The demobilization and reintegration process targeting Afghanistan's armed youth

This article provides an overview of the programs that are in place for the disarmament of Afghan children and youth. The article was provided by the Vera Chrobok from the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC).

Contributed by: Nadia Afrin
Submission date: 18 Aug 2004
Posted to: Afghanistan Reconstruction
Comments: no comments

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The demobilization and reintegration process targeting Afghanistan’s armed youth

Vera Chrobok

The recruitment of young soldiers by warring factions in Afghanistan has been common practice throughout the last two decades. Children and adolescents - often forced into service - fought under the mujaheddin in resistance to the Soviet occupation, during the years of civil unrest and the Taliban rule. Although the vast majority of young fighters returned home after the Taliban’s defeat in late 2001, many of them - up to the present day - continue to carry a gun and remain under the command of local militias engaged in inter-factional fighting. The tense and unpredictable security environment, particularly in the South and South East, but also in some areas of the North and Central Highlands, contributes to putting Afghan youth at risk of being (re)mobilized by armed groups.

In May 2003, the National Security Council issued a presidential decree prohibiting the conscription of young people under the age of 22 into Afghanistan’s National Army. Four months later, on 24 September 2003, the Afghan Transitional Administration announced Afghanistan’s accession to the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which sets 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment. While there is no indication of under-18s currently serving in the government forces, local commanders do not necessarily feel bound to decisions taken in the capital. The influence of the central government in areas outside Kabul remains rather limited, with a weak Ministry of Defense unable to monitor recruitment practices of militia groups. Besides, local commanders are often puzzled when asked about the participation of “child soldiers” in their ranks. The meaning of the term in the Afghan context is indeed open to debate. Many Afghans do not share the Western concept of youth or adolescence. 13-18 year olds are regarded as adults and expected to fulfill the same obligations as all Afghan men to protect their families and communities. It is not unusual that this includes the participation in combat.

Those who have been sent home by their commanders have returned to a life of extreme poverty. Alongside hundreds and thousands of young people who missed out on education and live in social and economic insecurity, these former underage combatants as well as those still under arms are in desperate need of viable alternatives and opportunities for income generation. Support from the government cannot be expected at this stage. The relevant ministries clearly do not yet possess the capacity and experience for providing adequate assistance.

In January 2002, shortly after the Afghan conflict officially came to an end, a preliminary needs assessment by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Worldbank recognized the urgency to identify appropriate reintegration strategies for former “child combatants”. However, it took more than two years and several postponements before this was put into practice and a formal program to demobilize and reintegrate young combatants was established. Initially set to begin in early 2003, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) finally launched the program in February 2004 in the North Eastern province of Kunduz.

In the same province, but four months earlier, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program for adult soldiers was launched (coordinated by the Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Programme, ANBP, which was created under the auspices of
UNAMA and UNDP to assist the Afghan government in decommissioning the military forces. Unfortunately, the ANBP and the UNICEF program run completely separate, without any kind of coordination in terms of program design and implementation. For the most part, they are operating in different locations with different NGO partners who are responsible for implementing demobilization and reintegration in each region or province. In the few cases where the two programs target the same province, information is not shared between the lead agencies. This is especially challenging for organizations that are both partner to the ANBP as well as to UNICEF, such as Child Fund Afghanistan in the North East. Problematic are not only the different timelines for demobilization and reintegration, but also the huge additional administrative and logistical efforts required for establishing separate support structures.

Many NGOs involved in the process also question whether the premise on which the UNICEF program is built – namely that youth requires different assistance than adults – really applies to the Afghan context, where the immediate needs of young people and those of adults tend to overlap. A more coordinated approach between the lead agencies would clearly be desirable. The same holds for the NGO dialogue. Program implementation moves from region to region, which offers great opportunities to share lessons learned. However, there is very little communication between organizations in terms of program experiences and best practices.

The UNICEF program as such takes place at the community level and is divided into two phases. During demobilization, the young combatants are assessed for eligibility, registered and offered medical screening. The signing of a code of conduct and the issuance of identification cards marks the end of each demobilization process in each community. Family reunification does not play a major role, since fighting largely took place within or in close proximity to the communities and most of the young fighters saw their families regularly during combat. The reintegration phase, intended to support young soldiers on their transition to civilian life, represents the more challenging part of the process. According to UNICEF, beneficiaries will be provided with “durable, alternative opportunities to military life”, including education, vocational training and apprenticeship programs. Reintegration assistance is planned to be provided over a three-year period. However, this strongly depends on the availability of additional funds. The estimated total costs of the program amount to US$ 10 million. So far, only US$ 3.5 million have been secured, with the US Department of Labor being the lead donor. The success of the reintegration phase further depends on the quality of assistance offered and the absorption of beneficiaries by the Afghan labor market after graduating from skills training.

Contrary to the adult-DDR initiative, disarmament is not a component of the UNICEF program. In fact, there are mixed messages concerning the fate of the ex-combatants’ weapons. It is clearly not the responsibility of the implementing NGOs to disarm program beneficiaries. Reportedly, former young soldiers are allowed to keep their guns if they own them. Otherwise, weapons will remain with the local commanders.

At present, demobilization has been completed solely in the North East and in the Eastern Region, covering the provinces of Kunduz, Badakshan, Takhar, Baghlan, Laghman, Nanghraha and Nourstan. The reintegration phase has so far only started in the North East, which is a positive development given the initial difficulties. Reportedly, some former combatants had no alternative than to return to their commanders when, after demobilization, the promised reintegration assistance was not delivered in time.

In the Central Region (including Bamiyan, Kabul, Kapisa, Parwan, Wardak, Logar and Paktia), demobilization is currently underway and expected to be completed by the end of September 2004. The South and South East of the country are not targeted at all, and it
remains unclear when the program will be initiated in the North Western and Western provinces, despite ongoing negotiations with potential NGO partners.

A matter of special concern is the initial identification process of underage soldiers, which is subject to criticism by several organizations on the ground. After conducting a rapid field assessment in 2003, UNICEF came up with total number of 8,011 underage soldiers in Afghanistan. This number is not consistent with NGO findings during the registration process. In some regions, the involved NGO partners identified more, in several cases even twice the amount counted by UNICEF. As of yet, it is not entirely clear how this divergence will impact program implementation. The exclusion of eligible candidates would clearly go against the purpose of the program.

In addition, many NGOs on the ground share the view that the needs of former underage soldiers are very similar to the needs of other Afghan youth, since most young people in Afghanistan have been exposed to the worst aspects of war and lack adequate support. They strongly support UNICEF’s initial objective to extend the program for the benefit of other war-affected youth. However, the implementation of this fundamental objective is largely dependant on a long-term financial commitment from donor states.

On the whole, the demobilization and reintegration process for former young combatants proceeds slowly and is characterized by continued delays and flaws in program design and implementation. However, the program is still in its early stages and initial drawbacks could be offset by enhancing inter-agency coordination, securing additional funds, targeting other war-affected youth and introducing a regular review and monitoring process.