

Afghan tribes plan manifesto of dissent

Government can't contain violence, document says, after Taliban attack on Canadian convoy kills 38 civilians

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — A groundswell of anger over the rising violence in Kandahar has prompted the major tribes to consider a manifesto expressing a lack of confidence in the Afghan government, even as another explosion killed at least 38 people.

Political talks are usually set aside during the mourning days that follow any major tragedy in southern Afghanistan, but an organizer of the meeting says the recent spike in violence leaves no time for such traditions. At least 100 people are feared dead after a massive blast on Sunday, and yesterday's suicide bomber injured four Canadian troops and turned a busy market into a bloodbath.

An unusual gathering of 27 powerful tribal elders is scheduled tomorrow in Kandahar city to approve a seven-point manifesto, which starts with a blunt declaration: "The problems are now so great, it's impossible for the government to control them," according to the draft text. "The people need to stand up."

The latest attack injured close to 30 people and destroyed about 120 small shops and vendors' carts as fire engulfed parts of Spin Boldak, a town near the Pakistani border, said provincial police chief Sayed Agha Saqib.

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Canadian troops helped the wounded civilians and took their own injured for treatment at Kandahar Air Field. All the Canadians' injuries were minor, but the death toll is expected to rise because several Afghans are in critical condition.

Insurgent attacks in Afghanistan have climbed 64 per cent in the past year, from about 4,500 incidents in 2006 to about 7,400 in 2007, according to NATO statistics released yesterday in response to a query from The Globe and Mail.

Those numbers include insurgent attacks, ambushes, small or heavy arms fire, rocket or mortar fire, improvised explosive blasts, mine strikes and surface-to-air attacks.

Such violence has been concentrated in the south, causing a rising discontent among the tribal elders of Kandahar who serve as a fulcrum of power in the southern provinces.

A group of 120 leading tribal leaders met quietly in Kandahar last fall to debate their response and selected a group of 27 representatives to continue the discussions. Last week a five-man drafting committee finished its manifesto, which will ultimately be presented to the full assembly of 120 for final approval.

"The foreign soldiers aren't helping, they're behaving like an occupying force," said Haji Mohammed Essa, Kandahar's former attorney-general and a leading organizer of the tribal gathering.

"You kicked out a government that called itself a legitimate government, but you didn't bring any better government."

The new council of elders does not intend to position itself as a rival to the existing provincial council, Mr. Essa said, but others involved in the project said it's an effort to circumvent a government that isn't working.

Ahmed Wali Karzai, who has served for years as chairman of the provincial council, said it's too early to draw conclusions from the tribal process because the draft manifesto hasn't yet been approved.

Asked whether the gathering of elders represents a challenge to his government's authority, he said: "No, no, not at all."

Mr. Karzai and his older brother Qayum Karzai sit on the council of 27 elders, and some observers say it's possible they may still exert a moderating influence on the group, possibly tempering the manifesto's language so that it's less critical of the government led by their brother, President Hamid Karzai.

As it stands, the document offers several pointed suggestions about how to stem the violence.

It repeatedly calls for an end to "discrimination" among the tribes, saying jobs and government offices should be distributed without favouring any tribe. That's a reference to the theory that the war has evolved into a tribal struggle between pro-government tribes and others disenfranchised from the political process.

Other parts of the document are less controversial, as the elders call for a stronger education system, a stand against narcotics, and an end to corruption.

The manifesto also endorses negotiations with "all sides" of the conflict, supporting the popular idea that Taliban fighters must be drawn into talks. President Karzai has called for negotiations with the Taliban, but he recently expelled two foreign diplomats who were reaching out to the insurgents.

But extreme acts of violence, such as the past two days of bombings in Kandahar, raise questions about the changing nature of the insurgency and whether any political solution is possible.

The events also appeared to strain relations between the Canadians and their local allies, as Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid told reporters that he warned the Canadians to stay away from the Pakistani border areas because of a specific threat of attack.

A Canadian military spokesman, Lieutenant-Commander Pierre Babinsky, retorted that the troops will travel anywhere they deem necessary.

"We regularly receive threat warnings and obviously we go where we want to, when we want to, in our area of operation," LCdr. Babinsky said.

On a conference call with reporters, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Afghanistan's worst bout of violence since 2001 does not represent a worsening of the situation.

"I wouldn't describe it as an escalation," Mr. MacKay said. "I would describe it as another example of, sadly, how determined the Taliban insurgents continue to be."

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