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Iran Again Accused of Trying to Halt Afghan Dam

By Shapoor Saber in Herat

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Police official says he has credible evidence that Taliban chief opposed to Salma Dam is funded by Iranians. Tehran has again been accused of attempting to stop work on an Indian-funded dam project in western Afghanistan, which would reduce the flow of river water into Iran. The fresh allegations, by a police battalion commander protecting the Salma Dam, follow the Taliban killing of a local Afghan district official who was promoting the project. Last October, a member of the Afghan parliament reportedly charged Iran with trying to sabotage it. The dam on the Hari Rud river, funded by a 150 million US dollars grant from the government of India, is located in the district of Chesht-e-Sharif, 180 kilometres east of Herat city and well away from the border with Iran.

Once completed, it will provide irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland and generate electricity. But Iran will lose the unfettered use of the water now flowing to it from the Hari Rud river.

When the governor of Chesht-e-Sharif district, Abdulqudus Qayam, was killed along with five security officials in mid-January, the Afghan media called it an insurgent attack. The Taliban accepted responsibility, but many in Herat saw it as part of a wider problem the province is having with Iran.

Qayam had been instrumental in pushing the construction of the Salma Dam, according to Gulbuddin, head of the police battalion guarding the project.

Herat has long been hailed as one of the most stable and secure provinces in Afghanistan. It is relatively prosperous, having profited from the long stewardship of Ismail Khan, who ruled the area in the early 1990s and again from 2001-2003.

Khan was famous for keeping the bulk of Herat's customs revenues in the province, refusing to send them to the central coffers. But once Khan was called to Kabul as minister for water and energy in 2004, Herat's fortunes began to decline.

Over the last few years, security has also been deteriorating, with the eastern part of the province becoming increasingly unstable.

"Abdulqudus, the late governor of Chesht-e-Sharif district, was a hardworking man who tried his best to construct the Salma Dam," Gulbuddin said. "But those who wanted to destroy the project killed him."

According to Gulbuddin, a man called Mirza had called government officials to claim responsibility for the attack. Mirza is a fugitive in the mountains around Chesht-e-Sharif, and has been in contact with the Taleban, Gulbuddin said.

The police battalion commander said he had evidence that a local Taleban commander opposed to the dam was being funded by Iranians.

"A member of the armed opposition called Mullah Mustafa is trying to stop the Salma Dam," Gulbuddin said. "He has about 200 men in the area."

Gulbuddin insisted that he had credible information that elements in Iran were providing money to this band to stop the construction project.

"Mullah Mustafa has promised Iran that he will succeed in halting work on the Salma Dam," he said.

The consulate of Iran in Herat declined to comment on the allegations and the Iranian embassy in Kabul could not be contacted. An Iranian embassy spokesman in London also could not be reached.

It is not the first time that Iran has been accused of meddling in Afghanistan's affairs. Numerous reports have surfaced over the past few years about Iran's alleged support for insurgents in the border region - claims Iranian officials have strenuously denied.

While predominantly Shia Iran would seem to be an unusual partner for the overwhelmingly Sunni Taleban, observers have suggested that Iran may think that by keeping the United States pinned down in Afghanistan it will be unable to direct its full attention to Iran.

Last year, parliamentarian Najibullah Kabuli accused Iran of interfering in the construction of the Salma Dam.

“We want to stop water from flowing into Iran and Pakistan,” he told a protest meeting in Kabul last October. “Every Iranian is benefiting from the water but not the Afghans who have the right to it.”

According to Pajhwok Afghan News, Kabuli alleged that Iran was intent on stopping the construction, which was the reason why construction workers on the project had been repeatedly attacked.

Senior security officials are much more cautious in their assessments, however.

"We cannot say anything unless we have authentic documents about involvement of neighbouring countries in such cases," said General Ekramuddin Yawar, police commander for western Afghanistan.

But Ahmad Ghani Khesrawi, a lecturer at Herat University, believes that interference from neighbouring countries has been one of the biggest problems Afghanistan has faced over the past three decades of war.

“Whenever a big project has been proposed or implemented in Afghanistan, our neighbours have tried to stop it, or put obstacles in front of it, even if it damages them politically or economically,” he said.

“The construction of Salma Dam has been a particular focus of Iran’s. If the dam is completed, Afghanistan’s dependence on Iran will be reduced; Iran will also suffer from loss of water. There is no doubt that Iran is against the Salma Dam.”

Khesrawi faults the Afghan government for failing to take action.

His complaint is echoed by local people. Ibrahim, 26, a resident of Herat, said, “Since the day that construction began on Salma Dam, not only governors but construction workers, engineers, and security police have been killed,” he said.

“Iran’s hostility towards Afghanistan is as clear as day, and I do not know why our government is acting deaf and dumb.”