of the National Front Party and the only parliamentary representative from the Panshjer Valley, who once supported Mr. Karzai and is now in opposition.

"We do not trust the administration or Karzai," Mr. Registani said during a recent interview at his home office in Kabul. "People are frustrated, angry and preparing for what they see as a failing government and an international effort that is not winning against the Taliban."

### **Scars of war**

The aroma of cooked lamb filled the general's dining room in the late evening. It was Uzbek pulao, rice cooked in seasoned broth with lamb, onions and carrots, the warlord's favorite dish. Surrounded by close friends, the beefy leader held out his hand.

"Go on, feel my palm," he said. Under the rough skin were fragments of shrapnel. He said he has more shrapnel in his arms and legs.

Gen. Dostum narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in 2005. He has been shot numerous times and barely escaped death by bombings.

His reputation as an ally of the U.S. was solidified in November 2001, when he

led a militia of 2,000 men on horseback to liberate the city of Mazar-e-Sharif from the Taliban. It was a joint effort with U.S. Special Forces, who aided in the capture of Kabul less than a month later.

The operation made international headlines when a CIA officer, "Johnny" Michael Spann, became the first U.S. combat fatality in the country.

Mr. Spann, a member of the CIA's paramilitary Special Activities Division, was killed during a prison uprising in the town of Qala-i-Jangi, near Mazar-e-Sharif.

Gen. Dostum later invited members of Mr. Spann's family to Afghanistan to the Qala Jangi fortress, called the "Pink House," where the 32-year-old officer was killed. The Uzbek general erected a memorial in honor of the CIA agent and "it was a very humbling moment for everyone, including Gen. Dostum," said a U.S. intelligence official, who asked not to be named due to the nature of his work.

The general's prison also made headlines when an American, John Walker Lindh, a student from Northern California who converted to Islam, was discovered among the hordes of Taliban prisoners captured by Gen. Dostum's militia and U.S. Special Forces.

The 19th-century fort is currently guarded by Afghan army troops. Children too young to remember the battle of 2001 now play in the shadows of its ancient walls

Without Gen. Dostum's help in 2001, "I'm not sure where we'd be," said a U.S. Defense official, who was involved in the campaign to defeat the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.

"He helped the U.S. enormously in pushing out the Taliban from the north," the official said, speaking on condition that he not be named. "He has his own bad reputation, but as a survivor, warrior, it's hard to find anyone like him."

Pictures of Gen. Dostum alongside U.S. Army Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of the Afghanistan operation in 2001, line a mantle top in the warlord's office.

"Tommy Franks is my friend," Gen. Dostum said. "He is a great warrior. He is a man who understood how to win a war. There are few men who are great warriors today. Many don't know how to win a war — they will not survive."

Gen. Dostum said he has also met Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"I admire women in authority," Gen. Dostum said. "I am not like the Taliban."

In early July, he met with White House officials but would not disclose which ones. They asked for advice about the war, Gen. Dostum said, but "after they left I didn't hear from them again."

The general said he was asked to help a "White House delegation" develop a road map to winning the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda. The general has also met with top level NATO and International Security Assistance Force officials, he said.

He shared his thoughts and plans, which included creating an Afghan militia to

fight the militants alongside international forces on the border of Pakistan, although he only gave limited details to The Times.

He asked that the advice be conveyed to "senior officials." However, he has been disappointed because they took his information and have not "responded," he said

"I have repeatedly warned the government and international community about the growing danger of Taliban and al Qaeda insurgency," he said. "Unfortunately, all those suggestions were overlooked for unknown reasons and no practical step has been taken."

The general's long green chapan, a traditional Afghan robe worn by northerners, blew backward as he strode swiftly past members of his Islamic National Party who were waiting to speak with him at his home.

In that moment, the warrior resembled a medieval painting, not a 21st-century member of parliament.

As the call to prayer wafted into his home by the warm wind in Kabul, the general retreated to his office, grabbed a beautiful old woven rug, knelt down in the direction of Mecca and prayed.

### **The arms bazaar**

Haji Sher, a trusted friend of the general, pushed his way through the crowds of people in Kabul's central bazaar.

Two men fighting near an open shop hit each other with such force that blood sprayed on bystanders caught in the commotion.

Haji Sher didn't stop. He kept walking along the bumpy dirt passages, pointing to different areas he frequents in the historic district. He finally made his way through a small dirt tunnel, where large Afghan fighting dogs, chained to posts, were being fed scraps of raw meat.

"To understand Afghanistan you have to go to the places the majority of the poor go to," he said. "The bazaar is Afghanistan."

In one of the shops, only miles from the ISAF headquarters of Gen. McKiernan, a middle-aged man was selling hundreds of AK-47s.

"You can buy almost anything on the street," Haji Sher said laughing, as the proprietor pulled an old Kalashnikov off the shelf and handed it to him.

Gen. Dostum, however, cannot leave the confines of his home and spends most of his days and nights working from his office in the diplomatic district of the capital.

He does not leave the mansion for fear of being killed or taken into custody by police.

He speaks of his situation as a sort of "house arrest" perpetrated by a corrupt government that does not accept opposition.

His boisterous laugh, hospitality and contagious smile can be deceiving. He is calculating, manipulative, good to his friends and ruthless to his enemies.

Good or bad, he is a survivor. It is the one truth both his enemies and friends can agree on.

As Haji Sher left the bazaar, sweet smelling smoke from a tin can being carried by a young beggar wafted through the rolled down windows of his car.

"It is a special grass burning to scare away the gin, evil spirits," Haji Sher said. "It really hasn't done much good in Afghanistan because our country has suffered more evil than can be imagined and has made even good men do terrible things."