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Afghanistan: Security situation in the province of Nangarhar; whether the Kabul government has control over the population (2003)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Nangarhar is an ethnic-Pashto province east of Kabul bordering the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan near the Khyber Pass; its capital and military centre is Jalalabad (ACC 5 Dec. 2002). Current provincial officials are Governor Haji Din Mohammed (AFP 26 Jan. 2003; RFE/RL 19 Feb. 2003), Deputy Governor Mohammad Asef Qazizada (Radio Afghanistan 30 Mar. 2003) and military leader Haji Hazrat Ali (*The News* 17 Mar. 2002; Denmark 7 Mar. 2003, 12; IWPR 15 Apr. 2003). Headquartered in Darra-e-Noor in southeast Jalalabad (*The News* 17 Mar. 2002), Ali's militia is dominated by the Pashais ethnic group (Denmark 7 Mar. 2003, 12). Twenty delegates represent Nangarhar on the Loya Jirga tribal assembly (AFP 3 July 2003).

The provincial leadership cooperates with the Afghan Interim government on security issues (ibid. 5 July 2003), taxation (Xinhua News Agency 15 May 2003; AFP 24 May 2003) and to the ongoing anti-drug operations (ibid. 16 Dec. 2002; RFE/RL 18 Dec. 2002; *Bradenton Herald* 27 Jan. 2003; IWPR 15 Apr. 2003). In addition, according to the Danish Immigration Service, military commander Ali "has the support of the USA as part of the fight against al-Qaida" (Denmark 7 Mar. 2003, 12). The Research Directorate did not find 2003 analyses of the degree of federal control over the region maintained by the transitional government in Kabul. However, in early 2002, Pakistani journalist Arif Jamal observed a lack modern state institutions, in addition to noting that that "[l]ocal warlords are ruling most of the provinces" (*The News* 17 March 2002).

The Afghan Security Situation in General

In its weekly security assessments, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) described the situation in Afghanistan in 2003 as generally "calm" between mid-January and early March (UN 17 Jan. 2003; ibid. 24 Jan. 2003; ibid. 31 Jan 2003; ibid. 14 Feb. 2003; ibid. 21 Feb. 2003; 28 Feb. 2003). Following a country-wide series of bombings, the WFP changed its description to "deteriorat[ing]" on 7 March (ibid. 7 Mar. 2002) and from mid-March until the end of April 2003, it called the Afghan security situation "volatile" (ibid. 14 Mar. 2003; ibid. 28 Mar. 2003; ibid. 7 April. 2003; ibid. 14 April 2003; ibid. 17 April 2003). On 27 June 2003, the WFP again described the situation as calm (ibid. 27 June 2003). In a July interview, the German commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) observed that the number of attacks on stabilization forces and NGOs in May was double the total in April and that "the level of attacks stabilised 'on a very high level' in June" (AFP 2 July 2003).

The Security Situation in Nangarhar Province

Nangarhar is identified as a route taken by "terrorist groups and Taliban supporters" after crossing into Afghanistan from Pakistan (RFE/RL 19 Feb. 2003). It is also one of the "traditional strongholds" of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) political party, which may now be allied with the Taliban (*Times Asia* 21 July 2003). *Jane's Intelligence Review* also referred to HIA's strong network in Nangarhar and its "ad hoc alliance" with Taliban forces and "groups of Al-Qaeda stragglers" (May 2003, 13, 10-11). An unnamed Taliban commander specified that the "Arab mujahedin" were not presenting Nangarhar (Al Jazeera 7 May 2003).

Officials "warn[ed] that bandits and remnants of the al-Qaida terrorist network still roam the countryside" around Jalalabad (*Bradenton Herald* 27 Jan. 2003). The Taliban leader corroborated this view when interviewed by Al-Jazeera television in May 2003. He claimed that the Taliban had established a centre in Jalalabad and asserted that the "Afghan mujahedin" continued "attacks ... on the Americans in Jalalabad ... almost every day" (Al Jazeera 7 May 2003). In May, regrouped Taliban forces and their allies were blamed for attacks on coalition stabilization forces and humanitarian aid organizations (JIR May 2003, 11). Even so, local authorities claimed on 26 May 2003 that the security situation in Nangarhar province was "very calm" (VIRI 26 May 2003) and that they have established peace (Radio Nangarhar 7 June 2003).

Nevertheless, attempts to curtail the cultivation of poppies for opium production in Nangarhar, led to unrest in 2003 (IWPR 15 Apr. 2003). The region is one of the major poppy growing areas of Afghanistan (ibid.) and was the scene of a crackdown led by a team tasked to destroy poppy crops (RFE/RL 18 Dec. 2002). According to one report, farmers' increasing anger toward UN aid agencies—thought to be passing information about poppy production to anti-drug authorities—led to sporadic attacks on aid workers and the mining of roads (*Bradenton Herald* 27 Jan. 2003). In February 2003, unrest among the local populations of Khogyani, Wazeer, and Agam forced anti-drug authorities to flee and led to clashes between farmers and police in Shinwari (IWPR 15 Apr. 2003).

The Research Directorate found numerous reports of attacks on international non-combatants in Nangarhar, including a 26 January ambush on a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convoy that led the UNHCR to temporarily suspend its operations in the provincial districts of Khogyani, Sherzad and Hesarak on 27 January 2003 (AFP 26 Jan. 2003; AP 27 Jan. 2003; UN 31 Jan. 2003). In addition, unknown assailants targeted NGO vehicles using remote controlled mines laid on roads in Dih Bala Hesk Mina (BAAG May 2003, 5) and south of Jalalabad (AFP 26 May 2003). Regional security commander Haji Ajab Shah alleged that Afghan guards hired by the NGOs were bribed by al-Qaeda to carry out the attacks (VIRI 26 May 2003).

In Jalalabad, explosive devices were thrown into the office of an NGO (BAAG May 2003, 5) and fired at a UNICEF office (Hindokosh News Agency 30 June 2003; JIR May 2003); most recently, a UNHCR warehouse was bombed (*Weekend Australian* 12 July 2002). In the latter case, authorities blamed Taliban fugitives, al-Qaeda and HIA loyalists (ibid.).

Anti-coalition forces were also held responsible for a March rocket attack on the Jalalabad airport, which is controlled by US and Afghan troops (RFE/RL 31 Mar. 2003; Radio Afghanistan 30 Mar. 2003). *Jane's Intelligence Review* noted that this was one of several attacks on US-controlled military bases across Afghanistan (JIR May 2003, 11). On 18 June, US Special Forces and regional militaries targeted Taliban, al-Qaeda and HIA forces in Operation Unified Resolve, which sought to disrupt infiltration networks into Afghanistan (AFP 3 July 2003; *The Nation* 26 June 2003) and possibly "flush out" anti-coalition fighters hiding in Nangarhar and other Afghan provinces (AFP 24 June 2003). Following this action, there were skirmishes reported between forces loyal to Hazrat Ali and Pakistani border forces (ibid. 5 July 2003) along the Afghan-Pakistan border (RFE/RL 11 July 2003; *Dawn* 8 July 2003). Afghan sources claimed that Pakistani troops penetrated into the Nangarhar districts of Lal Pur, Goshta and Khas Kunar (AFP 3 July 2003).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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