

## Intelligence Officers Widen The Net In Hunt For Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

A crucial intelligence war is going on in southern Afghanistan, where American, British and Canadian troops are trying to glean better information about the Taliban while attempting to persuade Pakistan to close Taliban command centres and camps.

The efforts follow the failure of the American-led coalition and Nato to predict the ferocity and numbers involved in the Taliban offensive that started in the middle of last month. So far, 600 people have died.

"We were not surprised that the Taliban attacked but the extent of their preparations was surprising," a senior western military officer said in Kabul.

Intelligence officers from several western countries said the Taliban preparations took place through the winter in and around Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, in Pakistan.

Much of the blame for the lack of information has been placed on the narrow focus of the US military in the past. Until last year the coalition's intelligence operated only in the provinces of eastern Afghanistan and only as far south as Zabul province.

The critical provinces of Helmand, where 3,000 British troops are now deployed, and Kandahar and adjacent Balochistan were not covered. The Americans were interested only in catching al-Qa'eda leaders, who were believed to be hiding in the eastern provinces or in Pakistan's adjacent North West Frontier Province.

The Taliban presence farther south was ignored and, although Pakistan was helping American intelligence, Islamabad turned a blind eye to Taliban activities in Balochistan.

Condoleezza Rice, the American secretary of state, arrived in Kabul yesterday to try to bolster the struggling president, Hamid Karzai. She said he was renowned for his "strength, for his wisdom and for his courage".

But behind the scenes her main strategic goal on the trip, which included Islamabad, was to persuade Pakistan and Afghanistan to stop bickering and work more closely in combating militants along their common border.

Mr Karzai has repeatedly urged Nato and the US to get tough with Pakistan, which he accuses of supporting and sheltering the Taliban.

There are now signs of co-operation by Pakistan. Western officers say that for the first time it is deploying its Frontier Corps to try to seal the border between Balochistan and Helmand and Kandahar, although there will remain plenty of places where militants can cross.

Battle plans, intelligence and communication protocols are being shared with the Pakistanis for Operation Mountain Thrust, the counter-offensive against the Taliban involving British troops.

However, a senior western military intelligence officer expressed concern that the co-operation was, and would remain, limited.

"Mostly we read from the same script with the Pakistanis," he said. "But we know that there is always a page two which is kept under the table and we have to fathom it out." Western military and intelligence officers say that the Taliban have driven more than 100 Toyota Landcruisers across the border from Balochistan in recent weeks to mount attacks against British troops.

At the same time the Taliban are creating a lethal new cottage industry on the Pakistan side: the manufacture of improvised explosive devices. The components of the devices - electronic panels, triggers, explosive materials and the casings - are manufactured by households, which then send them to the Taliban fighters to be assembled.