

## **Afghans Suspect US of Rocking Karzai's Election Boat**

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Some local analysts believe Washington may have taken an indirect swipe at president's re-election campaign.

The crimes are not new: Afghans and the rest of the world have known about the deaths of up to 2,000 Taleban prisoners of war immediately following their surrender to General Abdul Rashid Dostum in November 2001.

Nor is there any doubt that Dostum was then a partner of the United States in its successful attempt to topple the Taleban government.

But recent statements by President Barack Obama that he may be prepared to re-examine the deaths, have raised a furore in the highly-charged, pre-election atmosphere of the Afghan capital.

"The indications that this had not been properly investigated just recently was [sic] brought to my attention," Obama said in a July 13 interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper. "So what I've asked my national security team to do is to collect the facts for me that are known, and we'll probably make a decision in terms of how to approach it once we have all of the facts gathered up."

Dostum is a colourful and controversial figure in Afghanistan. He is widely revered among his fellow ethnic Uzbeks for his bravery and fighting spirit, while being just as widely reviled by others, especially Pashtuns, for his brutality.

He is also a key ally of the incumbent president, Hamed Karzai, in his bid for re-election.

Dostum has long come in handy during Afghanistan's decades of conflict and has danced in and out of alliances, his loyalty often seen as more a matter of realpolitik than genuine conviction.

When the US decided to invade Afghanistan in October 2001, it turned to Dostum, among other former commanders, for help. In the northern city of Kunduz, after a carefully brokered agreement, 8,000 Taleban and al-Qaeda fighters laid down their arms and waited for the transport that had been promised.

As many as 2,000 were shoved into metal containers with no ventilation, and left to suffocate, an investigation by Physicians for Human Rights under United Nations auspices concluded. They were then buried in mass graves in the Dasht-e-Leili, a desert in Dostum's home province of Jowzjan.

Dostum's alleged involvement in the deaths has been investigated by Afghan and international human rights groups, which have claimed that the burly general bears the bulk of the responsibility for what amounts to a war crime. But to date there has been no official inquiry and he has denied it happened.

When Karzai was elected president in 2004, he sought to bring many of the former warlords into his government. Dostum was given the largely symbolic post of chief of staff to the commander in chief.

But he went into exile last year, after a widely publicised brawl with a former ally, Mohammad Akbar Bai.

Saying he needed medical attention – Dostum suffers from diabetes – the general left for Turkey, where he now lives in the capital, Ankara.

But he wants to come home. Observers say that his support for Karzai was predicated on a promise that he would be allowed to return to Afghanistan, where he has a power base in the north.

According to a recent article in the New York Times, the State Department has been working to block Dostum's return to Afghanistan. The piece quoted US officials saying that the administration "might not be hostile to an inquiry".

The timing of the Times piece, as well as Obama's remarks, have many observers in Kabul scratching their heads. They see this as part of an ongoing campaign to unseat the Afghan president.

"The Americans think that if the current situation continues, the crisis in Afghanistan will expand," said political analyst Amad Saeedy. "So they want to place the burden [of government] on somebody else."

Dostum himself has reacted angrily to what he sees as a politically motivated attack.

In a letter to the Afghan media, he called the accusations about the Dasht-e-Leili burials a lie.

"The high council of the north ... released an announcement in September 2002, saying that there had been no deliberate killing of prisoners of war," he wrote. "Moreover, I have been told that the Pentagon confirmed the truth of this report."

Dostum may be a bit hasty in invoking the US military establishment in his defence. With a new administration in charge in Washington, many are not opposed to revealing some of the less savoury aspects of the Bush era. And the political wind may be shifting in Kabul as well, as Dostum points out in his letter.

"The only reason for bringing this matter up now is [Afghanistan's presidential] election," he said.

Karzai himself has not reacted to this issue directly. But Hakim Asher, the head of the president's media office, told reporters that the fuss over Dostum could well affect the campaign, adding that the fact that Dostum had a key role in the government meant that the issue could well be connected to Karzai's candidacy.

Dostum may have a harder time shaking off the accusations now than he did when he was a valued US ally in the war against the Taliban.

A video clip has been shown on Afghan media in which a police officer who served in Jowzjan in 2001 speaks to the camera, although his face is obscured.

“During the Ramadan month of 2001 I rented a bulldozer and some labourers and opened the containers, which were on the Khorasan bridge west of Shiberghan [the capital of Jowzjan]. Each container had more than 150 dead bodies,” he said.

“We dug three graves. I myself buried 1,100 people. Others buried five more containers. I reported my eyewitness account to [then US special envoy] Zalmay Khalilzad and a number of Afghan authorities, but nobody paid any attention. I also tried to meet with [then UN Special Representative] Lakhdar Brahimi, but I did not succeed.”

Last year, the media reported that the mass graves in Dasht-e-Leili were being tampered with; many of the bodies had been moved in an attempt to destroy evidence.

With Dostum fighting off renewed allegations of war crimes, he may be less effective as a supporter for Karzai in the increasingly tense presidential contest.

When asked about Afghan speculation over Obama’s recent CNN remarks and the Times article, US State Department spokesman Andy Laine stated the position set out publicly and repeatedly by American diplomats in Afghanistan that Washington will neither support nor oppose any candidate in the Afghan elections. US special envoy Richard Holbrooke told reporters in Kabul last week that the administration wanted there to be “a level playing field” for the leadership ballot.

Just a few weeks ago, Karzai looked to have the election in the bag. Using, and, some say, abusing the liberal advantages of office, he was dominating the media, local governance, and tribal structures.

But Karzai’s strange absence from the political scene along with the emergence of former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah as an unexpectedly strong rival have turned what many saw as a foregone conclusion into a wide open race.

This could not have happened without the shadowy hand of the Americans, say Afghan analysts.

“Karzai has become closer to Iran over the past nine months, and this is intolerable for the Americans. He also tried to get closer to Russia, but the Americans got themselves closer still,” Saeedy said, adding that this was all part of a concerted effort to unseat Karzai.

“The ripples from these accusations will expand,” he insisted. “Other people will be affected. These scenarios show that the Americans are trying to get Karzai off the election stage.”

Political analyst Wahid Muzhda agrees that Obama is working against Karzai with his attention to Dostum’s alleged crimes, as well as pursuing his own political agenda.

“There are problems between Democrats and Republicans [in Washington],” he said. “Obama wants to use this issue against the Republicans. And on the other hand, there are the [Afghan] elections.”

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