

Taliban attacks fuel tactical worries

Near miss on MacKay, suicide blast suggest improved capacity to gather intelligence

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FROM WEDNESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

NOVEMBER 7, 2007 AT 3:16 AM EST

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — The Taliban are getting increasingly sophisticated as they try to assassinate leaders, analysts worry, after a suicide bomber killed six Afghan parliamentarians among scores of others and rockets landed near visiting Defence Minister Peter MacKay Tuesday.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi refused to say whether his men knew Mr. MacKay was visiting a small Canadian desert base, about 20 kilometres west of Kandahar city, when insurgents fired two rockets at the outpost.

But a local Taliban commander who operates in Zhari district, near Forward Operating Base Wilson, said his group received a phone call from their superiors in Pakistan earlier in the day with specific instructions to attack the base.

"We got information that a big Canadian leader came to Zhari," the low-ranking insurgent said. "So we attacked him."

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Taliban are prone to empty boasting, and a military spokesman said the Canadians have no reason to believe that Mr. MacKay was targeted personally. The minister wasn't hurt, although four Canadian soldiers suffered minor injuries.

The insurgents were more successful later, when a suicide blast killed at least 40 people and injured 120 others during a visit by dignitaries to a sugar factory in a northern province.

It was the deadliest attack since the 2001 invasion, and the most effective against high-profile targets. Among the dead is the head of the Afghan parliament's economics committee, and the injured include the country's deputy agriculture minister.

"This shows the gravity of the situation," said Seth Jones, an analyst at RAND Corporation, who last visited Kandahar a few weeks ago. "The Taliban have improved their ability to gather live intelligence and execute on that information."

If a group of local Taliban did receive orders to attack Mr. MacKay, it would mark a departure from the insurgents' usual way of working, Mr. Jones said, because the Taliban are usually a loosely knit collection of fighting units. The insurgents get their strategic planning from above, but their masters don't often exert the sort of command and control found in a regular military operation.

In Ottawa, Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier said he did not think the attack was aimed at Mr. MacKay. "No, I do not believe he was targeted," he said. "These are things that occurred coincidentally in time and space."

Afghanistan's suicide bombers are also considered the worst trained in the world; a recent United Nations study found that although the number of suicide attacks increased sevenfold last year, the bombers often kill only themselves.

But the Taliban's co-ordination has been improving. In February, the insurgents learned of an unscheduled visit by U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney and launched a suicide attack on a northern base during his short stay.

Last week's fighting in Arghandab district also showed a degree of sophistication, as the insurgents kicked up diversions in several other parts of the province to distract government forces from the main offensive north of Kandahar city.

Still, Mr. MacKay looked unruffled and calm as he talked about the rocket attack, describing it several hours afterward as a typical episode in the war.

"There was a rocket attack that I'm told is not unlike some other attacks we've seen in the past," the minister said.

The Taliban often launch old Russian 107-millimetre rockets at larger military bases in Afghanistan, but they usually lack any aiming devices for the weapons and they rarely inflict serious damage. An accurate hit on a small base is far less common.

"It's the first time, a shell like this," Colonel Stéphane Lafaut, commander of the Canadian military's Operational Liaison Mentoring Team, told reporters who accompanied Mr. MacKay, speaking during the first moments after the impact. Rocket fire has been aimed at FOB Wilson only one other time in the past month, Col. Lafaut said.

"Today it seems they have a special interest, I don't know why, eh?" he said with humour, although he added that it's unclear whether the attack was related to the minister's visit.

The first rocket landed around 11 a.m. local time, and a pool reporter for The Canadian Press saw Mr. MacKay's bodyguards scramble for their helmets, clutch their guns, and quickly summon a light armoured vehicle to serve as an improvised bunker for the minister.

"There was an explosion. It was a loud bang," Mr. MacKay said. "When it happened, we heard the explosion, we heard the whistle overhead, we were told to get down and we did." He continued: "Everything went like clockwork. We were taken out of harm's way very quickly, put in an armoured vehicle, the people who I'm travelling with are consummate professionals."

A second rocket arrived about 15 minutes later and hit the base itself, a concrete-walled compound roughly the size of a football field.

With a report from Alan Freeman in Ottawa

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