

## **Mixed Feelings Over Helmand Handover**

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Afghan satisfaction at gaining control of security mixed with fears for future stability.

As British troops handed over control of security in Helmand to the Afghan military, residents of the troubled southern province greeted the historic move with both joy and apprehension.

The Afghan tricolour flag flew from shops and buildings in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah as the official handover was marked on July 20.

Afghan forces were out in full force to secure the invitation-only ceremony, which was of particular importance since Helmand – the source of much of the world’s heroin – has long been the scene of heavy fighting between American and British troops operating under a NATO mandate and the Taleban insurgents.

Helmand governor Mohammed Gulab Mangal noted that the Afghan National Army, ANA, was taking control of security at a time when two of the province’s districts – Dishu in the southwest and Baghran in the far north – were still under Taleban control.

Mangal called for Afghan and foreign troop numbers to be boosted along border areas with Pakistan to disrupt the flow of insurgents. “If that isn’t stopped, it will be difficult to secure peace in Helmand,” he added.

During the ceremony, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, who heads the national body in charge of the security transition process, said the ANA and the Afghan National Police were well-enough equipped and trained to take care of the situation.

“Our government is standing on its own two feet,” he said. “Our police have become more professional, and 765 million dollars is to be spent in Helmand on security affairs alone over the next three years.”

Provincial police chief Mohammad Hakim Angar assured the public that no efforts would be spared to provide security in Lashkar Gah and other parts of the province.

“Afghans have proved that they can protect their country, even with their bare hands,” he said. “Our police are equipped; the only things we need are more heavy weapons and ammunition.”

As the Afghan national anthem was played, the flag was formally handed from NATO to Afghan forces, and international troops pulled out of the town, many onlookers were left crying with happiness.

Kamal Khan, 60, wiped away tears with the end of his turban and said, “It’s been a great life ambition of mine to see foreign troops leave Afghanistan so that we acquire independence. God willing, this is the start of it, and I will live to see Afghanistan independent again one day.”

Bismillah, who comes from outside Lashkar Gah but works in the town, was equally pleased.

“Today was the best day of my life.... It’s been made clear to everyone that we are not controlled by anyone else, and that we’re independent,” he said. “The withdrawal of the foreign forces could be harmful if they stop their assistance altogether, but if they continue to help, we are now strong enough now to go on.”

Bismillah said the onus was now on the Afghan authorities to win public trust. “The only path to success is through treating people well. That has improved, but there’s still more work to be done.”

Mohammad Iqbal, who owns a chemist’s shop in the town, added a note of caution, questioning whether Afghan forces were up to the job of guaranteeing security for the long term.

“Now that the transition process in Lashkar Gah is over, my spirit feels freer, because I trust my own people more than I do the foreign forces. At least they don’t enter houses and kill innocent people as they sleep. At least they listen to what you say,” he said.

However, he added, “Since our army and police don’t have heavy weaponry and air support, some problems might arise given the current situation.”

Iqbal noted that the handover presented a direct challenge to the Taleban.

“If the Taleban really are fighting against foreign forces, they must not carry out attacks in areas where the

foreigners are no longer present,” he said. “If they still carry out repeated attacks, it will mean they are enemies to the Afghan people, and that the terminology of Islam and jihad that they use is just a pretext.”

**Gol Ahmad Ehsan is a freelance reporter in Helmand, Afghanistan.**

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