

Crime Wave Hits Afghan Province

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Unrest linked to ongoing tensions over the fate of local leader.

Residents of Balkh are reporting a deteriorating security situation as a political stand-off continues over the president's dismissal of the provincial governor.

Atta Mohammad Noor, a former mujahedin commander, had served as the Balkh governor for 13 years before he was dismissed by President Ashraf Ghani on November 8 2017.

However Noor, who is also a leader in the Jamiat-i Islami party, continues to defy Ghani and refuses to step down. Noor has accused Ghani of trying to divide Jamiat-e Islami ahead of presidential elections due next year.

The strategic province of Balkh has long been one of the most stable and prosperous in Afghanistan, but local people now complain that crime is rising and that armed men have been terrorizing the population.

Mohammad Baqir, a resident of Balkh's Dawlat Abad district, said that armed assailants had attempted to rob him in Mazar i-Sharif city, only 50 metres away from a police checkpoint.

"It was six pm and I was talking on my mobile phone, in the taxi station of Hazrat Ali Roza," he told IWPR. "I saw two people in a Corolla car driving towards me and when they approached, they said, 'Give us your cell phone.'" When I refused, they pulled their guns out and fired at me. A bullet hit me in my right leg and they escaped."

Baqir said that he suspected the gunmen had connections to local police, as when he was attacked there had been no reaction from security staff at the nearby checkpoint.

"Some former jihadi commanders have recruited a number of roughnecks without paying them, and these jihadi commanders tell them to go and find money for themselves and that's why they attack and steal from people," he said.

Ali Arifi, an agriculture student at Balkh university who lives in the Karti Sajadieh neighbourhood of Mazar-e Sharif, is another victim of the recent crime wave.

"At eight am, as I was going to college, I saw two people riding a motorbike coming towards me. They asked me to give them my phone and when I tried to resist, they fired a gun that hit me in my left arm. Fortunately the bullet did not [travel further] but just pierced my skin."

Arifi said that people had come running when they heard the gunshots and that the armed men had escaped. He was treated at Balkh's Abu Ali Sina hospital for three days before being released and said that he was still scared when he left the house each morning.

There have also been a spate of bombing attacks in recent months, including a November 8 suicide attack at the entrance to the Mansour Hotel which killed one person and injured two. Two separate car bombs later in the month killed two more people and wounded five others.

On November 30, 11 people, including two policemen, were wounded when a hand grenade was thrown by a motorbike rider at a police vehicle in front of Abu Ali Sinai Balkhi hospital.

"Gunmen are committing dozens of crimes and human rights offences, which is a matter of grave concern to us," said Qazi Sayed Mohammad Sammie, head of the regional department of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

He said that although there were no exact crime figures, he believed that armed violence had risen recently, both in the provincial capital and in the districts.

Some have suggested that cracking down on illegal weapons could help stem the wave of violence.

Local political scientist Abdul Qadir Mesbah said that strongmen were arming large numbers of men to take the advantage of Afghanistan's fragile state. Part of the problem, he continued, was the vast quantities of weapons in circulation.

"The only solution to this crisis is to issue weapon licenses because this will show how many illegal weapons these commanders have so that the government could collect them," he said.

Balkh police spokesman Shir Jan Durrani said that unauthorised weapons were too widely spread for them to be able to take effective action. Local officials were no exception, he continued.

“In Balkh province, if a businessman or a member of the provincial council has the right to carry a legal gun, you can be sure that in addition he has more than five other illegal weapons,” he said. “This all causes disorder.”

Durrani continued, “If ordinary people, traders, lawmakers, provincial council members and other government officials don’t cooperate with police, the Balkh provincial police headquarters cannot do anything to collect weapons from gunmen.”

Meanwhile, Noor remains the de facto head of the provincial administration, continuing to hold public events and numerous meetings at his offices.

Balkh provincial council head Mohammad Afzal Hadid, who agreed that the numbers of armed men had been growing, said that he had raised the issue with Noor, who told him that he would address the issue.

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