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Suicide attack in Afghanistan's north signals broader reach of Taliban

By Tom A. Peter

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An Afghan Taliban suicide bomber killed at least 31 people today in Afghanistan's northern Kunduz Province. The north has long been devoid of the Taliban's influence.

Kabul - A suicide bomber attacked a crowd of Aghans waiting to get government identification cards and other official documents today, killing at least 31 people in the north's traditionally quiet Kunduz Province. The bombing underscores the expanding reach of insurgents and may signal that grievances against the local government are pushing more people into the arms of the Taliban.

The Taliban have claimed responsibility for Monday's attack, which took place in the Imam Sahib district. It comes little more than a week after the district governor of the nearby Chardara district was assassinated in a targeted Taliban attack.

While such attacks are not uncommon throughout Afghanistan's more restive areas, areas such as Kunduz that have long been devoid of the Islamic militant group's influence. With top commander Gen. David Petraeus warning that the growing insurgency in the northern region may prolong fighting in Afghanistan, today's attack is likely to put the problems of the north into sharper focus for NATO and the Afghan government.

Discrimination against Pashtuns raises tensions

The insurgency's northward expansion is often explained as the result of militants trying to escape the intensified NATO and Afghan military push in the south and east. However, it may have much more to do with mounting ethnic tensions and the exclusion of Pashtuns from the political system there.

The problems are largely internal, and sending more NATO forces is unlikely to change the situation, say most locals. Any solution will require a concerted effort by the Afghan government to restore the peace.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, many Pashtuns in the north say they were ready to work with the government. The Taliban, however, are an almost exclusively Pashtun organization and many people nationwide turned against Pashtuns regardless of their support or affiliation with the militant outfit.

In the north, where Uzbeks and Tajiks are the majority ethnic groups, Pashtuns faced the most discrimination. Pashtuns were largely excluded from any significant positions in local government and in some instances forced off their land.

"The government is not treating the Pashtuns well and they are not happy. This is the way they come to give support to the Taliban," says Moeen Marastial, a member of parliament from Kunduz Province. "If they are not happy with the local government in the north, naturally they will support those who are against the government. It's not just in Afghanistan, it's like this everywhere in the world."

Pashtuns lose hope in government, turn to Taliban

In northern Afghanistan's Takhar Province, Arabab Zahir says that he and about 480 of his fellow Pashtun villagers are on the verge of turning against the government and supporting the Taliban.

After spending nearly a quarter of a century in a refugee camp in Pakistan, Mr. Zahir decided to return to his home in the north of Afghanistan. The United Nations assured him and other villagers that the government would help them with the resettlement process.

When they arrived, the district governor urged them to stay the night in a compound before returning to their village in the morning. Unbeknownst to them, the compound was a prison, and the refugees say that the district governor and Kazikabeer, an Uzbek warlord, kept them locked in it for more than a month, daily threatening them and telling them to leave the province.

In their absence, Mr. Kazikabeer had divided up the Pashtun refugees' land among his supporters, none of whom intended to return it to the original owners.

Four years after their unwelcome return, the refugees are free to come and go from the prison, but with no place else to go, they now live in the jailhouse. A government court ordered the

return of their lands about eight months ago, but the local government says it is unable to enforce the decision.

“If this situation continues much longer, I think all of us will be forced to fight the government,” says Zahir. “I believe that Pashtuns all over the north have faced the same situation and that is why they’re now in the Taliban.”

Local militias rise to protect ethnic groups

In addition to land disputes like Zahir’s, local governments began raising militia groups to supplement security in the region. The militias are composed almost exclusively of members of the same ethnic group and tend to be loyal to that group alone.

During the parliamentary elections this fall, Pashtuns in the north complained that Uzbek and Tajik militias stopped them from reaching the polls. Now there is only one Pashtun member of parliament for the 11 northern provinces.

“When one is ignored like this and doesn’t hold any positions in the government, the enemy will benefit from the situation and work with the minority,” says Asadullah Omar Khel, a tribal leader in the Chahar Dara district of Kunduz Province. “If the situation keeps going like this, I’m afraid there will be a war between the different parties and ethnic groups.”

Unlike the south, where NATO and Afghan government forces have experienced the heaviest resistance, the problem in the north is mostly an internal power struggle. Without serious action on the part of the Afghan government, a number of northerners say they worry that the situation could spiral down into another civil war.

“I think the foreigners will not be able to solve this problem, it needs an internal solution from inside Afghanistan,” says Mohammed Awrang, a Tajik member of parliament from Badakshan province. “The Afghan sides should try hard to reconcile with the Taliban. This is the only solution for this cancer that has overtaken our country.”