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# South Asia

Jun 21, 2007

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## Taliban put up a new fight

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

KABUL - With the Taliban geared for their biggest push of the year to take control of southern Afghanistan, district by district, coupled with suicide attacks in the cities, Western intelligence believes that the killing of Mullah Dadullah was a big mistake.

The one-legged, charismatic and battle-hardened Dadullah, 41, was killed in mid-May in the southern province of Helmand in a US-led coalition operation. He had emerged as the overall field

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commander of the Taliban, as well as an astute diplomat: he had courted Pakistan to act as a peacemaker between the Western coalition and the insurgents.

Highly placed Western contacts familiar with coalition operations in Afghanistan told Asia Times Online that with Dadullah dead, the Taliban have become a much more elusive adversary and the "peace route" with Pakistan is now a non-starter.

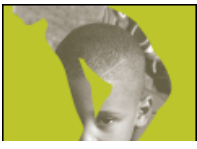
Dadullah was a natural leader who had been able to assimilate fighters of varied backgrounds and train them to follow a single coherent strategy. Maulana Jalaluddin Haqqani could possibly have taken his place, but he has been seriously ill, even rumored to be dead.

In these circumstances, the Taliban leadership decided to assign a number of seasoned commanders to different areas, where they would be in charge of their own tactics depending on local conditions. The idea was to scatter as many of them as possible to spread further already stretched coalition and Afghan National Army forces.

Although the commanders chosen were experienced, they were not well-known faces, and were thus able more easily to go

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about their business. For instance, Amir Khan Muttaqi was sent Kunar province, Mullah Kabir was activated in the Khost, Gardez, Paktia and Paktika areas, Mullah Bredar was assigned in the western zone that includes Ghor, Badghis, Farah and Herat.

For the southeast, the Taliban will keep coalition troops engaged with suicide attacks and guerrilla operations, while at the same time increasing operations in the southwest, such as in Badghis and Farah provinces.

Coalition troops are finding that when they focus on one sector, violence escalates in another. And they simply don't have enough resources to manage the whole of Afghanistan at the same time - especially when some of the coalition partners are not interested in ground operations.

The relative obscurity of the the new Taliban commanders also rules them out of becoming involved in any back-channel peace negotiations with Kabul. Indeed, rigid Taliban leader Mullah Omar is pulling their strings and there is no way he will ever sit with any Western coalition for dialogue.

#### Taliban on the move

As evidence of the new Taliban approach, southern Afghanistan has witnessed an array of devastating suicide attacks and guerrilla operations since Sunday, covering Kabul, Kunar, Nooristan, Khost and Paktia. There have also been incidents in Urzgan, Helmand and Kandahar.

The district of Mian Nashin in Kandahar fell and Afghan soldiers were forced to flee and call in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air fire. Similarly, in the Chor district of Urzgan, the Taliban seized key positions from where they plan a major push deeper into the province.

There was a major battle in the district of Grishk in Helmand between NATO forces and the Taliban on Tuesday. A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf, told Asia Times Online that the Taliban killed 16 NATO soldiers and destroyed three tanks. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

On Sunday morning, a suicide bomber blew up a police-academy bus in Kabul, killing 35 people and wounding 52. It was the country's worst bombing since the Taliban were ousted more than five years ago. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

The renewed Taliban activity is obviously of concern to the NATO command. Apparently as a result, Admiral William Fallon, the chief of the US Central Command, recently visited Pakistan for meetings with President General Pervez Musharraf, the vice chief of army staff, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director general of Inter-Services Intelligence.

US assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte have also been in Islamabad. The crux of this fresh interaction is that insurgencies do not have borders. Unlike previously, though, this does not mean that the US wants to go in hot pursuit of the Taliban in Pakistan. Rather, it wants to track them from the Pakistani tribal areas into Afghanistan.

The Taliban have several command centers in Pakistan, including in North Waziristan and South Waziristan, Bajur, Noshki and Chaman, from where recruits are sent to Afghanistan. But the Taliban also have hubs in Afghanistan in Nooristan, Kapisa, Kunar, Helmand, Kandahar, Farah and Badghis.

Massive bloodshed awaits Afghanistan's vastness, and there is currently no room for peacemakers.

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