

THE WORLD; Amnesty Offers Taliban Chance to Come Home; A former top official grew weary of hiding in Pakistan. The government hopes others will join him and deplete the rebel ranks.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

It is easy to lose sight of Habib Rahman as he meanders through the sea of dark beards and silky, gray turbans in this city's downtown.

From his confident stride and relaxed posture, one wouldn't suspect that Rahman had spent the last three years in hiding in Pakistan. Before that, he was a key figure in Afghanistan's Taliban regime.

Rahman surrendered to the Afghan government in late April, becoming one of about 80 militants who have done so under an amnesty program launched the previous month. He was the highest-ranking Taliban member to pledge loyalty to the administration of President Hamid Karzai, raising hopes that others would follow and the insurgency would wane.

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Tahkim-e Solh, or Strengthening Peace, is an initiative to bring noncriminal combatants back into Afghan society. Officials say the amnesty program is open to lower- and mid-level militants, including those from the ranks of renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

But the government says receiving amnesty is not as simple as coming back to Afghanistan. The returnees must immediately report to their provincial intelligence office and begin the application process.

"They go through an intensive interview on the provincial level and then are introduced to the national security office in Kabul, where, with the help of international intelligence officials, the Afghan government does complete background checks on them," said Sibghatullah Mojaddidi, the head of Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation commission.

Mojaddidi said the process could take a month. In the meantime, the former combatants are kept in government guesthouses.

If their records are clean, they are given government identity cards, which keep them from being arrested by U.S. and Afghan authorities on terrorism charges, Mojaddidi said.

During a recent news conference, Karzai insisted that once granted amnesty, the returnees would not be under surveillance. But Mojaddidi and other security officials say the former militants' movements may be monitored and their financial transactions tracked.

Most of the returnees are given \$100 to \$900 to start new lives.

Afghan intelligence officials say the amnesty efforts will help the U.S. military thin the ranks of the rebels leading campaigns against American forces in the country's south.

"The U.S. needs this help, even though they are saying that they are winning the war on terror. The enemy keeps changing faces, and a new tactic is needed to fight them," said Mohammed Saadiq Tarakhel, head of intelligence in Khowst.

The reconciliation program is also expected to boost Karzai's image among the country's majority Pushtuns, some of whom have accused him of turning his back on his own ethnic group.

But many Afghans, mostly outside Pushtun areas, are fearful of the Taliban returning.

"I still have nightmares about how the Taliban beat me for not wearing appropriate socks and burned my grapevines so I wouldn't have a livelihood. How do I know they are not planning to come back and take over the government?" asked Shereen, who goes by one name and lives with family members in a rundown house on the outskirts of the capital, Kabul.

Other skeptics believe the program just gives rebels access to the public and opens the door to recruiting new fighters.

Rahman, 36, says he has no interest in fighting. He has moved back into his Khowst home, where his wife and four young children stayed after he left for Pakistan in the spring of 2002.

"I moved from house to house before fleeing to Pakistan. I even passed myself off as my brother when the U.S. military came looking for me," Rahman recalled.

"Relatives and neighbors also hid me in their cellars and informed me when intelligence agents were combing the area."

Rahman's roots in Khowst run deep. His father and grandfather were from the province of the same name, whose approximately 800,000 residents are predominantly Pushtuns. The ethnic group, which is concentrated in the south, made up most of the Taliban ranks.

Rahman was a boy when the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in late 1979. During the ensuing war, he was put into a madrasa, or Islamic boys school, that bred young militants. Upon graduation, he crossed the border into Pakistan and studied Islamic law at Peshawar University, where he earned the title of mufti, or religious scholar.

"After I graduated, the Taliban had already taken Khowst and were advancing toward Kabul," Rahman said. "So I headed home to join them."

He quickly rose through the local ranks and was invited to Kabul to head the criminal activities department at the Interior Ministry.

"So much lawlessness had taken hold of the country during the civil war," he said. "I, along with a lot of other people, became Talibs because we thought maybe this group could bring some order into this country."

He insists that he always belonged to the movement's moderate ranks.

"I never killed anyone nor gave an order to kill anyone -- people know that," Rahman said. "That is why I have been given amnesty, and no one is trying to take revenge on me now."

Despite heavy criticism, the government wants to see people such as Rahman return and assist in rebuilding the country.

"The category of the Taliban that [Rahman] belongs to is forgivable. They were not the leaders who killed unnecessarily, but they have enough of a following to encourage others of the same group to return," said Tarakhel, the intelligence official.

Taliban returnees can be divided into three categories, Tarakhel said. The majority are young men recruited from Islamic schools in the border towns of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most of them have returned without fanfare to their villages and are living quietly with their families.

The second group, which Rahman belongs to, led departments or ministries but rarely had the opportunity to affect policies or strategies.

"The top group is about 50 to 70 people and include the big guys like Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden," Tarakhel said. "They are not forgivable and most likely not returning any time soon."

Rahman said that while he was in Kabul for screening, Afghan officials offered him a position at the Supreme Court, insisting that he make use of his Islamic education and status as a mufti.

He said he decided to decline the offer because he didn't want to be labeled a sellout by rebels still in hiding.

"Other former Taliban members that are thinking about returning will think I came back because I was promised a high-profile job," Rahman said. "I will slowly make my way into public life."

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