



Former Afghan fighters queue in Kabul to relinquish their weapons during an earlier United Nations peace program called Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

## Former Insurgents Choose Peace

Reintegration and reconciliation may help end conflict in Afghanistan

By per Concordiam Staff

**The Afghan government's peace and reintegration program has persuaded thousands of low-level Taliban fighters to renounce the insurgency that has plagued Afghan society for years. Former militants have tossed aside grenade launchers and rifles and made the courageous choice to reintegrate into their communities and return to their families with the hope of reshaping Afghanistan for the better. As security improves and areas stabilize, more rebels are expected to defect. Although reconciliation remains a slow process fraught with roadblocks, the Afghan government is being urged to reconsider engaging the Taliban leadership with the prospect of a settlement that would end a decade of warfare. Considering Afghan security forces' battlefield victories over the Taliban, with backing from its partners in the International Security Assistance Force, and the increasing momentum of the reintegration program, the conditions for reconciliation are ripe.**

The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) has enrolled nearly 3,000 former fighters and aims to integrate them peacefully back into Afghan society after they renounce violence, cut ties with extremists and agree to abide by the Afghan Constitution. "I cannot pull the trigger anymore. I am just tired of it," a former fighter told *The New York Times*.

In late 2011, the APRP gained momentum after a slow start when 250 fighters switched sides in December alone, including wanted insurgent Hajji Mohammad Yusef. After the fighters turned over

their weapons and signed a pledge to abandon the armed struggle, the governor of Badghis province, Gov. Delbar Jan Arman, congratulated the men on their brave decision. Hearing the governor welcome them back is a crucial part of acceptance.

Reintegration is taking place in 16 provinces and emerging in five to eight more. After only one year in operation, some security experts are saying that the APRP may be a hopeful sign for the government's plan to reintegrate. These men "are no longer shooting at the coalition and Afghan soldiers, no longer laying roadside bombs that kill innocent

women and children,” British Army Maj. Gen. Phil Jones told reporters in September 2011. Growth of the plan had once been uncertain; however, it looks as though the program is picking up steam.

The \$140 million program funded by NATO seeks long-term peace by resolving fundamental complaints. “A cornerstone of this local approach is the resolution of grievances that led people to fight in the first place,” British Royal Marine Maj. Gen. David Hook told reporters in December 2011. “If you accept the premise that 80 percent of the men fighting in the south are fighting for non-ideological reasons – and our analysis of why they have stopped fighting supports this – it becomes clear that if you can address their grievances, you can draw them back into society. You then make the other 20 percent less relevant.”

As brave as the decision is, changing sides can bring risk. Maulawi Noor ul Aziz, a former senior rebel leader who turned convert in April 2011, told Radio Free Europe that 15 suicide bombers were pursuing him to make an example out of a person they considered a traitor. The militants try to strong-arm other fighters to prevent them from considering reintegration. The Afghan government does not hold back when protecting crossovers. Aziz is protected by six watchtowers surrounding his house, and when he travels, three armored vehicles full of guards accompany him – all paid for by the Afghan government. Moreover, he was granted amnesty in late 2011 for crimes committed in his earlier life as an insurgent commander. For the Afghan government, keeping former fighters safe is paramount.

Increases in reintegration program enrollment may indicate a prime time for reconciliation talks. Reconciliation with the Taliban was first attempted in 2011, but stumbled when former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani was assassinated later that year. Security experts say that a lasting solution to peace in Afghanistan requires involvement of all parties in the future security of Afghanistan. In November 2011, the traditional *loya jirga*, a grand council meeting of Afghans, recommended ways to establish a transparent process in which all parties in the conflict can trust, even if personal trust is lacking. The *jirga* is starting to piece together a process that Afghans can shape and a final deal they can own.

Security analysts speculate whether reconciliation or peace negotiations can be successful without Pakistan’s involvement. In November 2011, Pakistan officials decided to boycott the Bonn Conference in Germany that had been scheduled to discuss



Taliban fighters peacefully surrender arms in Kandahar in April 2011 during a meeting with Afghan government officials as part of the peace and reintegration process.

MAJ. JAMES D. CRAWFORD/U.S. ARMY

the future of Afghanistan. “Pakistan has a crucial role to play in supporting a secure and stable and prosperous Afghanistan,” U.S. State Department deputy spokesman Mark Toner told reporters in November 2011. “It’s absolutely critical that Afghanistan’s neighbors play a role in its future development.”

Despite the challenges of reintegration and reconciliation, there is hope that these two programs can bring Afghanistan closer to the end of conflict. There is much work to be done, however, removing fighters from the battlefield and putting them to work toward rebuilding the country. □