

Standing By Their Guns

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

The process of disarming Afghanistan's warlord militias—the linchpin to establishing stability and rule of law before presidential elections on October 9—has been paralyzed for months. The three-year, \$300 million United Nations-Japanese plan known as DDR—disarmament, demobilization and reintegration—has made little progress. Warlords continue to terrorize local populations and defy President Hamid Karzai and the government.

“Warlords are a bigger threat than the terrorists, because you can't build state institutions or enforce rule of law or build a stable environment before the elections,” says Lt.-Gen. Rick Hillier, who heads the international security force in Kabul. “You have to create in the warlords' minds that DDR is irreversible, that you are gone.”

Most Afghans agree. “Elections without DDR are not feasible,” says Vice-President Hedayat Amin Arsala. Earlier this year, the UN and the Ministry of Defence agreed to collect all heavy weapons from the warlords and disarm 40% of their soldiers by June 30 to prevent intimidation of voters. The plan was not just to reduce militias but to disband entire units. But the process has been impeded by warlords' refusal to disarm, the lack of cooperation by Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim (see main article), the United States' reluctance to pressure warlord allies and Karzai's slowness in getting tough.

The warlords include over half a dozen regional leaders who control territory and troops. Some of them function as corps commanders nominally under the Afghanistan government but effectively independent, others entirely outside the government.

On July 20, after 10 days of negotiations with the warlords, Karzai removed three corps commanders from their posts, including Gen. Atta Mohammed, a Tajik based in Mazar-e-Sharif, who had openly defied the government in early July. In a compromise, all three were given other key jobs in their provinces.

There is not even agreement on how many militiamen there are. The UN says its original estimate of 100,000 men who have to go through DDR has been revised to around 60,000, as many unit commanders were drawing salaries for nonexistent troops. Chief of army staff Gen. Bismillah Khan, a Fahim ally, insists that the figure of 100,000 men is still correct. Karzai says the real threat comes from 20,000 men.

Meanwhile, only 30% of nearly 5,000 heavy weapons such as tanks and artillery had been collected by the June deadline. That's not including those belonging to Ismail Khan in western Afghanistan, who has not even allowed the UN to conduct a survey of his heavy weapons.

In the 10 militia corps around the country, only 12,000 men had gone through DDR as of mid-July. Two corps in Kabul and Parwan, directly under Fahim, have contributed the least to the DDR process. Of 84 military units only six, outside Fahim's control and loyal to Karzai, have actually been decommissioned.

All the major players share the blame. For months the U.S. Defence Department refused to be involved in DDR or allow U.S. forces to be used to pressure the warlords to disarm. And Karzai was slow to get tough—due to lack of American support for DDR, says a senior aide to the president. On July 14, Karzai finally passed a decree threatening warlords that if they failed to comply with DDR, they “will be considered disloyal and rebellious” and “will face the severest punishments.”