

## BY COUNTRY / AFGHANISTAN

# Afghanistan: U.S. Worried Iran Sending Chinese Weapons To Taliban

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By Ron Synovitz



**Authorities in Herat found a 10-ton cache of weapons marked with Chinese, Russian, and Persian (Pajhwak Afghan News)**

**September 14, 2007 (RFE/RL) -- U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte says Washington has complained to Beijing about Chinese weapons shipments to Iran that appear to be turning up in the hands of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.**

**Negroponte** confirmed the **U.S.** concerns over China's **weapons** deals with Tehran after a 10-ton **weapons** cache was discovered in the western Afghan province of Herat.

The cache found in Ghurian district, near the border with **Iran**, included artillery shells, land mines, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers with **Chinese**, Russian, and Persian markings on them.

Britain's Foreign Office **has** also confirmed that it **has complained** to **Beijing** about **Chinese**-made HN-5 antiaircraft missiles confiscated from Taliban fighters who were captured or killed by British Royal Marines in Helmand Province. **Beijing has** said that it would investigate allegations that the **weapons** were forwarded to the Taliban through **Iran**.

When asked in Kabul on September 11 about the Taliban's use of sophisticated new **Chinese weapons**, **U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte** also suggested that **Iran has** been a transit point for **Chinese** arms deliveries to the Taliban.

"A subject that I have discussed with the **Chinese** in the past is the fact of their **weapons** sales to the country of **Iran** and our concern," **Negroponte** said. "We have tried to discourage the **Chinese** from signing any new **weapons** contracts with **Iran**. We are concerned by reports -- which we consider to be reliable -- of explosively formed projectiles and other kinds of military equipment coming from **Iran** across the border and coming into the hands of the Taliban."

In June, **U.S. Secretary** of Defense Robert Gates said **Washington** had no evidence proving a direct role by the Iranian government in smuggling **weapons** to the Taliban. But Gates said **Washington** suspects Tehran is involved.

"I haven't seen any intelligence specifically to this effect, but I would say, given the quantities we are seeing, it is difficult to believe that it is associated with smuggling or the drug business or that it is taking place without the knowledge of the Iranian government," Gates said.

**Not Without Tehran's Knowledge?**

Alex Vatanka is the **Washington**-based **Iran** analyst for Jane's Information Group, which publishes "Jane's Defence Weekly" and other journals about the **weapons** industry and global security issues. Vatanka **says** it will remain unclear whether the Ghurian **weapons** cache is linked to the Taliban until

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-- Pakistani journalist  
**Ahmed Rashid**

Afghan or **U.S.** authorities announce details of their joint investigation.

But the presence of **Chinese weapons** so close to the Iranian border is the strongest evidence to date suggesting Tehran **has** had at least an indirect role in arms **shipments** to Afghanistan.

"Whether the government or somebody in **Iran** could be buying arms from China and, without Tehran's knowledge, ship it over to Afghanistan -- on that volume of **weapons** -- I find that extremely unlikely," Vatanka **says**.

"I can only see that happening if somebody pretty senior and in an influential political position in **Iran** decided to facilitate that without letting everybody in the system know about it," he continues. "But they still had to be involved somewhere in the **state** machinery. We're not talking about rogue elements [in **Iran**]. Baluchi drug traffickers can't pull that kind of thing off."

Many analysts have noted that Shi'ite **Iran** and the Sunni Taliban had been firm enemies since 1998, when the Taliban regime controlled most of Afghanistan and executed nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif.

But Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, an expert on Islamic militancy in the region and author of the book "Taliban," **says** that times appear to have changed. Now, with **U.S.** forces deployed some 60 kilometers from the Iranian border at Shindad Airfield in Herat Province, Rashid **says** Tehran and the Taliban have a common enemy.

"I have no doubt that **Iran has** been involved in channeling money and arms to various elements in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, for the last few years. They have long-running relations with many of the commanders and small-time warlords in western Afghanistan," Rashid **says**. "I think **Iran** is playing all sides in the Afghan conflict. And there are Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns who are being funded by **Iran** who are active in western Afghanistan. If the Iranians are convinced that the Americans are undermining them through western Afghanistan, then it is very likely that these agents of theirs have been activated."

### Political Backlash

Still, Vatanka **says** it would be "almost irrational behavior" for Tehran to supply the Taliban with **weapons**. He **says** such a move would almost certainly lead to a negative domestic political backlash for Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's government.

For that reason, Vatanka **says** he is eagerly awaiting the assessment of Afghan and **U.S.** investigators about whether the arms in the Ghuriana cache were stashed away by the Taliban or by one of several rival militia factions in Herat Province.

"The question is, what would get even a faction within **Iran** to make that type of a decision? Maybe you have excellent business ties between the Iranians and the Afghans on the other side -- not necessarily the central government in Kabul -- but local leaders in Herat who turn around saying, 'You Iranians are building roads and infrastructure here. You are setting up shops and factories. But for **us** to be able to guarantee that we can protect your business interests, we'll need to receive some arms.' That's an argument that one could put out: that the Iranians are essentially supplying not the Taliban, but Afghan partners to secure Iranian businesses and interests in western Afghanistan," Vatanka **says**.

To date, Afghan President Hamid Karzai **has** refused to publicly support allegations of a direct link between Tehran and **weapons shipments** to the Taliban. "We don't have any such evidence so far of the involvement of the Iranian government in supplying the Taliban. We have a very good relationship with the Iranian government. **Iran** and Afghanistan have never been as friendly as they are today," Karzai **has** said.

Vatanka **says** that as long as Karzai maintains that position, skeptics around the world will dismiss suggestions from **Washington** that Tehran is supplying Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

"From a **U.S.** point of view, if the insurgency in Afghanistan is essentially escalating based on Iranian assistance, then what **Washington** really needs

to do is to provide far more evidence that points to that -- and get Mr. Hamid Karzai in Kabul and the regional governments in Afghanistan to back the **U.S.** up when it makes these claims against **Iran**," Vatanka **says**.

After the **U.S.** military failed to find the **weapons** of mass destruction allegedly being stockpiled in Iraq, Vatanka **says**, "the skeptics out there are saying, 'These [new allegations] are being made up by the **U.S.** to justify another war with **Iran**' -- which might not actually be the case. **Iran** might be involved. But because of the lack of evidence, the Iranians are saying, 'Who else is backing up the **U.S.** allegations?'"

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