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Afghans fear infiltration from Iran

By Zia Ahmadi and Mustafa Saber
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HERAT - Islam Qala, a small border town that forms the gateway between Iran and Afghanistan, is a focus of concern for Afghan officials fighting the Taliban insurgency because some believe Iran is using it to infiltrate guerrillas intent on destabilizing the Kabul government.



"I was working in Iran for about eight months," said one man, a former refugee, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "But I got an offer from the Taliban in Gozara district [of Herat province] offering me a higher salary, so I accepted."

Once he had crossed the border into Afghanistan, he said Pakistanis and Iranians based in the hills of Pashtun Zarghon district, the site of a growing insurgency, gave him military training.

For four months, the man said he participated in armed attacks on behalf of the Taliban in the Gozara and Pashtun Zarghon districts, and received a monthly salary of 20,000-30,000 Pakistani rupees (US\$240 to \$360).

"We struck security posts in the villages of Toot, Siyawooshan and Injel, as well as carrying out attacks on foreign military convoys," he said.

Now he is happily settled in civilian life, having been awarded a certificate by the Peace and Reconciliation Commission - an Afghan body established in 2005 as a mechanism for engaging with insurgents - that records his decision to lay down his arms.

Border police officials in Islam Qala say that more than 100 Afghans return from Iran daily. Many lack refugee documents or other identity cards to prove their Afghan citizenship and there is no adequate process to check them, which leads to many undesirables passing through, they say.

"Dozens of refugees are deported from Iran every day," said Abdullah Achakzai, a border police officer who works at the Islam Qala checkpoint. "We have caught Arab and Iranian citizens trying to enter Afghanistan without the proper documentation and have turned them over to the National Directorate of Security, NDS. But we cannot check everybody so carefully. We do not have enough officers, or the right equipment."

Officials fear that Islam Qala is being used as an infiltration point by potential guerrillas, whether they are returning Afghans or foreign citizens trying to conceal their identities.

"One of these refugees told us that Iranian troops at the Sang-e-Safed military base said that Afghanistan is under American occupation," Achakzai said. "They asked him to fight against America when he went back to Afghanistan."

Achakzai said the border police had recently stopped an Iranian citizen posing as an Afghan refugee. "He had maps with him of Herat airport and other documents concerning the 207th Zafar [Afghan National Army] corps."

Haji Sher Ahmad, who owns a hotel in Islam Qala, told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting that many foreigners had stayed there recently.

"Several men who were speaking Arabic, and had apparently been deported from Iran, came to my hotel and stayed several nights," he said. "They asked for the best rooms, and ordered the most expensive food. I contacted the police, but they did not do anything."

An employee of the Bamyān Chahr Fasel Hotel in Herat city said that over the past year, several people had come to the hotel introducing themselves as Afghan refugees returning from Iran, but were in fact speaking Arabic among themselves.

"After staying a few nights, they went off someplace," said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We recently found a suitcase of one of the 'repatriates' that had been forgotten at the hotel. When we opened it, it was full of maps and other documents. We gave it to the NDS."

Police officials in Herat say that many foreigners who support the insurgency in western Afghanistan have entered the country illegally through checkpoints like Islam Qala.

"Two Iranian citizens were arrested during a police operation against anti-government

militants in Gozara district," said Ismatullah Alizai, Herat police chief. "We turned them over to the NDS for further investigation."

According to Alizai, more than 50 foreigners, among them Pakistanis, Chechens and Iranians, had been identified in the Gozara and Pashtun Zarghon districts. They are suspected of supporting the insurgency.

"Many terrorist attacks are organized by foreigners in Herat province," he said.

In Gozara district, which has seen a spike in insurgent activity over the past year, residents say that two Iranian Kurdish women had been seen in Siyawooshan village.

"I spoke with these two women," said one Gozara resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They were over 30 years old. They told me that Afghanistan has been invaded by America, and it is the duty of every Muslim man and woman to devote their lives to the liberation of this Muslim land."

Parliamentarian Mohammad Daud Sultanzoy said he had seen reports indicating that foreign militants who are cooperating with the Taliban often enter Afghanistan posing as refugees being repatriated.

"If the Afghan border police cannot control the borders, it is undeniable that the influence of foreigners who support the anti-government militants will grow," he said.

He recommended that the number of border police be increased, so that no refugee without the proper documentation would be able to enter the country.

Officials at the Iranian consulate in Herat said the country deports only Afghans who do not have proper documentation. They dismissed any suggestion that they were encouraging or allowing Pakistanis, Chechens or other foreign citizens to enter Afghanistan as Afghan refugees.

But in early October, Afghan speculation about Iranian intentions was further fueled when local people say Iran temporarily relaxed its border restrictions and allowed hundreds of undocumented Afghans to cross the border into Iran.

According to Colonel Hamidullah Sarhadi, the quartermaster of the border police in Herat, close to 2,000 Afghans were allowed to enter Iran during a two-day period.

Some Afghans fear Iran is deliberately attracting energetic young people so that they can be indoctrinated and sent back to Afghanistan to fight the Americans.

"With the use of Afghan refugees, Iran is paving the way for opposition against the Afghan government," said Khalil Ahmad Amiri, 30, a resident of Herat city.

But Iranian border officials deny that their frontier was opened. According to the Iranian consulate in Herat, the country already has close to one million registered Afghans in the country, along with another million who have entered illegally. In past years, Iran has embarked on a campaign to expel illegal Afghan refugees, sometimes as many as 500 per day, creating huge problems on the Afghan side of the border.

Some Afghan commentators have poured cold water on the speculation around the reported relaxation of border restrictions. "It is too early to say that Iran is going to use these Afghans for military purposes," said political expert Ahmad Saeedi.

Saeedi thinks a more subtle Iranian opposition to the United States and the Afghan government could have been the reason behind the alleged move.

"Iran wants to show its sympathy to the Afghans, who have suffered so much as a result of Iranian deportation. It wants to gain a political, social and economic advantage in Afghanistan because of its opposition to the United States," he said.

Basir Begzad, a political analyst in Herat, suggests that the reported frontier opening was an attempt to undermine confidence in the Kabul authorities and the international community. "They want to show the world that Afghans are not happy with the current government and the foreign forces, and that they run away as soon as they get the chance," he said.