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European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

McClatchy Newspapers

U.S. plan to arm Afghan militia founders on tribal rivalries

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April 27, 2010

ACHIN, Afghanistan — The detritus of tribal war litters the road that leads into this quiet mountain hamlet in eastern Afghanistan. The charred bodies of vehicles and the skeletal remains of destroyed houses fill the desert that flanks the road. Most of the shops in the main bazaar are shuttered, and some residents have packed up and left.

Achin district, a home of the Shinwari tribe, is part of an ambitious countrywide U.S. push to fund tribal militias to stand against the Taliban and stabilize the violence-plagued region. A months-long feud between Shinwari clans has brought Achin to a standstill, however, threatening to undermine the effort and illustrating the difficulties in enlisting tribes to combat the insurgency.

The initiative encourages tribes and other community groups in a number of areas around the country to defend their territory from the Taliban. A similar effort in Iraq is widely credited with diminishing the violence there.

The groups don't receive weapons — which already are plentiful in Afghanistan — but U.S. Special Operations Forces provide money and in some cases training. The militias are meant to complement uniformed Afghan forces and Western troops.

Locals say that tribal dynamics complicate such initiatives, however. "We want to solve the Taliban problem, but not cause a whole series of other problems in the process," said Moyen Shah, the deputy head of the provincial council, which helps govern the eastern province of Nangarhar.

The drive began last summer in the rugged, mountainous district of Achin. Insurgents and smugglers regularly crossed the nearby Pakistani border into the area, which consists of a small bazaar and clusters of homes behind mud-brick walls.

In July, two Shinwari leaders raised a militia to attack these insurgents. The tribal force killed a key Taliban commander and expelled a small band of insurgent fighters from its territory.

The rare uprising sparked a series of meetings between some tribal leaders and U.S. troops, according to Shinwari elders, after which the leaders pledged early this year to bar the Taliban from Achin.

It was one of the clearest anti-Taliban stances that any Afghan tribe had taken in recent years. "If we catch anyone harboring Taliban, we will fine him and burn down his house," said Malek Osman, one of the elders who made the pledge. "The Shinwaris are a huge tribe. We can make a major difference."

U.S. military officials rewarded the tribe with $200,000 and promised more development funds to come.

With the funds and newfound prestige, however, came infighting. Like most other Afghan tribes, the Shinwari are subdivided into a tangle of clans and sub-clans, each with its own leaders. Only one of the clans, the Shobli, had made the pledge against the Taliban.

"We haven't participated in that decision," said Muhammad Nabi, an Achin resident and member of another Shinwari clan, the Ali Sher Khel. "Those tribal elders don't represent us, and they don't speak for all Shinwaris." A number of others who were interviewed agreed with this sentiment.

Shortly after the decision to expel the Taliban was announced, the Ali Sher Khel claimed that the Shobli had occupied part of their land on the outskirts of the Achin bazaar, and launched an attack. Thirteen people were killed and 35 injured, and most of the houses there were reduced to rubble.

Many Shobli fled, leaving behind smoldering ruins and heightened tensions. Locals said life still hadn't returned to normal. "Look around," Achin resident Abdul Habib said, pointing to a gaunt, nearly deserted central bazaar. "There is fear everywhere. The (clans) don't trust each other and they think fighting will start again at any minute."

The Shobli that remain in the area don't patrol or otherwise attempt to enforce the Taliban ban, for fear that it would further stoke tensions. Moreover, the police rarely venture far from the

main bazaar into the patchwork of farms and orchards in the countryside or the nearby barren flatland, where many Ali Sher Khel live.

As a result, the Taliban still roam openly in parts of Achin, according to locals and government officials.

Tensions also are brewing between Shobli elders and the Afghan government. "The government is made up of thieves and mafia men," Osman said. "We prefer to work for the Americans."

The Afghan government, in turn, is wary of tribal groups that are beyond its control, something that it said could undermine the development of the national army and police. Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, the Nangarhar provincial spokesman, said the government aimed to incorporate the tribal militias into the Afghan police force.

North of here, in the northern province of Kunduz, a multiethnic area that has a large Taliban presence in the Pashtun regions, dozens of militias have sprouted recently. Many of their commanders are former warlords who participated in Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s and were disarmed in the years after the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2001, only to rearm in recent months. In some areas — particularly those without large Pashtun populations — locals report that the militias have been reducing the Taliban threat.

In other parts of Kunduz, however, locals say that the new militias are even worse than the Taliban are. In the district of Imam Sahib, a militia leader known as Commander Nizam is widely accused of crimes that include looting and rape.

"His people stopped our bus one night," recalled Fardin Rasouli, a businessman from the area, "and took all of our money, even the jewelry from the women. During the day these people are supposedly providing security, but during the night they become thieves."

Kunduz government officials acknowledged that Nizam and other militias occasionally crossed the line. "There have been some complaints about the militias," said Mohebullah Saidi, a spokesman for Kunduz province. "Members of the suspected militias have been arrested, and there is an investigation ongoing."

Still, he said that the militias were needed until the government could field its own effective security force. U.S. Special Operations Forces are widely thought to have provided money to Nizam and other commanders, but neither side would comment on the issue.

Military officials say that the use of militias is subordinated to the development of Afghan security forces. The "over-reliance on tribal- or community-based security can promote instability or abuses of power that are associated with warlordism," said U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Thomas Porter, a spokesman with the international forces. "At the same time, we've learned that it's not productive to work against the grain of Afghan culture, which means respecting the existing system of tribal and communal ties."

Nonetheless, it's no surprise that governments are wary of any plan to arm the militias.

"We have a dangerous history in this country with militias," Abdulzai said, referring to the country's civil war, in which thousands died as a result of warring militias. "We need to learn from that experience and make sure we don't repeat the same mistakes."