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'National Uprising' waged for Afghan rights

By Jennifer Glasse

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Five years ago, when Lotfullah Khamran went to take his university entrance exam in the Afghan province of Ghazni, he noticed something. There were not many of his fellow Pashtuns there.

"Among the 5,000 people taking the test, only maybe 1,000 were Pashtun," he says. "Why? That's when I started thinking we have to figure out why there are so few students. The reason is that in our area, the schools are closed and students being killed."

He says the Taliban murdered a dozen students in Andar district because they had gone off to study. The Taliban called them spies. Khamran said he wondered how long he could live that way.

He got into university in Khost province. He says he was not just studying then; he contacted everyone he could and explained about the closed schools and lack of services.

When he graduated with an engineering degree, not much had changed in Andar, and so three months ago, he decided to take things into his own hands and contacted the Taliban.

He and a handful of other men told the Taliban they would join the fight against the Americans if it would reopen schools, the medical clinic, local markets and allow reconstruction of the roads.

The Taliban refused, and gave the men a half-hour to leave the area. A battle ensued. Khamran claims the Taliban lost a dozen men to his one.

Since then at least 250 fighters from four villages have joined him. They call themselves the "National Uprising Movement". Clad in traditional shalwar kameez, turbans and sporting sunglasses, they look like Taliban fighters.

Local children perch on mud walls to watch them ride through the area on motorcycles. An elderly man with a long grey beard hugs Khamran and holds up the radio that allows him to act as a lookout for the group.

"I am happy to give up my life and my wealth for them," he says.

Just because they are fighting the Taliban does not mean the movement supports the government, Khamran explains. He says the government helped launch night raids against the people, and did nothing to improve their lives.

"For the past 10 years, our school, our clinic, our road, our hospital, our bazaar everything was closed. We feel like we are slaves. No one cares about us - not the government, not the Taliban, so the only choice we had was to start an uprising," he says.

Over a month ago, he says the movement captured about 17 Taliban fighters, which the Taliban confirmed. Khamran claims they are Pakistani. The Taliban says they are Afghans from Paktia and Khost provinces. Whatever their provenance, Khamran says they could be valuable in any eventual negotiation.

The fighting has intensified in recent weeks. The Taliban came into one village and burned a local house. An elderly woman says she begged the Taliban to search the house, because no one was inside. The Taliban ignored her, doused the property with fuel and set it ablaze.

She burned her feet trying to save the Quran. She wasn't able to get to the religious books inside. National Uprising fighters showed a trunk full of ashes.

The Taliban spokesman says the Taliban is aware of the group and would like to avoid any bloodshed because former Taliban fighters are among the movement. The Taliban says it has sent a delegation to negotiate, and has punished members who burned down a village house. The Taliban also claims the group is a project engineered by the American embassy and top government officials in Kabul. It says the injured fighters go to government hospitals.

Khamran denies any connection to the government or to the Americans and insists he would fight with the Taliban if it would let the villagers go about their lives unhindered. He calls the government corrupt, and says the only reason his fighters have not moved against it is that the government has left them alone.

In the village mosque, the men gather to voice their support for the new movement. Juma Gul's 30-year-old son died in the fighting, leaving behind five small children. Gul is undaunted.

"One of my sons became a martyr," he said. "I brought four more to fight and I will keep fighting until we are all dead. I will definitely continue this battle because we are being oppressed."

Even so, the men themselves question whether their fledgling uprising is a long-term solution to bring stability, security and prosperity to their lives. But after a decade of being ignored and feeling left behind, they say fighting for their rights is their only option.