

New Lease of Life for Liberated Herat District

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Insurgent commander's demise ends reign of oppression in Gozara, western Afghanistan. By Mustafa Saber in Herat

People's entrenched fears of travelling to Gozara district are hard to shake, even six months after the elimination of infamous local insurgent commander Ghulam Yahya Akbari.

But the change of mood is tangible from the start of the ten-kilometre car journey from Herat, the provincial capital: a woman passenger feels comfortable not wearing a burqa, and the driver free to play a music cassette, which would have brought punishment under Akbari's hard-line interpretation of Islam.

The road in western Afghanistan is again busy with vehicles heading to and from Gozara's now teeming bazaar, and at the roadside, groups of young girls make their way to school.

The transformation is remarkable considering the grim history of unrest associated with Akbari, a former mayor of Herat who went on to forge links with Islamic extremist groups like Hezb-e-Islami and the Taleban.

The United States authorities held him responsible for an increase in kidnapping, extortion and violence in Herat in recent years, including attacks in 2008 against the United Nations Assistance Mission and Herat city airport.

In particular, Gozara district became a virtual no-go zone under Akbari and daily life here was close to collapse.

Akbari was killed on October 8 last year in a firefight with foreign and Afghan troops in the hills surrounding Siyawoshan, where he had made his base. Along with him 22 of his men died – about ten per cent of his entire fighting force. Some 5,000 people attended his funeral.

Citizens of Herat would seldom visit Gozara for fear of abduction by his gunmen, whose presence was so strong that local police were permanently hunkered down in their own defence.

Today reassuring police posts are spread around the district, which owing to its lush, picturesque scenery has re-emerged as a favourite recreation spot for Heratis.

"I can come and visit now whenever I wish," said Farid Ahmad, 20, who was waiting for a bus to return to the provincial capital after visiting his uncle. "But we could not come here when Akbari ruled the district, and nor could my uncle visit us in the city."

Vehicles piled with locally grown fruit and vegetables are noticeable among traffic bound for the city, and trade in more upscale, manufactured items is also booming.

"Sales have increased and business has really improved in this area," said Khalil Ahmad, owner of a car lot in the Pashtunpol area of Gozara.

The destruction of the core of Akbari's gang also opened the way for badly needed reconstruction projects.

In the past six months, the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Herat has built one girls' school and refurbished several more, and built small bridges and two bathhouses, said district governor Zia'oddin Sharifi.

"People have now asked the government and donor agencies to extend electricity to villages without power, and also to asphalt the 50 kilometres of road between Gozara and the neighbouring Pashtun Zarghun district," he told IWPR.

A statement to IWPR from the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, confirmed the work on schools and bridges by the Italian team and said this followed talks with local leaders.

"The importance of achieving and maintaining a secure situation in the district to improve the general living conditions for residents was always highlighted during each meeting," the statement said.

"The ability to plan, and deliver, the development of all these projects in such a short period has increased

the level trust the local population has in the Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF.

“Three years before, the entire region was considered ‘off limits’ for local and international security forces. Now, through the careful partnering with local leaders and consistent follow through of local and international security forces, Siyawoshan is a thriving agricultural area.”

The improved security has also had a positive effect on perceptions beyond the provincial boundaries.

Herat’s industrial park, which is located in Gozara district and near the provincial airport, was in a state of decay in recent years because of the encroachment of Akbari’s group.

According to the deputy director of Herat’s department of mines and crafts, Toryalai Ghawsi, the former peak figure of 250 factories in the industrial park had fallen to 80. But since October, many factory owners who had shut down and gone abroad have returned and reopened their businesses.

The industrial park has about 40,000 workers active at present, but it is hoped to double the number this year, partly on the back of pledges by foreign investors to develop the site, the official told IWPR.

“Some foreign countries had previously expressed interest in investing but held back due to the armed opposition in Gozara. Now they are again ready to invest,” Ghawsi said, naming China, the United States, Italy, Poland, Turkey and Turkmenistan as countries now eyeing opportunities here.

But for all the rapid progress, some local people voice lingering concerns that remnants of the Akbari gang are in hiding, biding their time until they can return and resume the fight against the government and foreign forces.

“Armed individuals who survived when Akbari was killed have been seen in the Siyawoshan area and are currently staying in the mountains,” said Wali Khan, a 40-year-old resident of Gozara.

For now the district is quiet, although local people say there is nervousness among all sides caught up in the former conflict.

“Many people in the area still think as if Ghulam Yahya were still alive,” said a tribal elder who wished to remain anonymous. “Those who were against Akbari and his men are concerned they may regain control of the area. But those who supported Akbari and his men now fear the government may imprison them.”

The authorities are quick to reject speculation that remnants of Akbari’s group are still active in Siyawoshan area and elsewhere, and say the new stability is permanent.

“The people are happy and satisfied with the current process in the area, and are actively cooperating with government forces to ensure security,” said Colonel Abdolrauf Ahmadi, spokesman for the police in western Afghanistan.

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