

Local Hopes Riding on Khalili

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Residents of the Afghan province of Bamyan are counting on local warlord-turned-deputy president Karim Khalili to improve their lot.

Residents of Bamyan province, one of the most deprived regions of the country, are hoping their leader's decision to take up a government post in Kabul will lead to an improvement in local conditions.

They believe that Hizb-e-Wahdat chief Abdul Karim Khalili, who recently became vice-president in the transitional administration, will ensure that more money and resources are channeled into the area.

Khalili - one of the first warlords to be appointed to President Hamed Karzai's cabinet - was welcomed by nearly 2,000 of his people on his recent return to his headquarters in Hazarajat, a central district of the predominantly Hazara province of Bamyan.

He told local people not to expect too much of him, saying the rehabilitation of Afghanistan would be an uphill struggle as many regions of the country were as badly off as Bamyan.

"Before going to Kabul, I thought the Hazaras were the poorest and most unfortunate people of Afghanistan, yet after arriving in the capital I realised that problems exist in all corners of this country," he said.

Khalili is one of very few warlords to agree to take up positions in Kabul. Others, such as Herat governor Ismail Khan in the west, and General Rashid Dostum, who holds sway in the north, have refused offers of government jobs.

By bringing the warlords to the capital and giving them a role in the new government, President Karzai seems to be trying to remove the danger of factional fighting.

But the president has found it hard to tempt the local leaders away from their fiefdoms, as the recent assassination of eastern warlord Haji Abdul Qadeer, another vice-president, has made others wary of visiting the capital. Khalili, however, has not been deterred.

A military man, Khalili once served as deputy leader of Hizb-e-Wahdat, the main Hazara party. He took power in 1995 after the organisation's former leader Abdul Ali Mazari was murdered by the Taliban.

Many local people are hoping Khalili will use his new post to lobby for great support for the region. "We now want him to put all his efforts into rehabilitation and turn the authorities' attention towards Bamyan," said local resident Hussain Bakhsh.

Military officials in the region, meanwhile, are confident that Khalili's presence in the government will help to end factional fighting in the Kuhmard region of the province, where Hizb-e-Wahdat militia clash sporadically with Jamiat-e-Islami fighters.

They believe that Khalili and the defence minister Mohammad Qaseem Fahim, a leading Jamiat commander, will together attempt to stop the local conflict. “ We hope visits by Khalili and Fahim will solve the problems of Kuhmard,” Baz Mohammad Jowhari, commander of the Bamyan military division, told IWPR.

Already there are plans by the defence ministry in Kabul to bring the rival groups together in a joint regional force, details of which will be announced shortly.

Jowhari, who has 4,000 men under his command in Bamyan, has no problems with Kabul having a bigger say in the way in which military affairs are handled in the province.

“The only difference in controlling the soldiers of Bamyan is that in the past their military and logistic needs were fulfilled by Hizb-e Wahdat and now the national defence ministry is performing this job,” he said.

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