

Afghan Soccer Official, Charged With Sexual Abuse, Evades Arrest

The unsuccessful operation against Keramuddin Keram, whom players accused of rape and other abuses, showed the limited reach of the national government.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Fahim Abed

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The powerful former chairman of Afghanistan’s soccer federation, who faces criminal charges of sexual abuse of female players, eluded capture by Afghan Special Operations officers on Sunday, laying bare the tenuous reach of the national government.

The unsuccessful police operation against the fugitive, Keramuddin Keram, took place in Panjshir Province, a predominantly ethnic Tajik area that has long supported and protected Mr. Keram. He established himself there as an insurgent commander during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Officials in the province said that they had not been consulted before the attempted arrest, and that Mr. Keram was not home when the Afghan forces arrived.

“For this operation, no coordination was made with the governor office, security forces and judicial organization in the province,” said Mohammad Amin Sediqi, the acting governor of Panjshir.

Afghanistan has long tried to balance regional autonomy with the power of the central government, often to varying degrees of success.

In a July address, President Ashraf Ghani called on the people of Panjshir — as well as on Abdullah Abdullah, who is the head of the council that aims to negotiate peace with the Taliban and has political allies in the region — to “expel” Mr. Keram from the province and “enforce the rule of law.”

“I will suspend and help prosecute any official engaged in corruption or abuse of authority, no matter where or at what location,” Mr. Ghani said.

Mohammad Kalan, a resident of Panjshir Province, said that Mr. Keram was protected by his own tribe and well-armed militia, adding that high-ranking government officials in Panjshir all supported him.

“The government is weak, and corrupt people run it,” Mr. Kalan said. “That is why criminals do whatever they want. The government promoted the guy, and now they have to deal with him.”

The Afghan attorney general’s office issued an arrest warrant last year for Mr. Keram, who was banned from soccer for life by the sport’s global governing body, FIFA, and fined about \$1 million. The organization said in June 2019 that Mr. Keram had “abused his position and sexually abused various female players, in violation of the FIFA Code of Ethics.”

“No one can escape the law, and we will implement the order of the attorney general’s office regarding the arrest of Keramuddin Keram,” Tariq Arian, the spokesman for the Ministry of Interior Affairs, said in a video statement.

The operation targeting Mr. Keram, as well as the capture on Saturday of a former police commander, Zemarai Paikan, who has been charged with misuse of authority, comes ahead of an expected meeting in Geneva, where Mr. Ghani is likely to highlight his administration’s attempts to battle corruption in an effort to secure more financial backing from the West.

The World Bank warned last year that Afghanistan would require billions of dollars in international aid in the coming years, regardless of any possible peace deal with the Taliban, to deliver even basic services. Afghanistan’s public expenditure is roughly \$11 billion each year, though its revenue is only around \$2.5 billion, meaning 75 percent of Afghanistan’s expenses are funded by grants and international donors.

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