

Jobs for the Boys

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The first Afghan militiamen disarmed under a UN scheme are starting along the path towards civilian life.

As the United Nations begins finding jobs for about 1,000 men it has disarmed in north-east Afghanistan, the enormity of the task facing it in the rest of the country is all too clear.

The UN's the New Beginnings programme in Kunduz province is a pilot scheme which will be repeated in five other areas, at a total cost of 45 million US dollars. In each place, 1,000 men will hand in their weapons, given some money and food, and then offered retraining for civilian jobs.

The project will foreshadow the full DDR (disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration) effort which aims to disarm 100,000 militia members by 2006.

Phase one of the New Beginnings scheme kicked off in Kunduz on October 24, with a ceremony led by President Hamed Karzai, in which about 1,000 men formally surrendered their weapons.

Each weapon was inspected by UN officials, identified with a bar-code sticker and stored away. In return, each fighter was given a plastic identity card entitling him to 100 US dollars and a box of food, plus job retraining.

The arms that were handed in make up only a tiny proportion of the weapons in circulation, or stockpiled by militia commanders, but the UN believes the pilot project is a significant step forward in building security - a prerequisite for next year's planned elections as well as the badly-needed task of reconstruction.

Kunduz, a province close to the border with Tajikistan, was selected as launch pad for the project because it remains relatively peaceful. To help maintain security, Germany has sent an advance party of 27 soldiers to pave the way for a force which will run a Provincial Reconstruction Team in the region.

On November 9, the 1,008 men who have gone through the initial disarmament and demobilisation phases began reporting for the third and final stage in the process - reintegration. They are being offered vocational training for jobs in landmine clearance, road construction, factory work, or farming. In the first four days, 235 joined various retraining programmes.

The task the UN faces is not only to place these ex-soldiers in suitable jobs in a country where workplaces are scarce, but to keep them there.

"Disarming a thousand armed men and making them members of civil society is an important step on the road to success," said Noul Causin, a senior officer with the New Beginnings programme. "But if we cannot provide them with better jobs and facilities, they will go back to their previous work - the gun."

Many of those now looking for peaceful employment have been soldiering for most of their adult lives - as mujahedin resisting the Soviet occupation in the Eighties, as followers of various factions in the civil war of the 1990s, or as Northern Alliance troops fighting the Taleban regime until it fell two years ago.

Since then, many have been in the hire of local commanders who often engaged in feuding against other factions, or between themselves.

Before the job-placement part of the process started, the UN reported that most of the men had opted for farming jobs.

"In agriculture, we can help the men by giving them seed and fertiliser. If they wish to receive further professional training we will train them, for example in computers, business, carpentry or engineering," Causin told IWPR.

Kunduz's provincial governor, Abdul Latif Ibrahimi, promised to help find jobs for the former gunmen.

"The literate among them will be given jobs in government offices, and the illiterate ones will be employed in carpet-weaving, carpentry and so on," he said.

Hayatullah, one of several former soldiers interviewed by IWPR, said he wanted to join the farming programme, while another, Lal Mohammad, said he would resume his studies.

A third man, who did not wish to be named, said he doubted that he would find a good job, even with UN assistance.

The disarmament process is still in its infancy, and with so many weapons around, some observers are still sceptical about it. Kunduz resident Shirin Aqa told IWPR that given that there are tens of thousands of armed men in the Kunduz area, disarming a thousand of them will not bring any major improvement in security.

But the UN believes that if its pilot project demonstrates that former fighters can give up their guns, find useful jobs and live well, others will be encouraged to follow suit.

The pilot programme will shortly be replicated in five other cities - Gardez, Parwan, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif.

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