

## **Military Denied Role in Celebrations**

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President and defence minister deny rift after army is left out of independence festivities.

Independence Day celebrations went ahead last week with little of the usual pomp and circumstance after the military was told to stay away from the big parade.

Some observers were quick to blame a rift between President Hamid Karzai and his charismatic defence minister Marshal Mohammad Fahim after the August 19 event went ahead without the army.

However, Karzai said as it costs up to 30 billion afghanis - about eight hundred thousand US dollars - to put on a full military parade, the issue was simply one of cost. He was backed by his defence minister, who took the unusual step of issuing a public announcement on the subject stating, "Nothing can come between me and Karzai".

"There were some reports that there have been disagreements in the government of Afghanistan especially between Karzai and I," Fahim told a hastily scheduled news conference. "This is far from the truth.

"After the independence of Afghanistan, we have all worked for national unity and peace, finishing wars and enmities and helping our people move toward reconstruction."

Many questions were raised by Karzai's decision not to hold a military parade as part of the occasion, as billions of afghanis had been spent in April on a week-long event to celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the mujahedin invasion of Kabul. Tanks and guns were repaired and new uniforms made for the soldiers who took part.

The defence ministry's technical deputy General Attiqullah Baryalai told IWPR, "Karzai said the earlier anniversary was celebrated well and the military parade also went favourably, so now it isn't necessary to do it again. We can spend the money on other things."

The residents of Kabul have differing opinions about Karzai's move. Rahmanullah, a shopkeeper in the Pul-e-Bagh-e-Umomi district, said it was a good decision. "The expenses of the parade should go to pay the salaries of teachers and government workers," he said.

Mirza Gul, an officer at the central military headquarters, agreed. "If a teacher, a worker and an officer don't have any salary then what do the celebrations mean?" he asked.

However, Kabul resident Mohammad Tamim Tahseel was disappointed, "There should be a parade so that the world can see how much we love our army. People won't accept that it didn't go ahead because of the expense."

The parade celebrating 83 years of independence from Britain went ahead as usual in the Ghazi Stadium - the scene of several atrocities during the Taleban era. Karzai, Fahim and other cabinet members were joined by the frail figure of Zaheer Shah, the 87-year-old former king who returned from exile in Italy earlier this year.

The Afghan president told an estimated crowd of 10,000 spectators and young performers, “These youths are the leaders of the future. The young people should remember that today’s freedom is the result of the martyrdom of millions of our people in the fight for independence 83 years ago and in the holy war 20 years ago.

“Everything we love is the result of the sacrifices of our youths. The future of Afghanistan is yours. You have to give your compatriots a good and comfortable life, so that the coming generations may live in peace.”

A stream of sports teams and high school students filed past Karzai and his guests, as organisers attempted to turn the parade into a celebration of youth. Events were only enlivened by a troupe of Shomali plainsmen who clearly hadn’t been told about the “no guns” rule and fired their rifles into the air, startling the heavy security presence.

Afghanistan won its independence in 1919 after three wars against Britain, which led to the deaths of more than 30,000 British soldiers. The anniversary is marked each year, although the date itself is not fixed.

It has always been a grand affair, kicking off with a 21-gun salute followed by display of military might. Music, singing and dancing would continue for a week. It was difficult not to view the 2002 parade as a rather sad shadow of previous years.

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