



Special Dispatch Series - No. 2100

October 31, 2008

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In Afghanistan, Beheading of Bus Passengers Sparks Anti-Taliban Protests Not Seen Since 9/11

On October 16, 2008, Taliban militants in Afghanistan's southern province of Kandahar hijacked a bus and killed 27 passengers. The bodies of the bus passengers were recovered three days later; some had been beheaded. The manner of the killings has for the first time aroused popular opinion against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Although he confirmed that the Taliban had seized the bus in the Maiwand district of southern Kandahar province, a Taliban spokesman nevertheless said that no civilians were on the bus. Yousuf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, explained that the bus was taking Afghan National Army reinforcements to the restive province of Helmand. (1) This claim by the Taliban was later denied by the Afghan government. Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense clarified that the bus passengers were not troops.

Independent media investigations have since found out that the 27 passengers, who were from the eastern Afghan province of Laghman, were civilians on their way to Iran for work. The discovery of the Taliban's killing of 27 innocent civilians has sparked anti-Taliban protests, something not seen in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Recently, the protests have spread to other provinces.

Taliban Accused of Being Inhuman, Un-Islamic, and Anti-State

A day after the bodies were recovered, hundreds of people turned out in streets in the eastern Laghman province, where the workers were from, to protest against the Taliban. Abdullah, a local man who joined the protesters in the provincial capital of Mehtar Lam, told local journalists that the victims were innocent laborers en route to Iran in search of jobs. (2) It is common for jobless Afghans to illegally sneak into Iran in search of a livelihood.

Soon the anti-Taliban protests spread to the eastern Paktia province. In Gardez, the capital of Paktia province, hundreds of protesters turned out in streets, shouting slogans against "anti-state elements." (3) They were joined by local elders, Islamic clerics from the city of Gardez and Abdul Rahman Mangal, the Deputy Governor of Paktia province.

The protesters described the killing of civilians as "un-Islamic and inhuman by the country's enemies." (4) They demanded that the Taliban stop shedding the blood of the Afghan people immediately.

Anti-Taliban Protests Spread to Kunar, Khost, and Bamian Provinces

By late October, the anti-Taliban protests over the killings of the bus passengers had spread to the provinces of Kunar, Khost and Bamian, as local people, students and tribal elders joined the demonstrations. (5)

In the eastern Kunar province, activists of the Islamic Youth Organization, a local youth group, staged a protest in the town of Asadabad to condemn the killings. Hundreds of protesters, including students and tribal elders, marched through the streets and shouted slogans against the Taliban.

In Khost, the capital of eastern Khost province, a number of people, including students and soldiers from the Afghan National Army, held a meeting and condemned the workers' killings by the Taliban. A similar meeting was held in the central Bamian province, where a large number of citizens from all walks of life attended the gathering and accused the Taliban of cruelty.

According to another report by Pashtu-language Afghan website Benawa.com, the relatives of the deceased in the eastern Laghman province held a protest, vowing to avenge the killing of the 27 laborers. During a protest, the relatives were joined by local people who condemned the killings and offered the Afghan government to help wipe out the Taliban. (6)

By the end of October the anti-Taliban protests had continued in different parts of Afghanistan. In Kabul, the Afghan capital, the clerics of Afghanistan's Hajj and Auqaf Ministry came out protesting against the Taliban. Expressing their sympathies with the families of the deceased bus passengers, the clerics observed that killing and abduction of Afghan civilians and foreign workers reminded the Afghan people of the dreadful civil war when un-Islamic acts like these had affected the country during the 1990s. (7)

Calling the Taliban's killing and abduction of civilians and foreign workers un-Islamic and against Afghan tradition, the clerics stressed that it is the responsibility of all Muslims to protect the lives of foreigners who work for the welfare of Afghan people.

Endnotes:

- (1) *The News*, Pakistan, October 20, 2008.
- (2) *Wrazparana Wahdat*, Pakistan, October 24, 2008.
- (3) *Wrazparana Wahdat*, Pakistan, October 27, 2008.
- (4) *Wrazparana Wahdat*, Pakistan, October 27, 2008.
- (5) *Wrazparana Khabroona*, Pakistan, October 29, 2008.
- (6) *Benawa.com, Afghanistan*, October 29, 2008.
- (7) *Wrazparana Khabroona*, Pakistan, October 30, 2008.

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