

Al-Qa'eda Bankrolls Afghan Attacks

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

Taliban commanders are awash with cash and spending millions of dollars every month to launch attacks to disrupt preparations for October's presidential elections in Afghanistan.

Commanders of the ousted regime are said to have millions of pounds, donated by al-Qa'eda and other Islamic militants, to fund raids by gunmen based in Pakistan.

Documents seized from one Taliban leader arrested this month indicated that he had distributed £1 million to his fighters and arms suppliers in June alone. Mullah Sakhi Dad Mujahid led Taliban militia in south and western Afghanistan, with up to 2,000 men on his payroll.

"It shows the large sums of money the Taliban receive from their sponsors, which include al-Qa'eda," said General Bismillah Khan, the Afghan army chief of staff.

The money comes not only from Osama bin Laden's network, but extremist Islamist groups in Pakistan that have long backed the Taliban, and from the opium trade.



The opium trade in Afghanistan is still funding Islamic militants

Gen Khan's forces captured Mujahid, a former deputy defence minister, on July 6. They seized a satellite phone, a notebook of expenses and a diary of phone numbers including a mobile phone used by the fugitive Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, a close ally of bin Laden. Mujahid is now being interrogated by the Americans at Bagram air base near Kabul.

A US military official declined to say what else had been gleaned from him. But his arrest, along with the recent capture of several relatives and aides, has given American and Afghan intelligence officials a crucial insight into Taliban operations. The mobile number was traced to Quetta in Pakistan.

"Afghan agents made Mujahid ring Omar's number, but Omar put the phone down after Mujahid mentioned a code word that meant he had been captured," said Gen Khan. "It was just bad luck." The discovery that Omar is apparently directing operations from inside Pakistan has increased pressure on Islamabad to curb Taliban activities on its soil.

Pakistani officials have denied that Omar is in their country. However, Richard Armitage, the US deputy secretary of state, raised the issue on a visit to Islamabad last week. He said: "If these Taliban elements are able to cross into Afghanistan to conduct destabilising activities, this is clearly not in Afghanistan's interest, and not in Pakistan's interest, either."

In an interview with The Telegraph, the Afghan leader, Hamid Karzai, said: "The more we co-operate with our neighbour, brother and friend Pakistan, the more we will succeed. I am glad that Pakistan has begun a series of operations to capture members of al-Qa'eda from its tribal territories."

Bin Laden and his top aides are believed to be hiding in the mountainous Pakistan-Afghanistan border region.

Taliban fighters have been launching between two and four attacks a day in southern Afghanistan with a declared strategy to disrupt the presidential poll, the first to be held in Afghanistan. About 650 people have been killed this year in such attacks.

Taliban rebels are also targeting United Nations voter registration teams and aid workers to try to drive them from the country.