

Afghan tribe to fight Taliban in return for aid from U.S.

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The leaders of one of the largest Pashtun tribes in a Taliban stronghold said Wednesday that they had agreed to support the American-backed government, battle insurgents and burn down the home of any Afghan who harbored Taliban guerrillas.

Elders from the Shinwari tribe, which represents about 400,000 people in eastern Afghanistan, also pledged to send at least one military-age male in each family to the Afghan Army or the police in the event of a Taliban attack.

In exchange for their support, American commanders agreed to channel \$1 million in development projects directly to the tribal leaders and bypass the local Afghan government, which is widely seen as corrupt.

"The Taliban have been trying to destroy our tribe, and they are taking money from us, and they are taking our sons to fight," said Malik Niaz, a Shinwari elder. "If they defy us now, we will defeat them."

The pact appears to be the first in which an entire Pashtun tribe has declared war on Taliban insurgents.

But the agreement, though promising, is fragile at best. Afghan loyalties are historically fluid, and in the past the government has been unable to prevent Taliban retaliation. The agreement may also be hard to replicate, since it arose from a specific local dispute and economic tensions with the Taliban.

While the Shinwaris are now united against the Taliban, if payments from the Americans falter or animosities flare with the Afghan government, the tribe could switch back just as quickly.

Moreover, it is not clear that the elders, whatever their intentions, will be able to command the loyalties of their own members. After 30 years of incessant warfare, many of the traditional societal networks in this country have been weakened or destroyed.

In many places, the Taliban are stronger than the tribes themselves.

Indeed, in the past, Taliban gunmen have killed or threatened tribal leaders who defied them, and the American military and the Afghan government have largely been unable to protect them.

Many of the Shinwari elders said Wednesday that they had already received death threats. The brother of one elder, a district governor, has already been killed.

The pact is but one plank of a carrot-and-stick strategy toward the Taliban as the United States pours more troops into Afghanistan in the hopes of inflicting setbacks that might make the Taliban more willing to negotiate. While the Americans are rewarding tribes who confront the Taliban, on Thursday the Afghan government is unveiling its latest plan to woo back both Taliban foot soldiers and their leaders.

That plan hopes to compensate for past failures that were underfinanced, lacked the buy-in of allies and did not prevent revenge killings.

The new plan has two tracks: to reintegrate Taliban fighters into Afghan society and to allow Taliban leaders to play a political role in Afghanistan, a far more politically charged idea.

The Karzai government wants countries attending an international conference in London on Thursday to back its plan and agree to finance it — at least initially.

In exchange for laying down arms and agreeing to abide by the Afghan Constitution, Taliban fighters would be guaranteed jobs and an enforceable amnesty.

The pact with the Shinwari tribe would complement the reconciliation effort. It echoes a similar phenomenon that unfolded in the Iraq war beginning in late 2006, which ultimately contributed to a substantial drop in violence there. In Iraq, tribal leaders from the country's Sunni minority rebelled against Al Qaeda of Mesopotamia and joined forces with the Americans. The phenomenon was known as the Sunni Awakening.

But no one expects to be able to duplicate the scale of the Iraq effort, because in many parts of Afghanistan the Taliban have not only intimidated or killed local tribal leaders but insinuated themselves into the very fabric of the hierarchies of the tribes.

By contrast, in this part of Afghanistan tribal loyalties are strong and the tension between the Shinwaris and the Taliban longstanding. The conflict came to a head last July, when two Shinwari elders — Mr. Niaz and Malik Usman — insisted that a local Taliban commander named Kona stay away from a group of Afghan engineers who were building a dike in their valley. When Kona's men kidnapped two of the engineers, the Shinwari elders decided they had had enough.

In a confrontation that followed, members from the two Shinwari subtribes killed a senior Taliban commander who had come from Pakistan and chased Kona back across the border. After that, Mr. Niaz and Mr. Usman set up a local militia to keep the Taliban out of the valley, called Momand.

"The whole tribe was with me," Mr. Niaz said in an interview in November. "The Taliban came to kill me, and instead we killed them."

The dispute also had an economic element. Many Shinwaris make their livings by smuggling across the nearby Pakistani border. According to some tribal members, the Taliban had tried to take over the Shinwaris' business and its smuggling routes.

The dispute caught the attention of American Special Forces units, who descended into the Momand Valley on helicopters and offered help to the local Shinwaris. The Americans gave them ammunition and food, they said.

On Wednesday, Mr. Niaz and Mr. Usman said the Special Forces teams had not visited them in many weeks. Nevertheless, they said, they decided to call in the help of the rest of the tribe.

For their part, the regular American Army forces in Jalalabad said they were startled by the Shinwaris' decision. At a tribal council meeting — called a shura — held last week, 50 Shinwari elders decided to declare that the entire tribe would oppose the Taliban.

"The shura proclaims that the Shinwari tribe stands unified against all insurgent groups, specifically the Taliban," the agreement stated.

Among other things, the tribal elders declared harsh penalties against Taliban sympathizers, including huge fines and expulsion from the area.

"The shura authorizes the burning of residences of those found harboring the Taliban," the proclamation said.

But the Shinwari elders did not merely declare their opposition to the Taliban. Although they declared their allegiance to the Afghan government, they directed at it a nearly equal measure of fury, condemning "all the corruption and illegal activities that threaten the Afghan people."

"We are doing this for ourselves, and ourselves only," said Hajji Kafta, one of the elders. "We have absolutely no faith in the Afghan government to do anything for us. We don't trust them at all."

Sensing opportunity — and wanting the agreement to stick — the American officers decided to bypass the government entirely and pledge \$1 million in development aid directly to the Shinwari elders. That method of financing — directly to the shuras — mirrors that of the National Solidarity Program, which has gained much admiration here for the efficient way it has dispensed development aid.

The agreement, struck during a hastily arranged tribal council meeting last week, was reaffirmed Wednesday at a gathering of the Shinwari elders, Afghan officials and American commanders in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province. The pact was signed by 50 Shinwari elders, some of whom stamped their thumbs on the document because they cannot read.

Col. Randy George, the senior American officer in the area, said he was encouraged by the recent events. But he was not declaring victory.

"You've got to start somewhere," he said.

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