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## Afghanistan's warlord vice-president spoiling for a fight with the Taliban

**General Dostum has mustered his own militia to defend northern province but is waiting to get green light from president**

4 August 2015

General Dostum had waited for almost two weeks, but finally it looked like he would be allowed to go to the frontline. The Afghan first vice-president – as is his official title – had rushed to the north in mid-July to prevent the Taliban from overrunning Faryab province, a scenario he had warned about for six months. Several months before, while still in Kabul, he even had a force at the ready.

“There were up to 9,000 people gathered here. They wanted to go fight the Taliban. But what can I do? The president does not allow it,” Abdul Rashid Dostum said in a rare meeting with reporters in his hometown, Sheberghan.

Since early spring, Afghanistan’s north has borne the brunt of an intensified Taliban offensive, buoyed by an unusually high influx of foreign fighters, including Uzbeks and Chinese Uighurs.

Though the Taliban received a symbolic blow last week when it transpired that its leader, Mullah Omar, had been dead since 2013, the movement has military momentum. In Faryab, the Kabul government has been slow in sending reinforcements, and local forces are strained. As a response, Dostum has mustered his own militia to defend Faryab, a strategically important province which, if it fell, would allow insurgents to move across the north.

Dostum was still waiting for the green light from the president but his trip here had at least given him a sense of purpose. Though he now holds, on paper, one of the country's most powerful positions, the general has largely been sidelined since last year's election.

He has lamented that no one seeks his advice, despite his long experience and his role in securing Ashraf Ghani the presidency. As leader of Afghanistan's Uzbek minority, Dostum proved a valuable running mate for Ghani.

"Ghani won because of my campaigning here. There are two million votes here," he said. Yet, as vice-president, the highest office of his career, Dostum has drifted out of sight.

Perhaps Ghani has tried to assuage the concerns of his Pashtun supporters who loathe the idea of bringing a man they see as a mass killer to power.

One of the most notorious of Afghanistan's war hardened strongmen, Dostum is perhaps best remembered by opponents and human rights organisations for his ruthless militia which plundered and raped during the civil war, and for allowing hundreds of Taliban prisoners to suffocate in shipping containers. The prisoners, who Dostum insists died unintentionally, were buried in mass graves in 2002 in the desert outside Sheberghan, the provincial capital where most citizens swear fealty to Dostum before any president.

As the government has hesitated to bolster the defence of Faryab, Dostum has mustered a militia, independent of the government forces, numbering as many as 20,000.

Because of the history of such groups, "militia" has become a contentious term. Dostum prefers to call his men an "uprising force".

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"General Dostum does not create militias," he said, referring to himself, as is his habit, in the third person.

In reality, that distinction is mostly semantic. Faryab is reeling under a Taliban onslaught involving up to 5,000 men, and arming citizens willing to fight seems, to many, the only means of survival, whatever label one gives them.

"The Taliban were attacking our posts at night," said a soldier from Faryab who asked for anonymity for security reasons. "When they overran our bases, they beheaded eight soldiers. They put one's head to the body of another." He added that in Qarai, an area of Almar district where he fought before fleeing, the Taliban were now walking the streets freely. "We fought to our last bullet," he said.

In addition to Almar, where a suicide attack in a mosque killed at least 19 people on 22 July, Pashtun Kot and Qaisar districts are also besieged. Recent fighting in Faryab has displaced up to 30,000 people, the majority of whom now live in areas inaccessible to aid, according to humanitarian organisations.

Meanwhile, with the unrest in the north, Dostum is in his element.

“Whether I go to Faryab or I don’t go to Faryab, whether I command or not – my presence will have an effect,” he said. “You will see, even the women will be throwing rocks at the Taliban.” It was unclear whether Dostum would actually get permission to go, and the president’s spokesman was unreachable for comment.

The general spoke to reporters in the courtyard of his palace, painted in pink and baby blue, adorned with large-size images of himself. An ex-communist who always wore his religion and politics lightly, Dostum’s alliance with Ahmed Shah Massoud in the early 1990’s was an important turning point in the mujahideen’s war against the Soviets.

The general now pines for the admiration he once inspired.

Dostum near Mazar-e-Sharif, northern Afghanistan, in November 2001 as the Taliban was forced from power. Photograph: Darko Bandic/AP

“My coming here has shaken up the Taliban,” he said with an air of vindication, complaining that the government didn’t take the threat from the Taliban in Faryab seriously enough. “But I was getting information that [the Taliban] were gathering. I didn’t sit by quietly,” he said.

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In Ghani’s micromanaged government, Dostum stands out. His unscripted, bellicose style is at odds with the measured boilerplate statements on offer from the presidential office. Dostum, however, is also a product of decades as a protagonist in Afghanistan’s many wars, with traits and a sense of humour more familiar to many Afghans than Ghani, who honed a technocratic demeanour in the west, during a previous career as an academic and World Bank adviser.

Recounting how a Taliban commander, whom he held prisoner, used his prosthetic leg as a pillow to keep it from being stolen, he punctuated his story with bursts of laughter that made his eyes squint.

In his hometown of Sheberghan, he is still revered. In a barbershop, where photos of Dostum riding horses vied for wall space with posters of a coiffed Cristiano Ronaldo, a group of young men stood up for the general.

“During the election campaign, Ashraf Ghani came here and told Dostum: ‘You are a key person’. But after the elections, he has not shown General Dostum respect,” said Asadullah Barhad, 22. Along the main street, most people agreed with that sentiment.

“The general is famous all over the world. We love him, and the enemy is scared of him,” said shopkeeper Rasoul Qoraish. “If the government gives him what he needs, he will bring security to the north.”

Dostum recently forged an alliance with another northern strongman, Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of Balkh province. As the heads of two traditionally rival parties – Dostum’s Jonbesh-e Milli and Atta’s Jamiat-e Islami – the two commanders have large bands of armed men at their disposal.

A crowd in Sheberghan Dostum from his 2009 return from exile in Turkey. Photograph: Caren Firouz/REUTERS

Arming such irregular militias has historically caused serious instability in the north, a region already awash with weapons. Acting practically without government supervision, militias have been known to prey on local communities, subjecting rivals to violence and extortion. Their methods have provoked villagers to either take up arms or join the insurgency.

“Pro-government militias have a nasty record in Afghanistan of abusing human rights, but also of stirring up trouble and causing instability,” said Graeme Smith, International Crisis Group’s analyst in Kabul and the author of a new report on Afghan militias.

Another danger of arming militias, Smith said, is potential mass defections to the insurgency, and a flare-up of fighting between militias belonging to rival strongmen, such as Dostum and Atta.

Meanwhile, the government has turned a blind eye to the rearming of militias or, in some instances, helped them.

“Some officials in the Afghan government know they’re playing with fire, but they prefer to raise militias instead of giving up territory to the insurgency,” said Smith. “I’m sympathetic to their dilemma,” he added, “but it’s a terribly dangerous strategy.”