The Age

In the realm of the warlord

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Matiullah Khan: "If you do good, the people start making allegations against you."

ON A HOT Afghan morning, The Saturday Age steps past a child's upturned tricycle, and around a dilapidated armoured vehicle. A vulture carefully watches as we head inside to speak with the man some call the King of Oruzgan.

As Western faith in President Hamid Karzai's capacity to deliver government fades, and with NATO increasingly relying on sometimes brutal allies to fight the insurgency, the Gillard government's strategy is anchored by a man who is more feared, more effective and more active in Oruzgan province than the central government.

Far from the stereotype of the tubby and grizzled Soviet-era warlord, Matiullah Khan is in his mid-30s, a thin and wiry 1.9 metres, softly spoken and has a neatly trimmed beard.

In a country where the average yearly wage is less than $1000, this semi-literate man has - according to Australian government sources - earned more than $45 million from NATO and others, with many overt and covert streams of payments that inextricably link Australia's fate to his.

He is paid for his fighters to work with the US and Australia, he makes millions charging high prices for security on key roads used by coalition supply trucks, and he cashes in on fuel contracts and major construction projects often run by the civilian arms of Western governments.

None of this makes him unique. NATO is wedded to such warlords. As one Australian government source says, "there are 1000 Matiullah Khans". Men with murky pasts, these leaders are a new generation, exploiting tribal links to wield great power in a country where Western concepts such as governance, and even national identity, wither in the heat of tribal loyalties, patronage networks, and corrosive corruption.

"His wealth is great but he [Matiullah] is not alone in Afghanistan," says Susanne Schmeidl, from think tank The Liaison Office in Oruzgan.

"There are many like him making the same money, including in government, and that is part of the problem."

Matiullah holds no formal government position, and no operational command in the regular police force, yet he regularly meets Karzai and others in Kabul. The Saturday Age has learnt that Australian officials have canvassed him many times about possible positions within the Afghan government.

Crucially, the US blocked Australia's recent recommendation that he be appointed chief of police. That may be one reason why, as The Saturday Age has discovered, Australian soldiers and officials have been denied access to secret US intelligence assessments on Washington's plans for Matiullah.

But Australia's relationship with Matiullah is far from straight forward. In some government agencies, there is a feeling that Canberra's attentions have helped elevate him too far, and too much time has been spent skirting around his feared corruption.

Independent analysts have previously reported claims that Matiullah has planned the assassination of rivals, and been involved in acts of extortion, killings, arrest, harassment and

even torture against others who try to muscle in on his business - some of the reasons Dutch troops have refused to work with him.

The Saturday Age understands that the government is aware of Matiullah's likely involvement in corruption, and the potential criminality of many of the 2000 or more fighters he can call on. Despite this, it is believed that Canberra is considering whether Matiullah should be recommended for a yet-to-be-created senior Afghan government position.

SINCE an unflattering New York Times article last year, it has been hard for journalists to get inside the large, well-guarded mud-brick compound that lies less than half-a-kilometre from the main US and Australian military base. As we stand at the compound's metal boom-gate, Matiullah finally answers a call after we use a phone that, unusually for Afghanistan, blocks the caller's identity.

He is surprised and a little annoyed that we are here without an appointment. But he orders his guards to let us in. Australians who have dealt with him say he is casually dismissive of the death threats he often receives, something that impresses many.

However, he is careful; his guards are Uzbeks, unconnected to anyone else in Oruzgan, and they travel with him everywhere.

Inside - one Australian soldier describes it as a "nice pad" - thin toshaks, or cushions, line the parquetry walls and a patchwork of blood-red Iranian woollen carpets covers the floor.

Matiullah arrives 10 minutes after our call, dressed in a black and red embroidered skullcap, waistcoat and shalwar kameez - a long shirt that drops below the knees over baggy pants. The only furniture in this room is a wooden and glass cabinet with photos and certificates - tributes from the US, Australia and the Afghan government.

He is polite, but he begins with his scathing opinion of reporters. "There's no trust," is his unusually aggressive opening. "If a house is full of good things and a journalist finds out a tiny bad thing in the whole room, he will write [only] about that."

As tea is served, Matiullah starts to relax a little. He confirms discussing the possibility of being made Oruzgan's chief of police. "They mentioned it, but I don't want to do this, it's not enjoyable. All the officials of this government are thieves," he says.

Australian officials maintain that he did want the job. But those who met him complain that at the time they "lacked situational awareness" - they didn't know the details of America's current strategy for him or the US view of his future role.

Significantly, the move was opposed by the recently departed US commander of all forces in Oruzgan, Colonel Jim Creighton. He responds with one-word answers and chooses his words carefully. No, he didn't want Matiullah to become police chief and, yes, he agrees Matiullah is not suitable for that role.

"The final decision was not a coalition decision, it was an Afghan decision," he says. But he adds that Matiullah still has a role to play: "I clearly believe that he is part of the solution; we need to continue to build the relationship in order to make sure that he's doing the right thing."

Matiullah's potential promotion is also thought to have been opposed by outgoing US ambassador Karl Eikenberry. Last year, a US diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks, showed the ambassador had warned against supporting a similar powerbroker, General Razik in Kandahar, who this month was finally made chief of police of that province. "In ascribing unaccountable authority to Razik, the coalition unintentionally reinforces his position through its direct and near-exclusive dealings with him on all major issues", the ambassador wrote.

Yet it is men such as these that NATO is forced to rely upon as countries, including Australia, prepare for "transition" - the withdrawal of troops planned to begin in 2014. "From a security and exit point of view, Matiullah Khan is the man," says analyst Susanne Schmeidl, adding that "Razik and others" are equally important.

In the end, the reality is that Matiullah and others like him could prove to be the lesser of multiple evils. He is, at least, a known quantity.

One defence source says Australia's special forces know more about him - good and bad - than does any other government agency. Another says Matiullah "knows which side his bread is buttered on", echoing a general feeling in government that Matiullah is less involved in corruption and violence than many similar leaders of his stature in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Matiullah continues to draw power from the chaos around him, influencing the lives of the people of Oruzgan and beyond. He has his own radio station, is building schools and has founded about 70 mosques, funded by businesses that the Australian government estimates have

given him a retained wealth of about $25 million.

It is not just his wealth that earns respect. "Even without the money," one soldier says, "he earns respect because he's a charmer and he's the toughest guy around."

Matiullah is a potent resource, able to call up dozens of armed men within half an hour. And he is a genuine enemy of the Taliban, who are believed to have killed members of his family. As well, he is genuinely in Australia's debt, after the military called in an air strike to help him and his men out of a battle with insurgents.

He has been called on to resolve disputes and even gunfights between the Afghan police and the army - showing up the government by doing what it cannot.

He is also directly involved in the tough battles that are now shaping Afghanistan's future. Targeting the tactical commanders of the insurgency is a major part of the US strategy, and for this to happen on "an industrial scale", Australia's special forces need their Afghan partners - Matiullah's men.

Not confined to Oruzgan, they travel on American and British helicopters, fighting alongside Australian special forces where NATO's military is most active; the neighbouring southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, where two Australian special forces soldiers were recently killed. Sources say Matiullah's men have saved many Australian lives.

In the compound, Matiullah addresses allegations that he and his men have been involved in human rights abuses.

"You know, it's people's habits, no one can keep their mouth shut. People say bad things about [President Karzai], people say bad things about your leaders. I have a certificate that I observe human rights. Why would I have been given that otherwise?"

He directs his aide to retrieve the certificate from the cabinet.

Matiullah says he is simply a victim of his own success in having helped to increase security in the province.

"If you do good, the people start making allegations against you." He smiles with a sense of deep satisfaction, then nods repeatedly. "The local people have told me they are thankful, but not the government officials."

MATIULLAH'S compound is central to his efforts to win over locals and foreigners. He encourages children to play in his yard, people seek judgments on local grievances, and we speak to some of the 300 needy women who come to his house each Thursday night. They are given 500 afghanis (about $A10) or cooking materials such as oil and rice.

From under green or blue burqas, each of the women explain the tragic path that has left them destitute and forced to beg: a husband killed by the foreigners, a heroin-addicted husband or an only son killed by the Taliban. Among a group of 12, 35-year-old Saki Jan describes Matiullah as a "very good man", eliciting a concert of approving nods from the others. "Nobody else helps," the mother-of-seven says. "My husband is too old to work. I had six daughters, one son, and he was killed. We are just living from this," she says pointing to Matiullah's compound. "Without him, my heart is broken."

The coalition, too, has beaten a path to this house many times. Canberra's ambassador to Afghanistan, Paul Foley, has stayed here - despite the Australian military base being nearby.

It is a telling sign of Matiullah's influence that the other guest that night was Oruzgan's governor, Muhammad Omar Shirzad - a local official said to impress Australia with his honesty and integrity. The symbolism was telling; emissaries from two governments coming to Matiullah. Told this had led to criticism by rival tribal leaders, Matiullah gets animated. "The ambassador was my guest. The governor was also my guest. Who is angry? Maybe it's jealousy."

For now, Australian officials acknowledge they will have to put up with Matiullah's power and prestige draining support away from the Afghan government. For instance, he sometimes poaches the best local policeman with better wages.

And right now there is tension with the man who took the job he wanted, the new Chief of Police, Fazil Ahmad Shirzad, who is seen by the Australian government as a decent administrator, trying to "clean house".

At the moment, however, Matiullah is the strongest force in Oruzgan - and that means Australia must work with him.

Concluding the interview, he offers a warning. "If you say wrong about me, you will have 300,000 enemies in Oruzgan."

Last year's New York Times article criticising him was reprinted by a local newspaper, leading to demonstrations.

Matiullah uses the incident to deliver a final caution, alluding also to the minar, a two-storey traffic tower in the bazaar of Tarin Kowt, the town at the centre of Australia's strategy in Afghanistan.

"Everyone was looking for the American reporter. [He] had to escape from here. I hope he doesn't come back, otherwise I will hang him from the minar."

He is laughing as he sees us out of his compound.