

Northern Militias Clash

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Skirmish between rival local commanders is contained, but highlights the fragile truce around Mazar-e-Sharif.

A cease-fire between the two most powerful commanders in northern Afghanistan appears to be holding despite a fatal skirmish between groups of their fighters.

At least four armed men died in the clash in the Sholgara district, just to the south of Mazar-e-Sharif, in late February. The situation has remained tense but calm.

Last October, a cease-fire brought a halt to the fighting between the forces of Abdul Rashid Dostum, who leads the Junbesh-e-Milli movement, and Atta Mohammad, a Jamiat-e-Islami faction commander.

The two have long fought for control of northern Afghanistan, with the ultimate prize being control of Mazar-e-Sharif. The city was once Dostum's stronghold but over the past two years has come under the control of his rivals.

Balkh province police commissioner Mohammad Akram Khakrizwal said that the latest incident saw Ajib, a commander loyal to Atta, killed along with three of his bodyguards in what appeared to be a response to a previous killing. Two soldiers on the Junbesh side were also killed in the fighting that followed.

The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, UNAMA, which has investigated the incident, said that four Jamiat members were killed in "brief fighting". A UNAMA spokesperson added that eight arrest warrants had been issued for Junbesh members - with the support of Dostum.

All sides seem to be speaking in measured tones.

Atta told IWPR that he did not blame Junbesh as a whole for the skirmish, which he ascribed to a personal grudge held by one of its commanders.

He emphasised that he hoped to see intervention by the central government and the international community, and wanted those responsible for the deaths brought to justice.

A spokesman for Dostum, who is currently in the capital Kabul, said that the incident was currently under investigation.

Last month's clash was the most serious incident since last year's cease-fire negotiations, which were overseen by UNAMA and the British-led Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT.

National police are now in the Sholgara area to try to ensure stability.

PRT spokesman Captain Ed Rankin, said that his team was aware of the situation, and "Sholgara and Kabul

[national] police are investigating the matter and seeking the perpetrators involved”.

Rankin emphasised, however, that the PRT’s role was merely to support the police and the Afghan National Army.

Sayed Abdul Hamid Hamid, the head of Cooperation for Afghanistan, a local research centre in Mazar-e-Sharif, said he too understood that the incident was a clash between low-level commanders.”

“People find the easiest way for solving their problems is fighting because they have guns,” he said. A UN-sponsored effort to disarm militia members got under way earlier this month in the region.

Hamid said he suspected that control of local poppy production, used to produce opium and heroin, was behind much of such fighting. He said the clash underlined the weak hold that the central government has in the regions.

The recent violence has left some local people fearful of further conflict. “The central government must disarm both sides,” said Barat, a resident of Sholgara, “Otherwise there will be another serious fight and the supporters of the dead commander will take their revenge.”

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