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The Sunday Times

Taliban fighters being taught at secret camps in Iran

By Miles Amoores in Kabul

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THE Taliban fighters scurried up the craggy mountainside. As they neared the top, their 30-strong platoon split into three sections and they launched a ferocious assault on an enemy fort, opening fire from numerous positions.

The bullets they sprayed at the fort's mud-coloured walls were blank, however. They merely pretended to fire their rocket-propelled grenades. When they reached the desert at the foot of the mountain, they did not race away on motorbikes, but filed into sand-coloured tents to refresh themselves with tea and naan.

The attack was a training exercise overseen by Iranian security officials in plain clothes. The Taliban do not know whether they were police officers, soldiers or secret service agents. What they can say is that in camps along the border between Afghanistan and Iran, Taliban recruits are being taught how to ambush British, American and other Nato troops using guns and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

They are learning to attack checkpoints as well as mountain bases. Iranian instructors are also giving them target practice on desert ranges with Kalashnikov assault rifles.

In the past, Shi'ite Iran has opposed the Sunni Taliban. But western officials say Iran now wants to expand its influence within the Taliban movement.

A Taliban commander who has been trained in Iran said last week: “Our religions and our histories are different, but our target is the same — we both want to kill Americans.”

In recent months, senior American officials have accused Iran of playing “a double game” by training and arming the Taliban while supporting the Afghan government.

Taliban leaders interviewed by The Sunday Times last week provided the first direct evidence of how Iran is training insurgents on its own soil.

According to one Taliban source, emissaries travelled to Iran early last year to discuss a training programme with Iranian officials. The training began during the winter.

Working through local mediators, this newspaper persuaded two Taliban commanders who had attended the programme in Iran to travel to Kabul, the Afghan capital, to tell their stories. The men, interviewed separately in a partially constructed concrete building on the edge of the city, were both extremely nervous. “How do I know you are not spies and that you will not follow me when I leave?” said one before the interview began.

At times, their voices dropped to whispers as they spoke about their role in the insurgency and drank cups of tea on dirty cushions.

One of the commanders, from the central province of Wardak, described how he travelled to Iran with 20 of his men.

His journey took him south into Pakistan, then west to the border with Iran and on to Zahedan, a city of 600,000 people in southeast Iran.

The second Taliban commander, from Ghazni province in southern Afghanistan, took a group of his men on a five-day drive to Nimroz, in the southwest. From there, he crossed into Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan province, a hotbed of drug smuggling and tribal rivalry.

The militants paid a \$500 fee to Afghan people-smugglers using routes usually taken by refugees looking for work in Iran. They crossed the border at night in cars with the help of Baluch traffickers who guided the groups along dirt tracks to avoid checkpoints. After stopping to rest in the mountains, they headed out again at first light.

Finally, they were met by their Iranian instructors in white Toyota pick-up trucks and were taken to a village on the outskirts of Zahedan, an hour’s drive from the training camps.

There they were placed in basic compounds, each housing up to 30 Taliban fighters, mostly from the south and southeast of Afghanistan where the insurgency against British and American forces is fiercest.

Battered buses and pick-up trucks ferried the militants back and forth between the village and the camps every morning and night.

“Iran paid for the whole trip. We paid the travel fees to begin with and once we got to Iran they refunded us. They paid for our food, our mobile phone cards, any expenses,” said the Ghazni commander.

At one camp, a cluster of low tents erected in the shadow of a mountain, the Taliban fighters conducted live firing exercises, physical training and mountain assaults under the watchful eye of the plain-clothes Iranians, the commander said.

During a course lasting three months, the Iranian instructors worked in groups of two to five men. Their programme was split into three parts, each taking a month to complete.

For the first month, the recruits were taught how to launch complex ambushes on moving convoys. They learnt where to set up firing positions, when to trigger the ambush and how to escape before the enemy had time to respond.

“They were strong on the planning side. We would sit in the tents and they would take us through things like where the best escape routes were, making sure we had good cover and where to place our lookouts,” the commander said.

The second month was spent learning how to plant the roadside bombs that are responsible for most of the deaths of British soldiers in Helmand province. The insurgents were taught to use carefully positioned secondary and tertiary devices to kill or wound rescuers organising medical evacuations.

During the third month, the instructors taught the Taliban how to storm fixed enemy positions, climbing mountains in formation to launch attacks on checkpoints and bases.

“We were told ambushing was a very useful tool compared with a straightforward attack. They taught us how to select a good hiding position and how to limit the enemy’s response to our attacks by laying well- positioned mines,” said the commander. “We can kill a lot of our enemies this way.”

Both commanders said Iran also supplied them with weapons, often paying nomads to smuggle ammunition, mines and guns across the desert and mountain passes between Iran and Afghanistan’s western provinces. The nomads used donkeys, camels and horses to carry the military supplies into provinces such as Ghazni and Wardak, the commanders said.

Although the commanders believed that, after years on the battlefields of Afghanistan, they already possessed some of the skills that were taught in Iran’s camps, they agreed the training had improved their ability to launch more sophisticated attacks.

“I found some elements of the training in Iran very useful, especially the escape and evasion techniques I was taught,” said the commander from Wardak as he showed me video footage of his men patrolling on motorbikes with AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers slung over their shoulders.

The commanders gave no indication of precisely who was behind the training. Late last year General Stanley McChrystal, the US commander of foreign troops in Afghanistan, accused Iran's al-Quds force — an elite wing of the Revolutionary Guard — of undermining the efforts of the Afghan government and Nato forces.

“The problem with dealing with the Iranian regime is knowing to what extent these initiatives are conducted by local commanders and to what extent they are backed by the government,” said a western defence source. He added that, although he had seen no direct evidence, the accounts of Taliban training camps in Iran were “credible”.

American officials believe Iran's support for the Taliban has reached “troubling” proportions, although it is not on the same scale as its backing for Shi'ite insurgents in Iraq. The commanders' accounts suggest the number of Taliban fighters trained in Iran may already have reached the hundreds.

Taliban militants still receive much of their training in neighbouring Pakistan. Elements of the ISI, Pakistan's secret service, are known to train, equip and fund the Taliban. But a recent crackdown on Taliban safe havens in Pakistan has forced many insurgents to look to Iran for support.

“The military is pressuring the Taliban in Pakistan. It is certainly harder to reach places that were once easy to get into. I think more of my fighters will travel to Iran for training this year,” said the Ghazni commander.

Two weeks ago Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, said of the Iranians: “They want to maintain a good relationship with the Afghan government. They also want to do everything they possibly can to hurt us, or for us not to be successful.”

Days later, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran insisted he wanted to rebuild Afghanistan and criticised the presence of foreign troops.

The Taliban commander from Ghazni province said he had no doubt Iranian police and intelligence services knew about the training camps, however. “The government is not sleeping,” he said. “You just have to wiggle your ears in Iran and they will know about it.”