

## *At Least 9 Dead in Afghan Helicopter Crash, After Clashes With Local Militia*

The crash occurred in eastern Afghanistan, where security and militia forces have been in a tense, and sometimes violent, standoff since January.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Najim Rahim

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Nine security personnel were killed after an Afghan military helicopter was downed, likely by militia forces, in eastern Afghanistan early Thursday, signaling a drastic rift between the Afghan government and the regional forces supposedly under its control.

The fighting occurred in Wardak, a mountainous province that borders Kabul in the country's east. There, militia forces led by Abdul Ghani Alipur, a local warlord with a spotty rights record, have been engaged in a tense, sometimes violent, standoff with government troops since January.

The latest clashes have pushed the uneasy relationship to its breaking point as the country moves toward an uncertain future.

“There was fighting, helicopters were targeting us, and when the helicopter was firing rockets, we had to shoot at it,” Mohammad Hussain Tawana, an aide for Mr. Alipur, said of the attack that occurred in Hisa-e-Awal Behsud district. He added that it wasn't clear whether the crash was caused by the shooting or by technical problems.

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan did not directly accuse Mr. Alipur's forces of the attack, but said that the helicopter, a Mi-17 Soviet-era aircraft, was shot down and that the government would retaliate. The Ministry of Defense said it was investigating.

“I am assuring you that the perpetrators will be severely punished. Afghan security forces' blood will never be wasted,” Mr. Ghani said during a public event Thursday celebrating journalists in the country.

Those killed in the crash included four crew members and five security personnel, officials said. Several militia members were also killed in the fighting, Mr. Tawana said.

The clash comes at an especially precarious time for Afghanistan. Roughly 11,000 U.S. and NATO forces are poised to withdraw from the country by May 1 under a 2020 peace deal between the United States and the Taliban. Subsequent peace negotiations in Qatar between the Taliban and the Afghan government have all but stalled.

The Afghan government has increasingly looked to some militias as a stopgap measure to bolster its beleaguered security forces, which are under constant attack by the Taliban. But simultaneously, the heavily armed militias, much like Mr. Alipur's, are slowly positioning themselves to hold their territory should a U.S. troop withdrawal lead to the government's collapse or the country fractures along ethnic and tribal lines.

The fighting is a further signal of crumbling alliances and a growing threat of civil war that many fear will break out once the U.S.-led forces leave Afghanistan.

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Mr. Alipur and his forces are mostly Hazara Shiites, a persecuted ethnic minority in Afghanistan that for decades has been targeted by the Sunni Taliban and other militant groups. Since the emergence of the Islamic State offshoot in the country in 2015, Hazara Shiites, especially in Kabul, have been attacked mercilessly in high-profile bombings.

But Mr. Alipur also has a violent reputation, accused of human rights abuses and arrested in 2018. He was released days later after local protests nearly spiraled out of control. And though often at odds with the government, he remains close with Sarwar Danish, the second vice president of Afghanistan.

In January, Mr. Alipur's militia, which controls key territory and roads in Wardak Province, fought government forces for control of Behsud. The cause of fighting and who started the attack are unclear — the reasons range from control over tribal migration routes and the theft of government armored vehicles to the appointment of new police chiefs there.

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But on Jan. 29, a protest calling for the removal of the new police chiefs turned violent when security forces opened fire. Eleven civilians were killed in the shooting, according to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and more than 30 were wounded.

The Afghan government suspended Allah Dad Fedayi, the provincial police chief of Wardak, for overseeing the forces that attacked the demonstrators. But Mr. Tawana, the aide, still cited him as a reason for the fighting that reignited late Wednesday night, as the police chief was simply reassigned to another province earlier this week.

“The people understand that there would be no action taken by the government because of the incident, so they finally decided to take action themselves,” Mr. Tawana said.

Hours after the helicopter was downed, Afghan and Taliban officials, along with representatives from Russia, the United States and several regional countries, met in Moscow for a conference that could potentially put the peace process back on track. A conference in Turkey is also scheduled for the coming weeks as the May 1 date to withdraw U.S. troops approaches.

In an interview with ABC News that aired Wednesday, President Biden said it would be “tough” to meet the deadline, publicly hinting at a prolonged troop presence in the country that could scuttle last year’s U.S.-Taliban deal as the insurgent group has strictly opposed any such extension.

Mr. Biden added that he was consulting with allies on the drawdown, and said that if the deadline were to be extended, it would not be by “a lot longer.”

Fatima Faizi and Fahim Abed contributed reporting.