



## Obama Should Focus on Training, Not Troops, Afghan Lawyer Says

By Steve Scherer

Dec. 2 (Bloomberg) -- **Afzal Nooristani**, head of a U.S.-funded organization that trains Afghan defense lawyers in Kabul, said President **Barack Obama's** decision to add 30,000 troops to fight the Taliban won't solve the country's problems.

"We've had lots of troops in Afghanistan, and security keeps getting worse and worse," Nooristani, a native of the Nuristan province northeast of Kabul, said in an interview in Rome late yesterday. "If the U.S. wants to help Afghanistan, it should focus on Afghans. Besides, the cost of one U.S. soldier is 10 times the cost of one Afghani soldier."

While Obama promised a surge in troops that would bring the total foreign military presence in Afghanistan to 138,000, he also said the U.S. would begin drawing down its mission in the country in 2011.

"It will be clear to the Afghan government and, more importantly, to the Afghan people, that they will ultimately be responsible for their own country," Obama said.

The Afghan government has been working with the Rome-based **International Development Law Organization** (IDLO) to develop a justice system based on moderate Islamic law. The Taliban regime that was ousted by U.S.-led forces in 2001 left in place a system based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia. Accused criminals had no representation.

"Before, to get a confession, the police tortured people," Nooristani said. "Now that doesn't happen. If a confession is taken by force, it won't be accepted in court."

### Challenge of Corruption

Nooristani, a 35-year-old graduate of Kabul University's law program, said corruption is his country's biggest challenge. The Afghan justice system is "slowly" becoming less corrupt, he said.

Nooristani serves as the executive director of the Legal Aid Organization of Afghanistan (LAOA), set up in 2006 with backing from IDLO. His group, funded mostly by the U.S. government, last year received a grant of \$275,000. Some 40 Afghan lawyers affiliated with the group defend clients free of charge.

LAOA has handled 1,600 cases throughout the country this year, Nooristani said. The organization has offices in 12 cities plus an outreach program in 20 regions, and it's also involved in training lawyers and paralegals.

"Obama's message is to transfer more power to the Afghan people," IDLO'S Sumit Bisarya, a British graduate of Columbia University School of Law in New York, said in an interview. Nooristani "has accepted that responsibility."

### 'Defended Infidels'

Nooristani and other LAOA lawyers have taken on controversial cases including the defense of Sayed Pervez Kambakhsh, a university student sentenced to death in 2007 for downloading and distributing a paper on women's rights. Nooristani succeeded in getting a death sentence in the case commuted to a 20-year jail term. After lobbying by Nooristani, **foreign media** groups and foreign governments, President **Hamid Karzai** pardoned Kambakhsh in September.

An LAOA lawyer is defending a woman accused of adultery after she was raped by a government official. The Taliban sent a death threat to the lawyer on the case, Nooristani said. LAOA is also defending a journalist who printed a version of the Koran in a local language without including the original Arabic, a religious offense.

"During Friday prayers, I've heard the mullahs saying bad things about me over loudspeakers," Nooristani said. Because of death threats, he can no longer return to his birthplace in **Nuristan province**. "I know

them. They are serious. They say I've defended infidels."

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