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Kandahar: Assassination capital of Afghanistan

By Dawood Azami

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Kandahar - The southern Afghan city of Kandahar is accustomed to violence. It is, after all, the birthplace of the Taliban. But a recent wave of assassinations targeting the city's political elite has stunned even the most hardened observers.

History shows that whoever secures Kandahar, Afghanistan's historic capital, controls the rest of the country.

It is the home province of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and most of the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Mohamad Omar, is from southern Afghanistan. It is seen as the heart of Pashtun civilisation.

But southern Afghanistan is also the country's main theatre of war, where the Taliban insurgency has been at its fiercest.

Generation eliminated

In Kandahar, more than 500 killings of high profile political leaders and influential tribal elders have taken place over the past 10 years, according to figures from various sources including the author's own records.

The most notorious of these killings was that of Aimeed Wail Karzai, the president's brother, who was shot dead by his own bodyguard.

But other victims include provincial police chiefs, mayors, district governors, village and religious elders, as well as teachers, doctors and other civilians seen as supporters of the Afghan government and Nato.

There are targeted killings in other parts of the country but analysts believe those carried out in Kandahar could be more than the total number of killings in the rest of Afghanistan combined. These killings have become a weekly, if not daily, occurrence in recent years.

For the people of Kandahar, it feels as if a generation of leaders has been wiped out.

The "assassination" campaign intensified after the US and Nato troops surged south in 2010 in an effort to dislodge the Taliban from the region.

Their mantra at the time: "So goes Kandahar, so goes Afghanistan"; "If Kandahar falls, so goes Afghanistan".

Operations to clear Taliban fighters were viewed as key tests of the counter-insurgency strategy.

But it is precisely because stability came to parts of the south that the Taliban intensified their strategy of eliminating the elite. "The security situation has improved and further measures are being taken to improve security and governance. And that is why the enemies are trying to target government officials to slow this process," says Tooryalai Wesa, governor of Kandahar province.

Conspiracies and confusion

The Taliban have accepted responsibility for nearly all the assassinations. They have repeatedly threatened to target Afghan officials and "all supporters of foreign invaders who are working for the strengthening of foreign domination".

It is undeniable that the Taliban have gained a psychological advantage and publicity from these targeted killings. Even in this dangerous city long accustomed to violence, this has shocked people.

The killings have rocked the country's political elite and decapitated tribal and ethnic networks considered vital to securing stability.

And the situation has bred suspicion, conspiracies and confusion.

Many local people blame Afghanistan's neighbours, especially Pakistan for the killings - an accusation repeatedly denied by Pakistan and others.

The paranoia is embedded deep in the region's psyche.

"More than 40 countries have troops in Afghanistan and many more have their spy networks focus on Kandahar," said one villager who wished to remain anonymous.

"We don't know who is doing what here and who is behind all this mess."

Criminal gangs, drug traffickers and those with personal feuds and rivalries also seem to be taking advantage of this chaotic situation.

Such killings come against a more general backdrop of violence as roadside bombs planted by the Taliban continue to take lives and civilians are killed as Nato and the Afghan security forces battle militants.

"Each day when I go outside, I am not sure whether I will come home alive by the evening or not," says Abdul Hamid, one Kandahar resident.

But one of the biggest casualties of the killings is the lack of confidence in the city and its infrastructure. Many taking a government job know that their decision could have life or death consequences.

"I have been threatened many times, but I have accepted the risk because I want to serve my people in order to have a better future," says a local official who didn't want to be named.

The Taliban make threatening phone calls and leave "night letters" - notes pinned to doors in the dead of night - warning people to leave their government job.

"I have come from Pakistan where I lived as a refugee and didn't have any job," says one local government employee.

"What shall I do if I leave my job and what will I feed my family and children if I don't have a salary?" he asks.

'Hundreds and ones'

Other local officials have resigned or moved to other parts of the country. A number of senior officials have already escaped attacks. Lower level officials and civilians working for the coalition have also been targeted.

People cannot talk openly for fear of reprisals and are careful to criticise Afghan officials, Americans, the Taliban and neighbouring countries.

Another consequence of the killings is the vanquishing of the knowledge and wisdom of generations as tribal elders and village chiefs are murdered. These are the people central government in Kabul rely upon to hold together a restive population as conflict rages about them.

This has particular resonance because leadership is a very important theme in Afghan culture.

"You may lose a hundred but may not lose the one," says one famous Pashto proverb.

It is a sentiment many Afghans understand - and they fear the consequences for Kandahar as it continues to lose so many of the ones.