

Foreign Elements" Blamed for Riots

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Afghan leadership says foreigners exploited Islamic sentiment to destabilise the country in advance of elections.

Foreign and domestic enemies of democracy in Afghanistan used a United States magazine report as a ruse to touch off the worst violence since the suppression of the Taleban, according to police, political leaders and some of the demonstrators themselves.

Five days of riots beginning on May 10 left 15 people dead in at least 12 of the country's provinces. The worst violence, officials said, took place in areas near or bordering Pakistan.

The trouble began immediately after publication of a Newsweek magazine report on May 9 that a copy of the Koran had been flushed down a toilet at a prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where Afghan and other suspects are being held.

The article has since been retracted by Newsweek.

The magazine is not readily available in Afghanistan, even weeks after publication. Yet some demonstrators said local mullahs called on them to protest against the alleged desecration of Islam's holy book almost at the same time as Newsweek hit newsstands in the United States.

President Hamed Karzai, who is supported by US-led Coalition forces, was visiting Europe when the violence broke out.

Afghanistan is preparing to hold legislative elections on September 19.

"Foreign hands are trying to disturb our parliamentary elections and are against the strengthening of the peace process," Karzai told reporters on May 14, after his return. "They want to give us a bad name in the international community."

He declined to name the foreign countries involved, but others were not so reticent.

Qayoum Babak, the chief editor of the *Jahan-e-Now* monthly and a political analyst in Mazar-e-Sharif, blamed Pakistan and its ISI intelligence service, which has a history of backing one Afghan faction against the other.

"We see that the violent demos took place in the provinces bordering on Pakistan, and ISI penetrated those demos," said Babak. "In the provinces away from the border, the demonstrations were mostly peaceful."

He predicted that the violence was "just the beginning of a series of crises that are bound to happen before the legislative elections".

The trouble began in Jalalabad, 80 kilometres from the border on the main road to Pakistan and the main city in Nangarhar province.

The protest, mostly by students outraged at the alleged desecration of the Koran, remained peaceful during the first day. The demonstrations spread quickly to other eastern provinces, however, and turned violent when more people joined the students, said witnesses.

"We just staged the demonstrations to make our voices heard," said Najibullah Zakhilwal, a medical student at Nangarhar University. "What happened wasn't something we wanted."

Zakhilwal and others said outsiders bent on violence hijacked what had been a peaceful demonstration.

"When the other citizens of Nangarhar province joined us in the demo, it went out of our control," said Munir Ahmad, a student at Nangarhar High School.

Over the following days, the Jalalabad demonstration spread beyond the university campus. Government buildings and the United Nations Assistance Mission were set on fire, as was the Pakistani consulate. Four demonstrators in Jalalabad were killed by gunfire.

Nangarhar police chief Hazrat Ali denied that his forces fired the fatal shots, and said investigators were still looking for those responsible for the incitement. More than 20 people were arrested and the investigation is continuing, he told IWPR.

Students at Kabul University demonstrated on May 12, but the rallies in the capital and in the northern provinces ended peacefully.

Ghazni, a past stronghold of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose Hizb-e-Islami faction is aligned with the Taliban, saw the worst violence after Jalalabad. Three people were killed, and shops were burned down.

Many protesters were armed, the Ghazni authorities said, and the provincial police chief was wounded.

Hekmatyar still has influence in the area, although he is believed to be hiding in the mountainous border area, on either the Afghan or Pakistani side. During war against Soviet occupation and the ensuing civil war of 1992-96, Hekmatyar was a prominent recipient of military assistance from Pakistan.

Hamidullah, 58, of Wardak province, said he doubted that the protests had anything to do with defending the Koran.

"The protest was a conflict between the government and its opponents," he said. "And the result was that a lot of naïve students were killed."

President Karzai said the demonstrations were in reality aimed at undermining Afghanistan's relations with the international community, and not against desecration of the Koran.

"All this was done by Afghanistan's enemies in order to defame Afghanistan to the world," he said. Karzai

said he intended to take up the question of outside interference with the UN.

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