

Disarmament Drive

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Weapons collection programme frustrated by mismanagement and former combatants' reluctance to part with their guns

Afghan government efforts to collect more than a million weapons and pieces of military equipment from ex-fighters are being hampered by fear, confusion and shortages of funds.

While some 50,000 have already been collected - including 100 mortars, 130 armoured vehicles and 40 tanks - continuing worries over security coupled with uncertainty over compensation are causing problems for the authorities.

The task is further complicated by the country's gun culture. Weapons are part and parcel of local ritual, fired joyously into the air at weddings, or at the birth of sons. Afghan men say they love their guns as much as their wives.

Armament so far collected have been stored locally rather than destroyed, prompting concerns that they may be seized were fighting to flare up again. Defence ministry officials have promised compensation, which has yet to materialise. But most worrying of all, many men who fought in the civil war say they do not feel safe without their guns.

General Atiqullah Baryalai, deputy defence minister and president of the Commission for Collecting Arms, told IWPR that weapons have so far been collected in the five northern provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Parwan and Kapeesa - where former Northern Alliance commander turned defence minister Mohammad holds sway.

Officials say the campaign - which aims to gather up around a million weapons and pieces of military equipment - was started there because it is easier to gather guns from men they once fought beside, before moving into areas of the country where they may be less welcome.

"The collection process will be applied all over Afghanistan in the next six months, " said General Sher Mohammad Karimi, a member of the collection commission. However, the process has frequently fallen foul of confusion and suspicion.

Abdul Fatah, a resident of the Kapeesa province north of Kabul, said in some areas there had simply been a registration process, and that men who handed over guns had them returned directly afterwards.

"There are arms in most homes in Kapeesa because people are still not confident about their personal security. So they guard themselves and their properties with weapons," he said.

Afghanistan had a strong gun culture well before war broke out in 1979.

One well-known provincial folk song runs, "If you don't know who I am, when you come to the battlefield, you will know that I am an Afghan".

Men from tribal areas carried arms in public as a symbol of their status and manhood. And when Afghans went to war against the Soviets, ownership of weapons became even more widespread, funded by billions of dollars of aid from the CIA and Arab countries.

Arms are still freely available on the black market, where a rifle can cost less than 200 US dollars. "Without a weapon, we cannot defend ourselves from personal enemies," explained Ahmad Waheed, a resident of Jabal Saraj in Parwan.

Senior officials at the Commission for Collecting Arms say all arms will eventually be transferred to a central depot in Kabul. Similar collection programmes in other post-war countries, such as Liberia and Angola, have mainly focused on destroying the weapons to assure their former owners they will not be used against them.

The biggest problem, as ever in Afghanistan, is one of resources. Some of the men who gave up their weapons in Parwan are angry because they were promised payment in return, and none has come. "We cannot do this job alone and we ask for the assistance of the other ministries and United Nations," said Baryalai.

As part of the disarmament programme, the authorities had offered former combatants some compensation and the opportunity to join the new national army if they were suitable.

The trouble is that the military authorities don't appear to have sufficient funds for reimbursements and will struggle to find places for estimate 120,000 paramilitary fighters within in the new military force expected to comprise half that number.

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