

## **Disputed Ownership of Afghan Site Used by NATO**

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Officials say local men claimed rights over land because they knew it was prime real estate.

Afghan officials in Logar province, 60 kilometres south of the Afghan capital Kabul, say they have evidence that the purported owners of a piece of land currently used by NATO forces have no legal claims to it.

A former governor of the province also told IWPR that six individuals received a payment from international forces in 2009, and some of the money found its way into Taleban hands.

The Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT, a joint military and civilian force based in the area, has a compound in a desert area known as Abchakan, just south of Logar's main town Pol-e Alam.

International forces are planning to build an airstrip at the location, adding more buildings and roads.

Local officials say that six men from the area laid claim to a 53-square-kilometre area of land when they realised it was of interest to the PRT. In 2009, the six individuals received a payment of 2.6 million dollars, according to Atiqullah Ludin, who was provincial governor at the time.

IWPR understands that no further payments have been made since.

Ludin alleges that the men gave a fifth of the money to the Taleban, who have a strong presence in the province. (On this, see **Taleban Justice Dominant in Logar Province**.)

"In 2009, the intelligence agency in Logar reported to me that after the six men received 2.6 million dollars in rent for the first year from the Americans, they gave the Taleban 500,000 dollars," Ludin said.

A spokesman for NATO forces in Logar, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR they were unable to give a statement on these matters for the moment, because they were still unclear about ownership of the land in question – whether it belonged to the state or to local residents. The PRT in Logar is run by the Czech military rather than the United States.

In April 2010, Abdul Hakim Sulaimankhel, chairman of the provincial council, wrote to governor Ludin saying, "The governor's office should immediately arrest those who have seized the Abchakan desert, and the money the six individuals have received from the Americans should be retrieved and deposited in the government treasury."

IWPR's reporter spent a month trying to interview one of the men, Awal Khan, a tribal elder from the Abchakan area, and was eventually able to ask him a few questions about the money.

Awal Khan confirmed that he received 2.6 million dollars in rent for the first year, but refused to say what he did with it.

"If I have accepted money, it is rent for our property," he said. Telling the reporter to "go away", he said, "I know what I am doing, and I don't care about anyone else."

The head of the provincial agriculture department, Mohammad Humayun Omar, told IWPR there was no doubt the Abchakan land was government property, and he was aware that attempts had been made to appropriate it.

State-owned land is recorded by a properties agency that comes under Afghanistan's agriculture ministry.

Ludin said the title deeds held by the six were invalid and did not have his approval. He said the document dated from before his time, when his predecessor Abdullah Wardak was governor.

"I have made no deal with the people of Abchakan on this matter. Anything that went on happened in Abdullah Wardak's time, and I am completely unaware of it," he said.

Wardak was killed by a roadside bomb in 2008.

The governor's own role has raised some questions. When he was first informed that a rent payment had been made in 2009, and was shown documentary proof that the area in question belonged to the state, he had four of the six men arrested.

A few days later, he ordered them to be set free. Local police confirmed to IWPR that the men were released on Ludin's orders.

When IWPR asked him why he had done this, Ludin initially said the order came from the prosecutor's office, not him. Shown a copy of the release order for one of the men bearing his own signature, he said, "I was only doing my duty."

Sayed Rahim, head of the provincial justice department then and now, says the blame for letting the men get away rests squarely with Ludin.

Ludin, however, insists he did nothing wrong, and that that allegations made against him were part of a conspiracy.

"I haven't taken a bribe from anyone. I have only implemented the law," he said.

About 200 families live in the Abchakan area, and some received a share of the 2009 rental payment.

One farmer, Lotfullah, 36, told IWPR he was handed 18,000 dollars four years ago "because that was my share". Others got less – between 5,000 and 7,000 dollars – he said.

Lotfullah said that he had never seen that much money in his life, but that unfortunately, the windfall was never to be repeated.

IWPR approached Logar's new governor, Mohammad Iqbal Azizi – appointed at the end of September 2012 – for his view on these matters, but was told he was not prepared to go into controversial matters that related to his predecessors.

### **Abdul Maqsud Azizi is an IWPR-trained reporter in Afghanistan.**

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