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## Fearing post-2014 environment, Afghans buy up weapons

By HEATH DRUZIN

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A gun dealer sells hunting rifles at Kabul's Mandayi Market Sunday. While these weapons are legal the price of black market arms has skyrocketed in Afghanistan, as warlords and insurgent groups stockpile weapons ahead of the 2014 deadline for international combat troops to leave Afghanistan.

If you're in the market for an AK-47 here, better save your Afghanis: The price of weapons in Afghanistan has more than doubled as insurgents, warlords, politicians and regular Afghans stockpile weapons for a post-NATO future many fear will devolve into violence, or even civil war.

In the past three years, the black market price of an AK-47, the weapon of choice for Afghan fighters of all stripes, has gone up from between \$600 to \$700 to as much as \$1,500 for a new rifle, and prices for pistols, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and PK machine guns have kept pace, according to weapons dealers and a Taliban commander interviewed for this article.

The demand is so high for rifles that some weapons dealers are now going door to door to ask villagers if they're willing to part with their guns.

While insurgent groups like such as the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami, warlords and members of parliaments may have different ideologies, a Kabul province weapons dealer says they are all stockpiling weapons for the same simple reason.

"They are looking to have power after the foreign forces leave," said Malik, who would only use his first name.

Malik has sold weapons since the early days of the Taliban regime, when an AK-47 often sold for less than \$100 in Afghanistan. During those relatively peaceful days, he was smuggling weapons from Afghanistan to the lawless tribal regions of Pakistan. Now, most of the arms traffic is coming the other direction.

The vast majority of weapons sales are illegal in Afghanistan and gun owners are supposed to be licensed, but it's not hard to find a gun in a country left awash in weapons following the Soviet war, and where an AK-47 is an ordinary feature of many rural households.

Most of the Kalashnikovs are of Soviet vintage, along with Chinese, Egyptian, Bulgarian and newer Russian models. Anything Russian or Soviet is coveted for reliability, a notion reinforced, weapons dealers say, by a persistent rumor that the American military has technology that melts the barrels of Chinese, Egyptian and Bulgarian AKs but doesn't harm the Russian models.

The weapons come largely from open weapons markets in Pakistan's tribal areas, where the government has little sway. While the black market trade is largely driven by weapons left over from the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan that spanned the 1980s, weapons dealers estimate that at least one-third of the rifles sold in the country came from the Afghan military — either soldiers selling their weapons or rifles pilfered or taken off dead Afghan troops by insurgents.

At Landi Kotal, an infamous Pakistani weapons market near the Afghan border, it's even possible to buy Western rifles, such as the M-16, that NATO forces have issued to Afghan troops, Malik said.

"When you go to (Landi Kotal) market you will be shocked when you see American weapons, British weapons, and French weapons out there," Malik said.

With snow already blanketing the mountains and the long, cold Afghan winter setting in, fighting has hit its seasonal lull here and the impact of this arms binge is unlikely to be felt before next

summer, when fighters pour back over the Pakistan border, and in the coming years, as insurgents and warlords alike jockey for power ahead of the international withdrawal.

The quickened pace of weapons don't bode well for a post-NATO Afghanistan, indicating that the country's innumerable factions are preparing for turf wars likely to play out when the central government loses its main protector, international troops, said Joseph Trevithick, defense analyst at [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org).

"I think it's an indicator that things may well rapidly go back to what they were before," he said.

Trevithick said curbing the weapons trade in Afghanistan would be a difficult, long-term project beyond the scope of the current NATO mission, and that any efforts interdict black market weapons are likely to be highly localized and temporary.

"It might stop in one particular place that day," he said.

Sediq Sediqqi, spokesman for the Ministry of Interior, whose national police are tasked with curtailing illegal weapons sales, acknowledged that Afghanistan's long border with Pakistan makes it a challenge to stem illicit weapons sales, but denied that Afghans are stockpiling arms and disputed the assertion that any Afghan troops are selling their rifles.

"If we find anyone who is involved in this he will be prosecuted but we have had no such case (of soldiers selling weapons)," he said.

Officials with the international military mission in Afghanistan would not comment on efforts to fight the trade in illicit weapons, directing questions to the Afghan government.

In addition to a rush to stockpile weapons, aerial patrols of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border by NATO forces has made weapons smuggling more dangerous, further driving up prices, said Mullah Saleh Mohammad, a midlevel Taliban commander in Helmand province. Mohammad said the Taliban has been stockpiling weapons as they put more fighters in the field to match the build up of the Afghan security forces ahead of the 2014 deadline to withdraw international combat troops.

"Since 2014 is coming and the government is trying to increase training and increasing the size of the Afghan security forces, the Taliban is changing our techniques, too, which is why we are now increasing the number of fighters," he said. "We need more weapons for them."

Civilians, too, are increasingly stocking up on weapons, with many fearing increased violence between insurgents, warlords, and government forces, after international troops leave, said Mangal Ahmadzai, a weapons dealer in volatile Logar province.

"There is still a fear that people like (former militia leaders Abdul Rashid) Dostum and Atta Mohammad Nur will fight the Taliban, who are getting powerful in the South," he said. "In Helmand province, the day the foreigners leave, the next day there will be Taliban (in control)."

Shukrullah, a driver for a nongovernmental organization in Kabul who, like many Afghans, goes by only one name, said he recently bought a Makarov pistol for protection.

“The current situation in the country is not something you can count on,” he said, “and I’ve been thinking for a while of having something in the house to defend myself.”