

## **Fading Reconstruction Hopes in Western Afghan District**

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Locals say insurgents feeding on resentment at undelivered pledges.

Residents of a western Afghan district say it risks tipping back into instability because the assistance promised after the elimination of a local warlord two years ago has failed to materialise.

Many say the Taliban are making inroads in Gozara, a district of Herat province, on the back of resentment at what is seen as a failure by the international community.

Claims that insurgents had re-established themselves in Gozara were given added weight by a rocket attack in February targeting Herat city airport, which is located close to a base of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, ISAF.

Habibullah, a resident of the village of Siyawoshan, said insurgents could be seen moving around there and in neighbouring parts of Gozara, though mainly at night.

"It's because of mistakes made by the government and the foreigners that the opposition [insurgents] have reappeared in the area," he said. "If they'd created proper security, worked to benefit the people and kept them happy, the public would be cooperating with the government. The opposition presence shows that people have grown tired of the government."

Until 2009, Gozara was under the sway of a powerful militia leader called Ghulam Yahya Akbari. Once an ally of former Herat governor Ismail Khan, Akbari went on to align himself with insurgent groups and make Gozara a virtual no-go zone through attacks, abductions and extortion.

Akbari and 22 of his men were killed in October 2009 in a firefight with ISAF and Afghan troops near Siyawoshan.

With the return to stability, locals looked forward to new reconstruction projects and other kinds of assistance from the international community. (See **New Lease of Life for Liberated Herat District**.)

They say the Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT, a joint military-civilian force run by ISAF troops contributed by Italy, promised them roads, bridges, dams, wells and schools.

So far, they say, Siyawoshan has only got three small bridges and the walls of a school.

"They've all deceived us," Abdul Satar, an elderly villager, said as he sat by the unmade road that runs through Siyawoshan. "After Akbari was killed, the foreigners said that they would asphalt this road. They didn't rebuild it - they destroyed it further with their patrols. This dusty unpaved road is indicative of life in Siyawoshan. It symbolises how the government and the foreigners have done nothing for people here in the last ten years."

Such perceptions are feeding hostility to central government and its international allies, which the insurgents are happy to capitalise on.

"They are always speaking to people about the lies told by the government and the foreigners, and people now believe that the opposition is right," villager Gholam Sediq said. "As far as I can see, people are now tending towards the opposition."

The village head in Siyawoshan, Shah Ahmad Khan, said one of the late Akbari's sons was leading an effort to galvanise a local insurgent presence.

"One cannot deny that the opposition is here in this area," he added.

An insurgent commander in Gozara district, Samiullah Salahshor, told IWPR that his side was winning the propaganda war against what he called a "puppet government".

"The foreigners are being defeated in Afghanistan. Our comrades-in-arms are preparing to mount attacks against them in the course of this spring," he said.

Journalist and political analyst Fereidun Ajand said that when the international community was perceived as having reneged on its promises, this "lays the ground for the extremists to spout propaganda about double standards practiced by the international community, and thus to recruit more fighters, open up new fronts, and further inflame the conflict".

Mohammad Rafiq Shahir, a member of the Afghan parliament from Herat province, stressed the importance of living up to promises of aid and reconstruction.

“Otherwise, people will lack confidence [in institutions], leading to the people becoming more estranged from the international community and the Afghan government,” he added.

IWPR raised concerns about the assistance delivered to date with Colonel Antonino Inturri, commander of the Italian PRT.

Inturri said a number of bridges had been built and schools, but bigger projects like asphaltting the Siyawoshon were major undertakings and would take more time.

“Considering that just two years have gone by, one needs to note that this issue [the road] is going to need a longer period. The international community has never forgotten about this project,” he said.

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