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Taliban's spring offensive likely to target Afghan leaders cooperating with government

By Walter Pincus

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When Taliban leaders return from Pakistan this spring to begin their annual offensive in Afghanistan, a senior U.S. commander believes they will undertake a major assassination campaign against local and tribal Afghan leaders and others who in recent months have begun cooperating with government officials and participating in the peace process.

The reason: While Taliban leaders have used the winter to withdraw to Pakistan to rearm and retrain their forces, U.S. and coalition forces have destroyed hidden support bases, carried out Special Forces raids on those Taliban leaders remaining in Afghanistan and deployed 110,000 more troops than there were last year, 70,000 of them Afghans.

"The enemy is . . . going to be focused on the leadership much more than it ever has, the political leadership, the people who are supporting the government and the government leaders," said Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, deputy commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan under Gen. David Petraeus.

Rodriguez, talking to reporters and others last week, provided new details to support the

generally optimistic view of Afghanistan recently offered by Obama administration officials and nongovernment experts just back from visits.

"We have reduced the support bases inside Afghanistan . . . [and] we'll continue to keep the pressure up on their leadership, all designed to reduce the effectiveness of the insurgency," Rodriguez said.

Over the past 12 weeks, with the Taliban less active, coalition forces conducted "operations to make the environment of the enemy much more inhospitable than it was last year," Rodriguez said. They discovered and cleared 1,250 caches of Taliban arms hidden in Afghanistan. Last year the number destroyed was 163, he said.

Pressure on the Taliban leadership that remains inside Afghanistan was applied through an increased counterterrorism program. Special Forces night raids were "ramped up" with the help of better intelligence generated from increased tips from local people who see more Afghan security forces around them, according to a senior U.S. official, who asked that his name be withheld. Some 85 percent of these raids took place without a shot being fired, and most saw the right person or people being taken in; 90 percent of them were local Taliban and not foreign fighters, this official said.

Rodriguez said that when the Taliban offensive begins in March, he believes "they will not be as direct in their confrontations as they were last year."

Instead, because of the different conditions, they are "going to be focused on the [local Afghan] leadership much more than it ever has," using "assassination hit teams, IEDs [roadside bombs], indirect things," Rodriguez said.

Why does he think that?

"That has been their response in the local areas each time we've seen it over the past year," he said.

Illustrating his point, the Long War Journal Web site reported last week that a Taliban regional commander last month kidnapped 21 Afghan tribal leaders in the eastern province of Kunar. He demanded that relatives of the hostages had to resign their jobs with the Afghan army, police or NATO forces before his captives would be released.

In situations in which increased security and better local government leadership starts to work, the Taliban "response is to go after those leaders," Rodriguez said.

Afghans who once fought with the Taliban are now successfully being wooed over to the government side.

"Now," he said, "there are reintegration councils built, and U.S. and international funds are now starting to flow in," with the result that it has drawn 1,000 Afghans, some 200 in just the past month.

The effort "has got to earn the trust and confidence of the people," Rodriguez said, "so those thousand have to be treated well, and the program has to be run effectively."

Faced with President Obama's date of a July start for the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a joint Afghan-NATO transition board is being put together to begin work on recommendations that would go to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Obama in the next month or two, Rodriguez said.

"Over time, obviously, we do want to reduce our numbers in specific locations, based on conditions, and then either reinvest that transition gain or dividend in a contiguous area or in the training mission, or ultimately begin to send some of [the U.S. troops] home," Petraeus said recently on "PBS NewsHour."

Rodriguez said some of those changes already are being made. He cited Zad, in Helmand Province, where a year ago there were two Marine battalions. Now, he said, there is only a single Marine company, plus some individuals because the Afghan army and police can provide the same level of security that just over a year ago took two battalions.

When U.S. forces went into the Helmand River Valley last year, Rodriguez said, "There were five of us to every one Afghan National Security Forces; now there's one-to-one in that area."

He said security is being expanded there as quickly as possible "to withstand the challenges that will come in the summer."

In discussing withdrawal, he said that the eastern section of Afghanistan was the "most complex" in terms of terrain and therefore "the last place where we would pull out combat troops."