

Accident Highlights Commanders' Power

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A major gas leak prompts Balkh province residents to take action - but can they prevail over local militia leaders?

The aftermath of a gas storage-tank leak that drove thousands of people from their homes in northern Afghanistan earlier this month is serving as a stark example of the influence exerted by local militia commanders. Local and even national officials may be powerless if their policies run counter to the commanders' interests.

All agree that locating a major gas storage facility in the middle of a residential area is a potential hazard. But because the tank farm is under the protection of a local commander, residents and officials feel powerless to get the plant moved.

The leak happened on the morning of November 5 in the town of Hayratan on the border with Uzbekistan, when employees of the Homayun Azizi trading company, a major oil and gas importer, were transferring liquefied gas from a large storage tank. Suddenly, the tank cracked. According to local residents, a noxious cloud spread over the adjacent neighbourhood, making dozens of people ill.

The area was not evacuated, however, until 11 that evening. According to local reports, approximately 8,000 families fled in panic, fearing that they might be asphyxiated or that the gas might ignite. Many spent a cold night in the desert outside the town. Some left to take refuge in Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of Balkh province.

The following day, a demonstration began in Hayratan. Angry demonstrators chanted slogans in unison, demanding that the oil and gas companies move their facilities away from urban areas as soon as possible.

Nasir Ahmad was one the people who fled the gas cloud. Tying his head with a wide cloth, he complained of a severe headache.

"My health is completely ruined," he said. "I was working in the school when the gas released and asphyxiated me, I was unconscious for 24 hours."

Another demonstrator, Zalmai, calling the storage tanks a "major threat", insisted the company move them.

"My daughter has been asphyxiated, and now she is in a coma," he told an IWPR contributor.

Zalmai, a local teacher, said all Hayratan's schools were closed, and that neither teachers nor students would return until they get the go-ahead from officials. He accused staff at the gas firm of reacting with indifference while local people fled.

During the demonstration, protesters vowed to close down schools and government offices. They also threatened to block the railway lines to prevent the import of goods from Central Asia to Afghanistan.

Hayratan, situated about 80 kilometres northeast of Mazar-e-Sharif, is one of Afghanistan's main international trading points. It's just across the border from Uzbekistan, linked by a wide concrete bridge built by the Soviets in 1975. Visitors entering Hayratan are immediately struck by the large number of tankers and lorries transporting fuel and commercial goods into Afghanistan.

It's not the first time the residents have had problems with the storage complex. Some people leave the city during the hot summer months and move to rental houses in Mazar-e-Sharif, out of fear that the storage tanks might ignite.

The authorities responded by shutting down the facility. Judge Najibullah, deputy mayor of the city, told IWPR, "We have shut down Hodayun Azizi's company, and have given them a few days to move all their storage facilities further away."

He added that the local authorities planned to move oil and gas storage facilities outside the town limits at the earliest possible time.

Mohammad Hasan, an employee of Afghanistan's ministry of mines and industries, agreed the storage tanks pose a danger. Were a storage tank like the one that ruptured to catch fire and explode, it would destroy everything in the vicinity, he said.

"The presence of such storage tanks within 30 kilometres of a residential area is hazardous," he said.

Nearly a month after the accident, the plant remains closed, but efforts to move it out of town have stalled. Local residents fear that the government cannot follow through on promises to shift the facility.

Noorullah, who attended the November 6 demonstration, told IWPR that locals have long demanded that the companies cease operating storage facilities around residential areas, but the government thus far has not taken any serious measures.

"The people in charge of the companies bribe the local militias that run the town, so they don't lose their access to the land," he said.

Najibullah, the deputy mayor, said that as long as armed groups are stationed in the area, the problem will not be solved.

Mohammad Zaman Delawar, head of security for Hayratan, agreed. He said the oil and gas companies have close ties with local commanders, and pay them money to prevent the government from cracking down.

"Last year, a delegation from the ministry of interior came to Hayratan and wanted these companies to move out of town," he said. "But since they had connections with armed groups, we were unable to take action."

Delawar added, "These companies hire armed men affiliated with the commanders, give them illicit arms, and pay their salaries."

Hayratan is controlled by the 113th Regiment, a militia that supports influential Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum. Mohammad Hashim, commander of the regiment, declined to be interviewed.

Officials with the Homayun Azizi trading company refused several requests for an interview.

An employee of the company, who identified himself only as Hamid, denied the company had militia commanders on its payroll.

"We are independent businessmen, and I can't say any more," he said.

Delawar concluded, "As long as these storage facilities are here, things don't bode well for the people of Hayratan."

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