

## **Afghans See No Signs of Security Handover in North**

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In Balkh province, residents say foreign troops are conducting searches just the same as before.

Although NATO-led troops officially handed over to their Afghan counterparts in the northern Balkh province in January, residents complain that they are still as visible as ever.

As part of a phased transition ahead of the withdrawal of foreign troops by the end of 2014, responsibility for taking the lead on security was formally transferred to Afghan forces at a ceremony in Mazar-e Sharif on January 25.

In formal terms, the transition has been completed in Balkh, as well as in the neighbouring provinces of Samangan and Sar-e Pol, and in Shiberghan, the main town of Jowzjan, also in the north. The handover process began in the central Bamian province in 2011, and is expected to be complete by mid-2013.

In Balkh, the main responsibility for security previously lay with the 500 soldiers of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, which in this province is run by Swedish and Finnish forces under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, and with American units also stationed in the area.

NATO envisages the transition as an ongoing process, so that its troops will still be active while Afghan units take the lead and assume a growing operational role. But many Balkh residents thought the handover meant the NATO units would disappear from sight, and they are angry that this has not happened.

"We were pleased that Afghans had taken over responsibility. That would have resolved our problems, as we share a common language, faith and culture. But we see that nothing has changed," said Golboddin, a resident of the Chimtāl district. "The foreigners enter people's houses whenever they want. They search homes and they stop and search people on the roads."

Amir Mohammad Weqar, currently local government chief in Balkh's Daulatabad district and now head of Charbolak district, said international forces were operating in both places just as they used to.

"All processes called 'transitional' are symbolic," he said. "In the past [the foreign forces] said they were performing military duties and now they say they are engaged in reconstruction, but their goal is the same – to maintain a presence in Afghanistan," he claimed.

Charbolak resident Sharif said patrols and "harassment" by foreign units continued. In late April, troops with dogs searched a house and took one person away with them, he said.

In a statement on March 13, Lieutenant-Colonel Joni Lindeman, commander of the Finnish contingent, said the PRT had been renamed a Transition Support Team, but there would be "no major changes" in his troops' role.

"We will continue to fulfil the tasks we have been assigned, as we have done until now," he said.

Provincial governor Atta Mohammad Nur says he had been expecting the NATO troops to roll back their operations more than they have done.

"We believed that all the parallel structures created by the foreigners would be eliminated when the security transition process started, but that has not happened yet," he said. "This has meant that arbitrary actions continue to take place."

At the same time, the governor acknowledged that the Afghan military was unprepared for a complete NATO withdrawal.

"The Afghan forces have no air or ground defence capacity," he said. "They have not been equipped, and all the assistance given to them has been futile."

While Balkh residents may be keen to see the back of foreign troops, others question the ability of Afghan forces to secure the country after foreign troops leave. Recent insurgent attacks in Kabul and other cities have done little to boost confidence in the national army and police. (See **[Afghan Forces Criticised After Kabul Battles](#)**.)

Abdullah Khan, a retired colonel who is now a defence expert, dismissed the security handover as a show.

"The transition of responsibilities cannot be done just by raising the Afghan flag and lowering the flags of

foreign countries,” he said.

Political analyst Arif Musavi argued that announcements about handing over control of security might be a ruse by NATO-member governments to persuade their own populations that more progress had been made than was really the case.

Another analyst, Fahim Hamdard, argued that Afghan forces were not independent anyway.

“There are foreign advisors present in all sections of the Afghan security forces,” he said. “Afghan forces can’t do anything without their permission, so how can one claim that responsibility has been transferred?”

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