

Corruption Turning Afghan Prisons Into Taliban Bases

AFGHAN PRISONS CONTINUED FROM A1

"You had a prison that was run by the Afghan government, but really, entire facilities within that prison were being used as training and education grounds for insurgent elements," said Drew Quinn, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs director at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, on the NATO Channel in November 2009.

Resolving such issues is no simple matter, and the battle behind prison walls continues to this day.

A rare news conference in Kabul, held by Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security intelligence service in February, highlighted the breadth of the problem—noting that despite efforts to root out operations at Pul-e-Charkhi, it is still going strong.

Taliban commander Talib Jan, a prisoner at Pul-e-Charkhi, is one of the more extreme cases. He organizes suicide bombings across Kabul from within his cell—including the Jan. 28 suicide bombing of a supermarket that killed 14 people.

"Most of the terrorist and suicide attacks in Kabul were planned from inside this prison by this man," said National Directorate of Security spokesman Lutfullah Mashal at the conference, The New York Times reported.

The problem, according to Berquist, runs deep.

"The prison systems are corrupt," Berquist said. "The safest place for the Taliban is the prisons because they can't get caught again."

Prisoners often use cell phones to communicate with, and give commands to, insurgents operating outside. Meanwhile, since captured Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders from across the country are at times detained together, the prisons give them an otherwise nonexistent opportunity to network and coordinate—since they are wary of gathering too many leaders in one place outside the prisons for fear of attack by



PRISON BREAK: An Afghan policeman sits next to the entrance of the tunnel in room number seven of the Political Prisoners' section through which Taliban fighters escaped in an audacious jailbreak from Kandahar prison in southern Kandahar city on April 25.

unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or special operations raids.

"The culture becomes so tough to break because these guys become so powerful within the prison," Berquist said, adding that when they try to dismantle networks by moving prisoners to different cells, "they meet additional people and all it does is end up expanding things."

A Corrupt System

Pol-e-charki is haunted by significant infamy, even for Afghanistan—its Soviet past of violence, terror, and political turmoil has

'The safest place for the Taliban is the prisons because they can't get caught again.'

—Drew Berquist, author, former U.S. intelligence agent

been reanimated to face a new war. Impossible roads through communities supportive of the

insurgents lead to its gates, while the now-empty mass graves of political prisoners nearby stand

as painful reminders of the prison's Soviet founders in the late 1970s.

The problem is not limited to Pol-e-charki, however, as other Afghan prisons have met with similar problems.

The April 25 Taliban "Great Escape" at Saraposa prison in Kandahar dealt a blow to the image of Afghan prison security, when 500 inmates escaped through a 1,000-foot-long tunnel, and with the help of corrupt guards.

The incident happened after Saraposa was revamped, similar to Pol-e-charki, after a 2008

attack on the prison that freed 900 inmates in broad daylight. The whole area was known for corruption, with "assassinations of investigators, bribery of prosecutors, intimidation of justices, and attacks upon witnesses" that "obscured both evidence and law," stated Army Brig. Gen. Mark Martins in a Feb. 10 Department of Defense video conference, according to the Pentagon transcript.

Illegal use of cell phones by prisoners is one of the key problems, since they act as enablers for commanding troops outside, and efforts to take their phones have met with little success. "Most of them operate either with their own phones smuggled in, or they pay corrupt guards to use their phones to call not just people inside the prison, but also to other people in Afghanistan, and across the border into Pakistan," Berquist said.

Meanwhile, non-insurgents going into the prisons can be thrown into a cycle of radicalization through Taliban and al-Qaeda members inside. Prisoners arrested for more extreme crimes also rarely serve their full sentences, which becomes a problem since "they start to get street cred having been in prison, when they get out," Berquist said. "You get guys who become more extreme in prison then come out as a much bigger problem than when they went in."

He added that, "because of how corrupt the system is, people frequently do get out because there are a lot of dirty parliamentarians and other government officials who take bribes."

The flow of corruption into Afghan prisons is difficult to put a cap on.

"If you didn't go in dirty there's a reasonable chance you're going to turn dirty because you're going to get frustrated by how monotonous and how difficult it is to be in those positions, and just how tough life is there," Berquist said. "Eventually that money starts to sound good, and it's a slippery slope once you do that."

Former Confucius Institute Teacher Seeks Asylum

BY OMID GHOREISHI & JASON LOFTUS
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

TORONTO—A Chinese woman who came to Canada to teach Chinese language at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, says she was required to sign a statement promising not to practice Falun Gong in order to obtain her position.

Sonia Zhao says she was warned she would face punishment if she breached the agreement, which she said all volunteer teachers at Confucius Institutes are required to sign before being hired.

As a result, Zhao says she secretly hid her belief in Falun Gong even while working at McMaster. In July, she left the institute and has applied for refugee status in Canada. In a draft statement obtained by The Epoch Times, Zhao says, "Since I left the Confucius Institute, for the first time, I feel free inside."

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice that involves practicing meditative exercises and living according to the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. In 1999 the Chinese Communist Party launched a campaign to "eradicate" it. Falun Gong is freely practiced in over 100 countries around the world, including Canada.

The Epoch Times reported in July that the main Confucius Institute has on its website a directive in English stating that volunteer teachers must have "no record of participation in Falun Gong."

Canadian lawyer Clive Ansley calls the rule a violation of "all human right codes in Canada."

Winnipeg-based international human rights lawyer David Matas says the institutions that host Confucius Institutes "have a responsibility to ensure there is no discrimination."

Funded by the Chinese regime and with over 300 branches worldwide, Confucius Institutes (CI) are nonprofit organizations branded as promoting Chinese language and culture.

However, they are also seen

Institute forced her to sign document against practicing Falun Gong

as organizations charged with extending China's "soft power." A senior Chinese official has referred to the institutes as an "important part of China's overseas propaganda setup."

"Although Confucius Institutes are located in foreign countries, they are still governed by the Chinese government," says Zhao.

In an e-mailed response, Andrea Farquhar, assistant vice president, Public and Government Relations at McMaster University, said the university is unaware of the CI contract requiring teachers not to associate with Falun Gong, "or any requirement for such documents to be signed by those who will be teaching within the institute."

"We will look into this further," she wrote.

The Epoch Times had also earlier contacted Angela Sheng, director chair of the Confucius Institute at McMaster, for an earlier article on Confucius Institutes. Sheng, who had been identified by the university's communications department as the spokesperson on this topic, said she wasn't interested in talking and hung up the phone.

Beijing's Long Arm

For 25-year-old Zhao, it all started about a year and half ago when she learned that her university was choosing graduates to teach Chinese language and culture as volunteers at CIs around the world.

The chance to travel abroad and teach traditional Chinese culture seemed like a dream job for Zhao, who had majored in teaching Chinese to nonnative speakers. She applied and got accepted.

All went well—until she was handed a contract to sign stipulating that volunteers can't do anything that isn't to the liking of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and explicitly stating that they cannot practice Falun Gong.

Since this was the last step in the process, and the administrators knew there were no other barriers preventing her from



BREAKING FREE: Sonia Zhao gives a speech about the persecution of Falun Gong in China at a rally in Toronto celebrating 100 million people quitting the Chinese Communist Party on Aug. 13.

'Although Confucius Institutes are located in foreign countries, they are still governed by the Chinese government.'—Sonia Zhao

going abroad to work for the CI, she thought it would be risky if she refused to sign.

"I thought maybe I would have to tell them I am a Falun Gong practitioner and then they would know and I would be in danger and risk being arrested"—a fate that Zhao was all too familiar with.

Since her teens, Zhao has seen her mother get dragged to prison

more than once because of her belief in Falun Gong. The two had started following the teachings of the spiritual practice after seeing the miraculous health effects it had on Zhao, who was very frail as a child.

Soon after getting accepted to the CI, Zhao started her training. Anticipating every possibility, the instructors taught them that at their level, being teaching

assistants, if students ask about any topic deemed sensitive by the Chinese communist regime, they should change the subject and say that they are not here to discuss politics and should stick to language and culture.

Zhao says one of her colleagues at the McMaster CI was once asked by a student about the Taiwan independence issue. The colleague managed to avert the question. If she hadn't, the students would have been told the Chinese regime's version of the situation.

According to Zhao, during their training they are taught that if a student insists on a question, the teachers have to cite the CCP line on the issue. For instance, Taiwan is part of China, and Tibet has been "liberated" by the regime.

STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

GORDON YU/THE EPOCH TIMES