

Militia Men Give Up Their Arms

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A nationwide programme to collect weapons from those who belonged to private armies gets under way in a northern province.

One thousand soldiers from each of the two main militias in northern Afghanistan have begun surrendering their small weapons in and near Mazar-e-Sharif under the United Nations-supervised Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, DDR, programme.

Members of the militias controlled by General Abdul Rashid Dostum and General Ata Mohammad had fought against each other as recently as October. Last year, under a separate programme, the two militias began surrendering their heavy weapons.

The disarmament programme, which is primarily being paid for by a grant from Japan, is seen as crucial to restoring peace to the nation. Since warlords still hold sway over vast areas of the country, most observers say that, until their militias are disarmed, order will never be achieved in Afghanistan.

A pilot DDR project began in the northern province of Kunduz in October, with just over 1,000 soldiers surrendering their weapons. A similar project followed in the southern town of Gardez.

Deputy defence ministers Lieutenant General Mohebullah Moheb and Major General Humayoun Fawzi were on hand for the inauguration of the project in Mazar-e-Sharif, along with the deputy head of the Afghan National Army, Lieutenant General Mohammad Isaq Noori.

One ceremony was conducted at General Mohammad's 7th Corps headquarters in the south of Mazar city. The general asked his troops if they were ready to give up their arms. "Yes, we submit our weapons," the men shouted in unison, with a bit of bravado.

A similar ceremony was conducted at Qala-i-Jangi, the fortress headquarters of General Dostum's 8th Corps, west of Mazar-e-Sharif. The fort was the scene of fierce fighting between the Taliban and Northern Alliance forces towards the end of 2001.

Ahmad Shah Siddiqi, the programme officer of the DDR project in Mazar, emphasised that the project was voluntary. He said the aim of the programme nationally was to reintegrate about 100,000 militia officers and soldiers to civilian life.

Each member of the militia is paid 100 US dollars, no matter how many small arms they actually turn over. These weapons are then given to the new Afghan National Army. The goal is to process about 100 soldiers a day in this district.

Once the militia members have been disarmed at their respective headquarters, they travel to the DDR centre in Mazar.

It's here, Siddiqi told IWPR, that the truly hard work of the project begins.

“The main objectives of the reintegration part of the programme are to provide information to the former officers and soldiers about the different steps of rehabilitation, to give them suggestions and information about choosing a new way of life and to distribute aid to them,” he said.

At this centre, each man is given his 100 dollars, a certificate signed by President Hamed Karzai and a voter registration card. The men are also given two sacks of wheat, three cans of cooking oil, two packs of salt, seven kilograms of lentils and a set of civilian clothes.

These former officers and soldiers are also told about options available to them, including vocational training, jobs in agriculture or starting a small businesses, joining de-mining operations or the police force, or signing up for the new Afghan National Army. A month after their disarmament, they will be counselled about their future life.

Three months after they turn in their weapons, the former militia members receive another 100 dollars when they appear at the centre to discuss how their transition to civilian life is going.

So far, most of those who have gone through the programme have opted for vocational training. Very few have expressed interest in joining the police or the National Army.

Many solders seem relieved to be handing over their weapons.

Mohammad Hussain, who served in General Mohammad’s militia, said he is happy to turn over his weapons “because I am tired of carrying this gun for more than ten years”.

Ahmad Shah, a fellow militia member who said he had carried his Kalashnikov for more than 15 years, said, “I will submit my weapon if the DDR project provides me with all I need. Otherwise I can sell my weapon anyway, separately from this project.”

Mohammad Shafi had already turned in his weapon, “I submitted my weapon, because war is over in the country.” Saying that the most important part of the hand-over was receiving the certificate signed by Karzai, Shafi added that now “I will start working on my own land again”.

Tash Mohammad, 20, who served in General Dostum’s militia, expressed a sense of relief after giving up his weapon. “I can sleep well now,” he said. “I had my gun for five years, since I was 15. I’ve now surrendered it and can live a normal life, the same as my brothers.”

The only ones who appear unhappy with the project are those who did not serve in a militia and therefore are not eligible to receive assistance from the program. These people argue that the DDR is rewarding those who in the past participated in armed robberies against the civilian population.

“I had heard about DDR and I went to their office to receive some help,” said Mohammad Qurban, who ekes out a living by selling oranges on a street in Mazar-e-Sharif. “But they told me they will not help ordinary people. They will only help gunmen, as they collect their weapons.”

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