

## **Afghan Schoolboy Takes on Taleban**

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Afghanistan's youngest military commander is determined not to let the war disrupt his studies.

Many fifteen-year-olds spend much of their day goggle-eyed over computer games. Not Mohammed Aqa Humayun Khadim. "I don't like video games," he said, "and besides in Afghanistan we have more important things to think about like food and safety."

Known simply as Humayun, or by his troops as "Amir", which means leader, life changed for this young commander three months ago. That was when his father, the ethnic Uzbek chieftain of Bolak Kushlaq, died in a Taleban rocket attack on the front lines here in West Kalafgan. A local council was called and it chose his eldest son to succeed him.

"I have 300 soldiers," said Humayun, munching through a small banquet of meat and potatoes. "They were my father's soldiers and now they belong to me." Humayun, believed to be Afghanistan's youngest commander, also has six tanks and a lethal truck-mounted BM-21 Soviet-era rocket launcher, which can plaster enemy troops with up to forty, three metre long rockets at any one time.

Despite his age, Humayun is also married. He met his wife, Jamillah, at the age of thirteen, when they were both still at school in nearby Taloqan. Now Taloqan lies behind Taleban lines and girls are barred from education in Taleban-held territory, anyway.

As we eat, a row of silent retainers sit at Humayun's right hand, waiting to be called upon to give their advice or to run and fetch things.

Humayun has seven brothers and three sisters and must also look after his father's three wives. Outside of his extended family his personal fiefdom extends to 26 villages and hamlets.

Every morning, Humayun rises at five, washes, prays and then issues orders to the troops. Of his 300 men, some of whom are former classmates from Taloqan, 150 are currently on the front. After this he retires to study history and politics for two hours a day. "At the moment I am still studying Afghan history but I'd like to move on to world history next."

The young commander says that when he is older he would like to become president of Afghanistan, but, in the meantime, he needs to study more. "Now the situation is not good but I must find a good English teacher."

Humayun explains that his leadership was endorsed by Ahmed Shah Masood, the legendary Afghan fighter and anti-Taleban leader, who was assassinated last month, and Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Northern Alliance president.

"Rabbani told me that when it was safe in Afghanistan he would send me to London to study. Do you think my bodyguard will have problems with the gun? If I have a pistol would that be okay?"

Before he died Humayun's father would leave him in charge while he was away. He was clearly being groomed for the succession. But, it is also clear that Humayun is a smart young man in his own right and

clearly comfortable as a leader.

He asks serious questions about the world and discusses the military and political situation in Afghanistan at exactly the same level as other commanders, many of whom were already fighting years before he was born.

But Humayun does not rule his fiefdom alone. He is assisted by a form of regency council headed by two of his uncles.

One of them, Mohammed Yaqub said, "He does not have the experience but this is not such a problem because he has advisers who do. He is also very intelligent but he must accept our advice. We are trying to train him."

The next morning Humayun leads his visitors up to his father's grave and then his rocket launcher. He is followed by scores of his men. He is the youngest of them all.

At first sight, the story of Humayun would seem to illustrate the problem of child soldiers in Afghanistan.

An official from the UN's Children's Fund, UNICEF, who preferred not to be named, said, "Twenty years of conflict have made all children experts at war in Afghanistan. It is a hard life and those that do become child soldiers actually have to support their families.

"Another problem is that there is not enough to do. There is a lack of schools and activities. If they had these things they would not think about war."

One of the problems is that while some countries define children as anyone under the age of eighteen, and technically this is the age accepted by the authorities in northern Afghanistan, in fact, boys are really considered to have reached full maturity here at the age of sixteen.

But while the likes of Humayun are a concern for organisations like UNICEF, the fact is that the child soldier issue in Afghanistan is not as big a problem as it is in say, West Africa.

According to Eloi Fillion, a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross in northern Afghanistan, the case of Humayun highlights other fundamental problems here.

"On both sides of the front lines, you have a 'government' but, in fact outside the cities, there is no administrative control at all," he said. "This case reflects the reality of Afghan problems. You'll have the leading family of an area, the father dies and he is replaced by the eldest son, so, that's it. It is like the succession of a king."

Humayun first went to the front with his father when he was 13. "I have been to the front line many times. It is my duty." Asked about moves in the West and other parts of the world to end the use of child soldiers he thought a moment and said, "You in the West have the wrong idea. Children make great soldiers. They are strong and fast and they are very brave."

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