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Taliban producing ‘new generation’ of tech-savvy fighters

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** Once seen as uneducated thugs, Taliban are producing dangerous new fighters who use latest digital technology to plan and publicise attacks*

KABUL: Once seen as uneducated thugs, the Taliban are producing dangerous new fighters who use the latest digital technology to plan and publicise attacks against NATO and Afghan forces, analysts say.

The militants recently released a video of a June 1 attack on a US military base in the eastern province of Khost, on the border with Pakistan, showcasing far more developed techniques to plan the assault than previously thought.

The footage shows the fighters, in military uniforms, being briefed by their commander using a model and satellite images of the target, Forward Operating Base Salerno. A huge truck bomb is seen destroying the entrance to the facility, before an assault force enters the base to carry out the second phase of the attack – wearing US military uniforms, according to the US-based company IntelCenter.

The blast and fighting that followed were filmed from at least three angles, showing the militants' multiple observation points – and their desire to produce a slick video afterwards for propaganda purposes.

Analysts say such organised and complex attacks generate more publicity, require fewer fighters and give the insurgents the appearance of being stronger than they may actually be.

"Maybe in some cases they only want the media impact. On other occasions, we say to ourselves that it looks really serious. These videos show that they have real skills and technical knowledge," a Western official told AFP.

The film of the Khost attack was first obtained by Al-Jazeera but later posted on the Taliban's Voice of Jihad website.

"Far from showing a Taliban force weakened and on the ropes, the video is a clear reminder that the Taliban maintains the ability to prepare and execute large-scale attacks," wrote IntelCenter, which monitors jihadist websites.

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, almost all electronic products were outlawed as un-Islamic. Photographs of living things were illegal, and ownership of a video player could lead to a public lashing. But now technology plays an essential role in the militants' reshaped strategy, with carefully-planned surprise attacks in places that previously were spared heavy assaults, said analyst Waheed Wafa. "Five years ago, for instance, the Taliban would attack in hundreds, mostly in remote towns. But now, 10 fighters can do an even better job in sophisticated attacks in big cities," he said.

"The Taliban also want to show that they are very clean, organised and high-tech, and that comes whenever a party in conflict feels that it has a chance to come back to power."

Afghan writer and analyst Waheed Mujda, a former official in the Taliban regime, added, "It is a new generation of Taliban, they are very high-tech and that is because they face a high-tech army as their enemy.

"They use GPS, Google Maps, cameras and almost every digital age technology. They can inflict more casualties on their enemy if their attacks are well planned."

NATO's US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan Interior Ministry dismissed the video as a propaganda stunt. It is "simply an attempt by the insurgents to sensationalise this action," ISAF spokesman Brigadier General Guenter Katz told AFP. "What this video really shows is the insurgents' selfish efforts to recruit and propagandise more young men to needlessly die for a failed cause."