

Massoud Ready To Fight On Eurasia Insight

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Despite significant military setbacks in recent weeks, Afghanistan's United Front leader Ahmad Shah Massoud is confident that he can hold the present frontline against further Taliban advances, at least until winter snows by end October makes fighting more difficult. Contrary to press reports his supply lines from Tajikistan to Badakhshan, the last major province under his control, are still open.

In his first interview since the Taliban offensive in north eastern Afghanistan began in August, Massoud said Pakistan had sent two brigades and an artillery battalion to help the Taliban capture Taloqan which fell on September 5. "I advise Musharraf to read the history of Afghanistan to know the fate of British and Soviet invasions of Afghanistan - the Pakistani invasion will have the same destiny as its predecessors,"

Massoud said. "The resistance needs the support of the international community to stop the Pakistani intervention, he added. Although there is a heavy presence of Pakistani advisers and thousands of Pakistani Islamic militants, there is no evidence of Pakistani troops being involved. Pakistan vehemently denies Massoud's charges. Islamabad believes a pliant Taliban regime in Afghanistan will give it "strategic depth" in any future war with India, while a Taliban victory will ensure that the international community recognizes the Taliban government with Islamabad acting as broker, thereby ending its present diplomatic isolation.

Massoud, who was making his first trip from the front lines to his supply base in Dushanbe since Taloqan fell, said, "forty percent of the Taliban's 15,000 troops on the Taloqan front

are made up of foreigners, non-Afghans - this has serious consequences for the entire region." UN and Western diplomats and Western relief workers in the area say the Taliban force comprises of at least 15 nationalities, including 3,000 Pakistani Islamic students, 1,000 Arabs loyal to wanted Saudi terrorist Osama Bin Laden, several hundred troops from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and others - Philipinos, Kashmiris, Chechens and Uighurs from China's Xinjiang province.

Massoud's military strategy is to hold the present front line, which runs roughly 60 miles north and south of Taloqan along the border between Takhar and Badakhshan province. At the same he intends to bring more troops into Badakhshan to build up an offensive capacity in order to counter attack - possibly after the first snows have fallen. On October 6, Massoud met with Ismael Khan and General Rashid Dostum in the eastern Iranian city of Meshad, where they formed a common front under Massoud's command.

Massoud aides in Dushanbe said Iran has been helping Ismael Khan train a new army of some 5,000 Afghan refugees and ex-soldiers in eastern Iran, which will be flown to Tajikistan from where they will enter Afghanistan. Iran is also the main provider of arms and ammunition to Massoud and shows no signs of decreasing its support. Russian military aid does not come free and is being paid for by Massoud, although Massoud sent a senior official to Moscow last week to discuss the issue. His few Soviet era helicopters lack critical spare parts.

Massoud also controls a swathe of territory north of Kabul, his home base in the Panjshir Valley and some territory in central Afghanistan, but all these forces could be cut off if Badakhshan falls.

Massoud's major problem is the growing humanitarian crisis among his own support base in the

population. Western NGO relief workers say that after a 10-day evaluation they estimate that 90,000 refugees are sleeping rough in the mountains of Takhar and Badakhshan, while another 50,000 are being looked after by relatives and receiving food from relief agencies. Many of these refugees are steadily moving north, pushing up against the border with Tajikistan which has closed all border crossings. Some 1,000 refugees are already camped on islands in the Amu Darya river, which divides Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

If the Taliban attack Badakhshan in the next few weeks, another half a million refugees are likely to flee north. Massoud's abandonment of Taloqan was partly to avoid civilian casualties and any counter-attack he carries out will be equally hampered by his fear of causing excessive casualties among civilians in the region, who largely support his cause.

The Taliban, who control 90 percent of the country, aim to take Badakhshan before winter snows set in. They are attacking from three directions, northwards from Taloqan, eastwards from Kunduz along Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan, while a third force of some 2,000 Pakistani Islamic students have already tried once to enter Badakhshan from the east, from the Pakistani city of Chitral. The Taliban are consolidating their forces, bringing up fresh supplies of ammunition and also sending emissaries into Badakhshan to persuade and bribe local commanders to desert Massoud.

Massoud is categorically defiant that he will not leave Afghanistan, or retreat into Tajikistan. "We are very, very confident, we will not withdraw into Tajikistan," he says. But that's exactly what Tajikistan fears. 25,000 Russian troops and border guards man the nearly 1,000-mile border with Afghanistan and Tajik diplomats say they expect more Russian troops to arrive. Tajikistan, already hit by draught, severe economic problems, incursions by the IMU and political uncertainty is likely to become more dependent on Moscow in order to cope with the possible nightmare scenario of masses of refugees and/or Massoud's troops retreating into Tajikistan.

However it is clear, given Massoud's shortage of manpower and equipment, any counterattack he undertakes is unlikely to succeed in retaking major towns in the region. Massoud's strategy now depends on pushing the Taliban back to a point where another military stalemate develops over the long winter months, in the hope that international pressure and a build up of his forces will better prepare him for the spring.

If Massoud is defeated, he would continue guerrilla war against the Taliban from Tajikistan - creating further instability and widening the zone of conflict in Central Asia. A defeat would also mean that Central Asia, China and Russia lose their last buffer against the Taliban and face the prospects of sharing borders with the Taliban, while the West will have to face up to the issue of recognizing Taliban control over all Afghanistan.

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and author of the book "Taliban: Militant Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia."