

## **Taleban Defections**

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Messengers are said to be criss-crossing the frontlines in north-east Afghanistan to negotiate the defections of Taleban commanders and their men.

The well-dressed messenger, sporting an elegant black turban with a pinstripe design, looked distinctly uncomfortable, clicking his worry beads as only a worried man can.

This was not surprising. Where we might say, "don't shoot the messenger", in Afghanistan they might do just that. This was the man from the Taleban and he was deep inside enemy territory.

He had not come bearing gifts - but, tucked safely into his robes, he had three small scraps of paper. They were handwritten offers from three Taleban commanders to defect to the opposition Northern Alliance along with their men.

The local Northern Alliance commander asked that all names and the location of the meeting be kept secret. The deal had not been clinched and the Taleban do not know that these commanders are trying to jump ship.

Asked what the response would be, the Northern Alliance commander, looking more than pleased with the morning's developments, said he had just called General Fahim, the opposition's minister of defence, but no decision had been taken.

Opposition commanders say messengers are constantly criss-crossing the north-east frontlines. This one says his three commanders would bring 400 soldiers with them.

The Northern Alliance may have postponed their long-awaited offensive to see how many commanders from the other side are prepared to defect first and whether their offers are genuine or made simply to extricate themselves from a difficult but temporary military situation.

Just over a week ago, General Atiquallah Baryalai, the Northern Alliance's deputy minister of defence, was crowing that a commander called Abdul Kazi Hai had defected with 4,000 men, in the vicinity of Mazar-e-Sharif.

He later admitted that the commander had switched back to the Taleban - but claimed that some of his men had remained with the opposition.

Whether Abdul Kazi Hai had ever defected or commanded 4,000 men is, of course, unverifiable since he is fighting in a region inaccessible to journalists.

But it is clear there are now serious attempts at persuading Taleban officers to come over to the Northern Alliance side.

Only last week, the legendary Afghan opposition leader Abdul Haq was executed by the Kabul regime after

he was captured apparently attempting to persuade Pashtun Taleban commanders to join the Northern Alliance.

Asked why his commanders' offer had not come before the current crisis, the messenger shifted uncomfortably and said, "six months ago was not a good time for us, now it is." This is understood by all to mean that the Taleban military chiefs want to end the war on the side with the best chance of winning.

Although it is clear that many Taleban in north-east Afghanistan are thinking about defecting, this does not mean that this is the case all over the country.

The messenger we spoke to came from three ethnic Tajik commanders and the Northern Alliance forces ranged against them here are also mostly ethnic Tajik. The Taleban are dominated by Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest single ethnic group.

Like a man making a sales pitch, the messenger said, "Because we are Tajiks it is very difficult for us to live with their regime. That is why I was sent."

Messengers are not the only men crossing into Northern Alliance territory. The town of Farkhar is one of the most inaccessible spots on this jagged frontline, lying several hours drive from the place where the meeting with the messenger was held. Here, boys of military age from nearby Taleban-held Taloqan have been arriving in droves.

They have been fleeing ever since armed Taleban stormed the Abu Osman High School in Taloqan just over three weeks ago, herding out 20 boys at gunpoint and dispatching them to the frontlines.

Apart from the fact that ethnic Tajiks don't want to die for the Taleban, there are several other good reasons why they can't find enough volunteers.

When night falls, the Northern Alliance attacks their lines with fearsome three metre long rockets from truck mounted BM-21 Soviet era missile launchers. The roar is deafening and it leaves the inner core of your body vibrating like a tuning fork.

According to Said Mahmud, the officer in charge of the rockets, they are aimed at targets 14 kilometres away. Targeting is done in coordination with a spotter on the frontline, but an accurate report of what is being hit only comes the next day from agents operating inside Taleban territory. Bashir, an aide to Commander Daoud, who is in charge in Farkhar, said, "Last night the rockets took out three Datsun pickup trucks and killed eight Taleban."

When the rockets are done, the silence over the pitch-black frontlines is broken only by the menacing thud of invisible American helicopters. Where they are going or what they are doing is anybody's guess. But, in the wake of the recent allied special forces raid on Kandahar, no Taleban commander can rest assured that American or British troops won't be paying them a visit.

No wonder many commanders are reconsidering their loyalties. As one Afghan source who asked not to be named said, "Of course, when it is all over no one will admit to having been a Taleban." It is already happening.

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**Location:** Kosovo  
Afghanistan

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