

# Defection of key men eats

Alexander Nemenov

FOR five years a young warlord maintained the allegiance of his 40 commanders and 1,000 men to the Taliban despite his creeping disillusionment with a regime characterised by mass detentions, public hangings and the stoning of adulterers and thieves.

Not until his own brother was picked out for summary injustice did Nuridin Akhmadi finally resolve to break the bond.

It happened on a summer's day when two Taliban militiamen swaggered into the Akhmadi family's home town in search of young conscripts to bolster their forces on the front line of a brutal civil war against the rebels of the Northern Alliance.

Mohsen Akhmadi, the warlord's elder brother and a hardened mujaheddin fighter in his own right, with long experience of fighting the Soviet forces which invaded Afghanistan in 1979, intervened to help a group of young men confronted by the press-gang. As he argued for their freedom, one of the militiamen pointed a Kalashnikov at him and opened fire. Two of the men also died in the hail of bullets; the rest were taken away, never to be seen again.

"At first I believed in the Taliban," said Akhmadi, 29, who marched for two hours over a mountain to establish radio contact with The Sunday Times. "I thought of them as true Muslims, religious leaders who could never be corrupted — who would strive to banish the mistakes of the past.

"But then the repression began. It has not taken long to understand that these are dictators. The last thing they want to do is rebuild Afghanistan."

Last Sunday, weeks of covert communications with the Northern Alliance culminated in Akhmadi's defection, just as American and British missiles began to rain down on Afghanistan. As the first Taliban leader to switch sides in



## INSIDE AFGHANISTAN

Mark Franchetti  
30 miles north of Kabul

the current conflict, Akhmadi has assumed an importance he could never have envisaged amid the shifting alliances and betrayals that are customary among Afghan warlords.

Not only did he hand over control of the Taliban's most critical north-to-south supply route near Bamiyan, where the destruction of two ancient giant Buddhas earlier this year provoked international outrage, but he also raised hopes in Washington and London that other significant defections might follow, causing the regime that protects Osama Bin Laden to crumble.

Akhmadi also delivered a crucial boost to the morale of rebels preparing for an offensive that may come this week against government lines north of Kabul, the capital.

## HE'S MAD, YOU KNOW



Sean Langan, hanging out with Taliban troops near Kabul, discovers their loathing for Bin Laden and his Arab fanatics  
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Northern Alliance commanders indicated yesterday that they would be ready to strike as early as Wednesday night. Plans have been laid for attacks on three sides of Kabul, to be spearheaded by six generals. The aim, well-informed sources said, is to surround the city, then send in an initial force of 3,000 men to seize control of whatever is left of its infrastructure.

There were visibly more Northern Alliance troops on the streets of towns north of Kabul this weekend. Groups of fighters armed with Kalashnikovs and grenade-launchers were crammed into trucks heading towards the front line, alongside the occasional armoured personnel carrier.

On the outskirts of Golbahar, a market town about 30 miles from Kabul, builders worked frantically to improvise an airstrip ordered by General Bismala Khan, commander of the frontline forces and a former close aide to Ahmed Shah Masood, the Northern Alliance leader assassinated last month.

"We were told by our generals to expect movement within the next three days," said Abdullah Rakhim, a senior commander. The alliance wanted America to bomb Taliban lines, but would move towards Kabul even if the US provided no help, he said.

"All we are waiting for is the command and we will attack," said Akhmadi. "The Taliban are feeling the heat. There is nothing they can do about the airstrikes and they know the world is against them.

"They know that more and more people like me have now turned against them. There is a high chance of anti-Taliban uprisings, and there is nothing they can do about that, either."

The role of defectors such as Akhmadi could be decisive, and the Northern Alliance is doing everything it can to facilitate them. When Akhmadi first made contact with Ustad



Gaining strength: Northern Alliance mujaheddin are growing more confident of a successful strike south as cracks appear in the Taliban's ranks

Ata Mohammad, the rebel commander who had been his enemy during five years of fighting, the response was understandably circumspect.

But trust was built up through messages delivered by hand across the front line and through coded radio exchanges. It took Akhmadi three months in all to secure a guarantee that his men would not face retribution.

Similar negotiations are now said to be under way with other commanders. In desolate villages where former neighbours have battled against one another since the Taliban seized power in 1996, elders exploit breaks in exchanges of rocket fire to cross the minefields at night and deliver notes from those willing to defect but anxious for guarantees of safety.

"Mainly these are people who supported the Taliban, but now see that their time has come, so they are jumping ship," said a Northern Alliance spy who returned last week from Kabul.

"We know most of them personally. They are Afghan commanders who supported the Taliban for money or ideology. Now they don't want to be on the losing side."

Military observers draw a startling parallel between the struggles for control of Afghanistan and a national sport called *bazhuki*, in which horsemen with whips fight over the carcass of a headless goat: it is a dirty, debilitating game and the prize has seen better days.

Last week Haji Almaz, a senior Northern Alliance commander near Kabul, knelt on a carpet and constructed intri-

cate lines of almonds and chickpeas to illustrate how the rebels would grab the capital back from the Taliban.

"Defections are vital," he declared. "When the moment comes, the defectors will be in place with their troops behind Taliban lines. This way, we will attack from the front and the rear, squeezing the Taliban in a pincer movement. They will have no way out."