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Taliban show media savvy

By Kevin Maurer
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The Taliban has The Associated Press and Reuters on speed dial.

Elias Wahdat, a stringer for Reuters and BBC news services in Khost province, said that every time the Taliban launch an attack or American troops call in an air strike, he gets a text message.

The Taliban will give its version of what happened, often claiming that American bombs killed civilians. It may take officials with the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan hours to put together a news release for the press. In the meantime, the Taliban version is already circulating.

Lt. Col. David A. Accetta, the 82nd Airborne Division public affairs officer and chief spokesman for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, said it takes time to verify the facts.

“The major difference between us and the Taliban extremists is that they are not bound by any regulations, laws or policies,” Accetta said. “They do not have to tell the truth and are more likely to use propaganda than they are to put out true, verifiable, factual information.”

But the lag time is leading to propaganda victories for the Taliban, experts and military officers said this week.

The information defeats — along with growing concern about confirmed civilian deaths — have put U.S. forces under scrutiny whenever civilians die.

A case in point is the ongoing investigation into the actions of Marine special operations soldiers from Camp Lejeune alleged to have shot civilians while speeding away from the scene of a car bombing in March.

On Tuesday, a special tribunal started to examine the actions of unit commander Maj. Fred C. Galvin and platoon leader Capt. Vincent J. Noble. At the end of the inquiry, the panel will recommend whether the officers should be charged with a crime.

Unverifiable spokesmen

Accetta said the Taliban use numerous anonymous or unverifiable spokesmen to put messages out on the Internet and in a newspaper in Pakistan. But most times they call reporters directly.

“We monitor what they say but usually don’t ever consider it as being even close to the truth,” he said.

He is confident that the Afghan people are smart enough to recognize that it is propaganda.

But Marc Garlasco, a senior military analyst with Human Rights Watch, said the Taliban have been very successful at using civilian deaths as a part of their information war against the Afghan government.

“Every civilian death in Afghanistan leads to more calls for the democratically elected government to step down. That is clearly the driving force,” said Garlasco, who just finished a draft report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

Afghan civilians told Garlasco that Taliban fighters force residents to remain in their homes as shields or force them to accompany insurgents on operations. A NATO source told Garlasco that the Taliban will also “seed an area with civilian

dead” to make it look like NATO and coalition forces killed them.

He found that at least 388 Afghan civilians — triple the number from a year before — were killed by airstrikes in 2006-07. According to U.N. figures, 314 civilians were killed by international and Afghan government forces in the first six months of 2007 — more than the 279 civilians killed by the insurgents.

That prompted President Hamid Karzai to plead with President Bush to suspend airstrikes.

One of the big problems facing NATO is that there is very little independent verification of the death tolls by reporters in Afghanistan, Garlasco said. Much of the fighting occurs in areas that are either too remote or too dangerous to reach.

The Taliban have filled the information void. There have been reports of multiple phone calls from the Taliban to news organizations in Kabul within moments of NATO airstrikes.

“It seems the Taliban are leveraging the time lag between event and verification,” Garlasco writes.

Col. Edward Reeder, former commander of the 7th Special Forces Group, said U.S. forces have about 90 minutes before a Taliban spokesman starts talking to the international press.

“What people need to understand is how good the Taliban are at information operations (and) what masters they are at disinformation,” Reeder said.

Reeder commanded the 7th Group for eight months in Afghanistan last year. He said the key in the information war was getting the facts out earlier. His soldiers also started to videotape airstrikes to prove that civilians were not in danger.

Accetta said the 82nd also uses the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police Public Affairs offices to counter the Taliban propaganda machine.

“Their press statements and releases often resonate more than information we provide and get out quickly as they use the native languages and we work through translators,” Accetta said.

Still, the U.S. military is often caught fighting a propaganda war with limited ammunition. And that can be costly in winning the support of Afghan residents.

“We’re in a sense winning the tactical battles,” NATO spokesman James Appathurai said in a CNN interview. “But we’re not focusing enough on the strategic battle, which is public opinion.”

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