

## **Helmand Ex-Governor Joins Karzai Blame Game**

**Author:** [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Controversial former official joins chorus of criticism of British presence in Helmand, but some say seeds of violence were laid long before NATO troops arrived.

When I was governor of Helmand for four years, NATO did not drop a single bomb on the province," said Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, the controversial former chief of the troubled southern province. "No civilians were killed, and no districts fell to the Taleban. If I were still there, I am sure things would be the same as before."

Powerful words indeed, given the sad state of affairs in Helmand, arguably the most volatile of all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

Yet while technically accurate, the former governor's statement is also a bit misleading. NATO did not get involved in Helmand until the spring of 2006, months after Sher Mohammad was removed as governor, under pressure from the international community which was concerned at his alleged ties to the drug mafia.

But it does reflect one indisputable fact – in the past two years since Akhundzada's dismissal, the situation has deteriorated steadily.

"Even a child can see that things are getting worse," said one young journalist who lives in Lashkar Gah.

Afghan president Hamed Karzai created an international storm last month when he told a group of journalists at the World Economic Forum in Davos that the arrival of the British in Helmand had marked a downturn in the province's fortunes.

"Before [the British came] we were fully in charge of Helmand," he said. "They came and said 'your governor is no good.' I said, 'all right, do we have a replacement for this governor? Do you have enough forces? Both the American and British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them. And when they came in, the Taleban came."

Karzai has since tried to back away from his comments, claiming he was misquoted.

Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was replaced in December 2005. According to media reports, the international diplomatic community called for his removal after nearly ten tons of opium was discovered in his offices. Having a provincial chief deeply implicated in the drug trade would hardly be a great advertisement for the counter-narcotics efforts that were gathering steam at the time.

The loudest voices demanding Sher Mohammad's ouster belonged to the British, who were scheduled to take over military command of Helmand in May 2006.

"Akhundzada made it his personal crusade to grow as much poppy in the province as possible," said one British diplomat, speaking to IWPR on condition of anonymity in early 2007.

Sher Mohammad's "punishment" was to be elevated to the senate or upper house of parliament in Kabul, while his younger brother, Amir Mohammad Akhundzada, was left in Helmand as deputy governor.

The new provincial head, Engineer Daud, quickly lost control. His roots in the area were too shallow. While he had relatives in Helmand, he himself was seen as a Kabul appointment, with his background in international development and the United Nations.

He was also undercut by his powerful deputy, his predecessor's brother.

The strong backing Engineer Daud received from the British was a two-edged sword. In an area where the British are historically unpopular, he became seen as a creation of the foreigners.

A power vacuum developed almost immediately. The private militia chiefs loyal to Sher Mohammad, who maintained relative security through brutal tactics, now either stayed at home or, worse still, joined the Taliban.

"The mistake was that we removed a local arrangement without having a replacement," said Karzai in his now-famous Davos comments. "We removed the police force. That was not good. The security forces were not in sufficient numbers or information about the province."

Meanwhile, the United States-led Coalition Forces, with their strong counter-insurgency mission under Operation Enduring Freedom, were replaced by a British-dominated NATO contingent, which initially announced that it would assume a more defensive peacekeeping role.

The insurgents lost no time in capitalising on the situation. At present, the Taliban control much of Helmand.

Daud himself lasted barely twelve months. He was removed in December 2006.

Sher Mohammad Akhundzada has said that he largely agrees with Karzai's assessment of the British efforts, and is not shy about claiming the credit for the comparative stability in the province during his tenure.

"The people of Helmand supported me and cooperated with me," he told IWPR. "My father and grandfather had governed there. People did not allow the Taliban to gain a foothold."

He places the blame for current problems on both the international forces and the Afghan administration.

"The local officials and NATO must cooperate. This is of vital importance," he said. "I am sorry that their connection is so weak. The situation is unstable because they have not managed to build a strong relationship."

Down in Helmand, people seem to agree with him.

“Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhund[zada] was one of the really active governors,” said Abdul Khaliq, a prominent tribal elder in Helmand. “If he were here then Barancha - a remote district of this province - would never have fallen under Taleban control.”

Abdul Khaliq compared Akhundzada’s successors to him unfavourably, saying, “Anyone who wants to govern here needs to be unafraid. He cannot be encircled by fences and sandbags. That’s impossible.”

The present governor, Assadullah Wafa, is often walled up in his compound, with armed guards and barbed wire protecting him.

These security measures are quite justified. The previous governor, Daud, suffered a serious attempt on his life in December 2006, when a suicide bomber killed eight people and injured seven others outside his office. In January 2008, another suicide attack in a mosque on the governor’s compound killed the deputy governor, Pir Mohammad, along with six others.

Abdul Satar Mozahari has been the provincial director of refugee affairs since Sher Mohammad’s time. According to Mozahari, it was a golden era.

“Everything was safe during that period,” he told IWPR. “Abdul Rahman Jan [then chief of police] was able to walk alone through Garmseer at that time. Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhund would go to Dishu district with just two vehicles.”

Garmseer and Dishu, in Helmand’s south, are two of the most unstable areas of the province today.

“[Akhundzada] was a religious scholar,” continued Mozahari. “He understood religious matters well. Thousands of Taleban fighters surrendered to him. I am confident that if Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhundzada came back, there would be no need for foreign troops in Helmand province at all. Then we wouldn’t have bombings, and civilians wouldn’t be killed.”

Hajji Muhammad Aka, a resident of Chanjir in Nad Ali district, also longs for the old days.

“Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was a known personality of his tribe,” he told IWPR. “He would be able to bring security to the province the way he did before. The commanders who were with him then have all joined the Taleban. He knows them all and he could approach them. They would then abandon the Taleban and either join the government or stay at home. Security would improve.”

The lines between Taleban and the government are a bit fluid in Helmand. The present governor of Musa Qala, the Helmand district recently retaken from the insurgents after close to a year under their rule, is a former Taleban commander. So is his de facto chief of police.

But Sher Mohammad has his share of detractors in the province, who remember the behaviour of militia commanders associated with him.

“I would not want Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhund to be governor of Helmand,” said Taza Gul, a resident of Lashkar Gah. “I didn’t like him then, and I don’t now. He did not pay any attention to reconstruction or security when he was governor. He had aggressive and independent commanders who did whatever they wanted. They killed and terrorised people. Where there is tyranny, you cannot have anything good.

“I agree that there is no security in Helmand now. But there has been a lot of work on reconstruction. [Current governor] Wafa is a nice man, and I think he is a good governor.”

Ghulam Ghaws Dawari, general director of the Helmand Olympic Committee, also defends the present administration.

“Yes, it is true that the situation in Helmand was satisfactory a few years ago,” he said. “But now, even though there is insecurity, there have been some remarkable developments. I would not say that Sher Mohammad Akhund’s era was better than now.”

Among the achievements of the present regional government, Dawari listed reconstruction projects and police training, work that has been sponsored and funded by the British-led Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT.

Mohammad Hossein, who fled embattled Musa Qala for the calmer Nad Ali district, said that that if the ex-governor were to return it would make matters worse.

“Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was always a cause of tribal disputes,” he said. “During his time, his men abused their government positions and did a lot of damage. They lit a fire that nobody can put out now.”

Tribal tensions run deep in Helmand, and the present administration has been less than adept at easing them, according to Mirwais Patsoon, who runs one of Helmand’s two independent radio stations and heads the Helmand Journalists’ Independent Association.

“Tribal issues are the most important for people in this region,” he told IWPR. “The tribes help those who represent them - they know who is their enemy and who is their friend.”

At the moment, he said, “Helmand is not being governed by its own people. If Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhund comes back to Helmand and is helped by the central government, I think the situation will change.”

Sher Mohammad belongs to the powerful Alizai tribe, which controls much of northern Helmand. Other major groups in the province include the Barakzai and Ishakzai, all of which have numerous sub-groups that often war with one another. Negotiating these waters can be treacherous and calls for someone with a thorough knowledge of the hidden dangers.

The overall situation is not eased by the current tensions between the British and the central government. As most observers predict, Helmand and the rest of the country can only lose from confrontation.

“The media have reported Karzai’s statement criticising the British for the destabilisation in Helmand,” said political analyst Ahmad Sayedi. “This upsets the British, and makes other NATO countries mistrust Afghanistan. British forces have suffered casualties and mothers have lost their sons. Other countries now think that even if they work as hard as possible for Afghanistan, they will still get blamed one day. So these disagreements must be resolved as soon as possible.”

In addition to Karzai’s backpedalling, his press office has been at pains to downplay the Davos gaffe.

“[The president’s] remarks were not published in their entirety,” said presidential spokesman Humayun Hamidzada. “The president was not talking about only one country. He spoke in general, saying that we and the international community made mistakes in the past, jointly, but that now things are improving.”

Observers are not convinced.

“Britain accuses Karzai of being unsuccessful over the past six years,” said political analyst Fazel Rahman Oria. “The Taleban are resurgent, drug cultivation has increased, and corruption is at an all-time high. Karzai feels himself in a perilous position, so he is beginning to attack Britain.”

Oria does not agree that the British are to blame for the situation in Helmand province, placing the responsibility closer to home.

“Helmand has been a drug centre since earlier times – and the governor and other officials were involved. The situation in Kandahar and Uruzgan has also deteriorated. The British are not to blame. The government is.”

However, Habibullah Rafi, a member of Afghanistan’s Academy of Sciences and a prominent analyst, told IWPR that the only problem with Karzai’s criticism is that it came too late. He recalled the historical enmity between Britain and Afghanistan, which looms much larger in the Afghan memory than in that of most British. In fact, many Afghans are of the opinion that the British are still hungry for revenge for past defeats.

The British fought three bitterly contested wars with Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries, gaining little and losing thousands of troops in the process.

“The British are hostile people; they are trying to take revenge on Afghanistan for their previous casualties,” said Rafi.

A major bone of contention between the government and the British is Musa Qala, the district in northern Helmand that was the subject of a hotly-disputed truce with the Taleban. There has been much dispute over who negotiated the agreement, but in October 2006, the British withdrew, thereby opening the door to the Taleban takeover.

In December, 2007, the British and the Afghan National Army mounted an operation to clear the Taleban out of Musa Qala. Now the government is back in control – albeit of the town rather than the whole of the surrounding district centre – but no one can tell how long it will last.

“It took us a year and a half to take back Musa Qala,” said Karzai in Davos. “This was not a failure but a mistake.”

Akhundzada agrees.

“From the very beginning I did not agree with that truce,” he said. “Nor am I very optimistic right now. I told both the government and NATO that it was a mistake, that it was a poisoned chalice. But they drank it.”

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