

Afghan Local Police Defect Over Pay

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Paramilitaries in Kapisa region complain Afghan authorities ignore their role in fending off Taliban attacks.

A local policing venture in Afghanistan's northeastern Kapisa province is faltering as men leave the force because their wages have been cut.

The men are part of the Afghan Local Police, originally village militias that have been brought under a centralised command structure since last year. They remain distinct from the regular Afghan National Police, ANP.

In Kapisa's Tagab and Alasai districts, around 40 men are said to have left the force after effective command shifted six months ago from France's NATO contingent stationed in the area to the Afghan interior ministry.

Until the changeover, they say, they were paid good wages by the French army, which also supplied weapons and conducted joint operations with them.

"The French troops stationed in Kapisa used to provide us with all kinds of assistance. They paid our salaries and gave us arms and ammunition. But once we were transferred to the interior ministry, everything became disorganised," Nazir Ahmad, who has resigned from the local police in Tagab, said.

He added that although the local police created security over large swathes of territory, they were more or less ignored by the Afghan authorities.

"The government pays wages of 150 dollars [a month], but the payments have been held up for several months. And it's a low wage," Nazir Ahmad said. "The [ANP] police headquarters doesn't care about us. Even if the Taliban kill us all, police headquarters isn't going to help us."

His concerns were echoed by Mazar, deputy commander of Afghan Local Police unit in Tagab's Landakhel area, who said the French had paid wages of 500 dollars a month, not the 150 the government was offering.

"We're unhappy about this process. Ever since we were incorporated into the interior ministry, we've had no supplies and our wages have been delayed for months," he said.

He said lack of resources meant his police were unable to perform as effectively as they used to. In one recent clash with the Taliban, their Kalashnikov rifles proved no match for the heavier weapons deployed by the insurgents.

Under French control, Mazar said, "We had trained up some people behind the Taliban lines... to inform us about their movements, in return for payment. We provided good security in the region, but now we can't do anything. Our militia members are having to leave their jobs and go into some other business."

In Kapisa, the Taliban have singled out the Afghan Local Police, accusing them of being worse than the ANP and Afghan National Army and of working as spies for the foreign troops, perhaps because their knowledge of the terrain and community makes them more of a threat than forces drafted in from outside the area. Earlier this year, an IWPR report **Taliban Vent Ire on Afghan Local Police** described how the insurgents had ordered civilians in Tagab not to have any dealings with the paramilitary police - they were not to allow relatives to marry them or attend their weddings or funerals, on pain of death.

Afghan Local Police members who leave the force say this vendetta means they are also having to move out of their home areas for fear of reprisals.

Zaman, an ex-member in Tagab, is planning to go off to Iran to find work as it is unsafe for him to remain in his own village. Accusing both the Afghan government and the foreign troops for abandoning people like him, he said he would only return if the situation improved.

The ANP commander in Tagab district, Pacha Gol Bakhtiar, denied accusations that the local police were left on their own.

"They use our vehicles in combat and receive training from our commanders. They are also supplied with ammunition, but some of them sell it," he said.

Bakhtiar said the government could not afford the same high wage levels as the French military, but servicemen should be motivated by patriotism.

General Alishah Ahmadzai is in charge of Afghan Local Police units within the interior ministry. He said there had been teething problems with bringing these irregular forces into the ministry's structure, but issues like wage delays and supplies were being addressed.

Ahmadzai said the current monthly wage of 150 dollars was the same as regular ANP officers in Tagab received, and this was to be raised to 210 dollars a month. "That's an adequate wage for someone living there," he added.

The general appeared unconcerned at the defections, saying, "If people leave, others will be recruited. I don't think security will deteriorate in Tagab due to their absence."

Tagab's district government chief Abdul Hakim Akhondzadah takes a different view, saying the Afghan Local Police presence had allowed officials to move around the area without fear of attack, but this level of security was likely to deteriorate if the force was depleted.

Experiments with raising militias have been controversial from the start. As a diversity of local defence forces began springing up around Afghanistan over the last year or so, in some cases sponsored by NATO troops based in the area, the Afghan government appeared to grow concerned at the lack of structure and control. (See **Afghan Village Militias Accused of Abuses** for examples from the west of the country.)

The solution the authorities found was the Afghan Local Police initiative, approved in summer 2010 to formalise the status and structure of all these units under interior ministry command.

Many Afghans have bad memories of the armed factions whose members engaged in widespread violence and looting in the civil war of the early 1990s. There were also concerns that the new forces were recruiting ex-members of the old groups.

In Tagab, not everyone would be sad if the paramilitary police disappeared.

"There are no good men in these tribal militias. There are thieves, gamblers, drug addicts and other criminals in their ranks," a shopkeeper who declined to give his name said. "They robbed my shop three months ago and took everything away with them. I even know who the perpetrators are, but what can I do about it? Nothing.

"I say these militias should not only be disbanded but also prosecuted."

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