

Rebellious warlords threaten Afghan stability

An influx in crime could also subvert efforts to hold national elections this fall

By Malcolm Garcia
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

KABUL, Afghanistan — With the United States preoccupied by the insurgency in Iraq, Afghan and Western officials here are warning that rebellious warlords and a rise in crime are threatening the security of this country and could undermine efforts to hold national elections in the fall.

The violence still plaguing Afghanistan almost three years after coalition forces toppled the hard-line Taliban regime illustrates the kinds of problems that the United States could face in Iraq even if it subdues the current insurgency and transfers power in June.

The Afghan capital, Kabul, is considered the most stable city in the country and a bastion of pro-Western democratic reforms. A force of international peacekeepers is in the capital and will prevent it from descending into chaos, most officials agree.

But even that control is tenuous; militias associated with warlords are a growing presence, particularly in Kabul's western suburbs. Soldiers with the international security force in Kabul regularly find heavy weapons and ammunition hidden throughout the city. To date, they have destroyed more than 200,000 anti-tank weapons, guided missiles, mines and other explosives.

And resistance continues. On Friday, two military helicopters belonging to the international security forces were fired upon just 12 miles outside of the city. No injuries were reported and no suspects arrested.

Last month, two rocket-propelled grenades were found pointed toward downtown targets.

"These incidents must vanish," said Sharif Fayed, the minister of higher education. "The government must show more resolve, more determination and act more decisively." Without security, Fayed said, it is unlikely that people will feel motivated to vote in September.

Most of the international aid for Afghanistan has gone toward rebuilding Kabul. Countless new businesses have cropped up, including Internet cafes, pizza restaurants and blue jean outlets that cater to western journalists, aid workers and embassy personnel.

Rents have skyrocketed — to as much as \$10,000 a month — in a country where the average income is less than \$75 a month.

Flush with cash, Kabul has attracted

a growing number of burglars and robbers. Chicken Street, a tourist destination for many Westerners, closes as soon as the sun sets, as do many other business districts that used to stay open late.

A poorly paid police force — wages average about \$50 a month — lacks the motivation to crack down on crime. Demonstrations by officers for higher pay are common. Many police remain employed by warlords. Those who are assigned to work in the provinces are often rejected by the regional warlord and sent back to Kabul.

"You can have no loyalty without money," said Haron Asefi, director general of police. "The economy here is very poor. The people want money to eat. If the economy improves, the security issues go down. If not, the problems will increase."

In west Kabul, residents regularly

report being robbed by troops of the former fundamentalist Mujahedeen leader Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, whose headquarters in Paghman Province are less than an hour outside Kabul.

Car mechanic Sayad Zaher, 28, a resident of west Kabul, said a police officer occupied his house last month and refused to leave until he paid \$1,000. They bargained down to \$300.

"Herat is better than Kabul," Zaher said referring to the western city controlled by powerful warlord Ishmael Khan. "The rule there is strong. The police can't rob you, beat you. The shops are open late. There is peace, real peace. The peace in Kabul city is not real."

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Bush: Intelligence operations may need overhaul

The president's suggestion comes before testimony to the Sept. 11 commission by the former FBI director

By Shannon McCaffrey
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — President Bush passed up an opportunity to throw his support behind the FBI on Monday and instead said that the nation's intelligence operations may need overhauling to prevent another terrorist attack against the United States.

Bush's remarks sent a shudder through the FBI on the eve of crucial testimony Tuesday before the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks. Former FBI Director Louis Freeh and Attorney General John Ashcroft are expected to face tough questioning

about the bureau's failure to act more effectively against the al-Qaida terrorist assault.

The hearing, scheduled to last two days, will also explore whether the FBI has done enough to reform itself in the more than two years since the attacks.

The FBI has been lobbying hard against proposals to create a separate domestic intelligence agency, in the mold of Britain's MI-5. Until now, the Bush administration has opposed such a move, saying the FBI needed time to transform into an agency dedicated to counterterrorism.

However, Bush administration officials and Republican partisans have been trying to deflect criticism of the administration onto the FBI and the CIA, while Democrats try to highlight deficiencies in the president's and his advisers' response to the terrorism threat.

National Security Adviser

Condoleezza Rice did the FBI no favors in her high-profile testimony last week when she said the only thing that might have prevented the Sept. 11 attacks would have been better domestic threat information and a major overhaul of intelligence gathering.

Bush echoed her remarks when he spoke to reporters in Crawford, Texas, on Monday.

"Now may be the time to revamp and reform our intelligence services," Bush said, adding that he was looking forward to seeing the commission's recommendations.

Ashcroft's predecessor at the Justice Department, Janet Reno, is also scheduled to testify Tuesday. FBI Director Robert Mueller and CIA Director George Tenet will testify Wednesday.

"The FBI has more questions to answer than Condoleezza Rice or (former presidential anti-terrorism adviser)

Dick Clarke or anyone we've had testify before us so far," commission member Slade Gorton, a former Republican senator from Washington state, said after Rice's testimony.

The commission is expected to focus on a newly declassified presidential intelligence memo, dated Aug. 6, 2001, that revealed that the FBI had some 70 active investigations related to al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden under way in the United States.

Yet the bureau apparently did little to alert thousands of agents in its 56 field offices nationwide to the bin Laden threat or to the surge in intelligence warnings of possible attacks that the FBI received in July 2001.

A federal law enforcement official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said then-acting FBI Director Thomas Pickard told the 56 special-agents-in-charge, who run the FBI's field offices,

to increase their terrorist surveillance in July 2001. Whether Pickard's urging reached street-level agents is uncertain.

"We have done thousands of interviews here at the 9-11 commission. We've gone through literally millions of pieces of paper. To date, we have found nobody, nobody at the FBI, who knows anything about a tasking of field offices," Democratic commissioner Timothy Roemer, a former congressman from Indiana, said during Rice's hearing last week.

Bush said Monday that when he read the intelligence memo in August 2001 he was comforted to learn that the FBI was juggling 70 terrorism probes.


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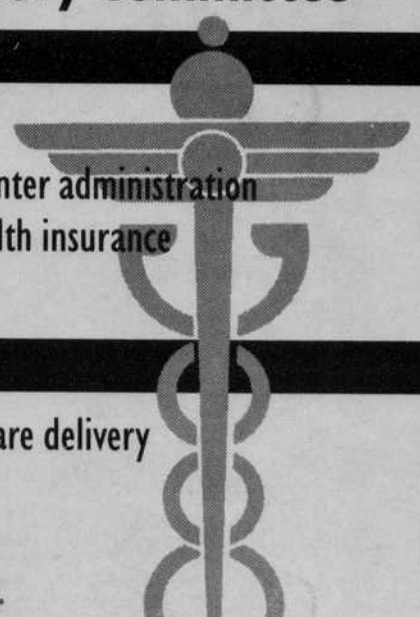
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