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Taleban rift ignites power struggle over who controls the insurgency

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Two of the Taleban's most senior military commanders are involved in a bitter power struggle, which insiders claim has split the insurgents' leadership council and could turn violent in parts of southern Afghanistan.

The commanders are vying for military control of the insurgency, district elders and mid-level Taleban commanders have told *The Times*.

Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir and Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor were both named as the successors to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taleban's second in command, who was arrested in Pakistan in February.

Mullah Zakir, according to reports at the time, was given responsibility for military operations, while his rival was put in charge of logistics. District elders in Helmand said that Mullah Mansoor was disappointed not to get his former leader's operational role, referred to as the Taleban's defence minister.

"When Mullah Baradar was arrested, Mullah Mansoor thought he would be his replacement," the elder with links to the insurgency said. "When Zakir was introduced as the defence minister, [Mansoor] was disappointed."

Tensions are reportedly highest in central Helmand, where British troops are based and where fighters loyal to both men massed before Operation Moshtarak, the US, British and Afghan offensive to clear the insurgents out.

Fighters loyal to Mullah Baradar have been forced to take sides, after his arrest in Karachi. Haji Sar Mualem, the deputy head of the Marjah community shura, said that relatives told him about the tensions. "There are problems between Zakir and Mansoor," he said. "Each of them says 'I am the commander in Helmand' ." Both men have supporters in Helmand, but sources said that Mullah Mansoor was trying to flood the province with fighters from his own tribe to wrest control from his rival. "He sent his soldiers to every district," one said. "There wasn't any fighting but it created tension."

Mullah Mansoor served as the Taleban's Minister of Civil Aviation and Transportation from 1996 to 2001. He has been linked to the narcotics trade in provinces bordering Pakistan according to Interpol, and in 2007 he was made shadow governor in Kandahar.

Mullah Zakir is a former detainee at the American detention facility at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba who was released in December 2007. He quickly rejoined the insurgency.

Mullah Mansoor reportedly asked the Taleban's leadership council for military control of Helmand after Baradar was detained. Mullah Zakir and his supporters refused. "He [Zakir] said, 'I'm the defence minister. I control all of Afghanistan, we should work together'," the elder said.

"Now there's a big division," he added. "Some of the members went to Zakir's side. Some of the members went to Mansoor's side." It wasn't clear last night if either man was in Helmand, or in hiding elsewhere.

A spokesman for Daoud Ahmadi, Helmand's Governor, said that he was unaware of the rift. Zabiullah Mujahed, the Taleban spokesman, meanwhile insisted that it wasn't true. "Mullah Zakir is the defence minister," he said. "He is Mullah Baradar's replacement. The Taleban don't have time to fight each other, they are too busy fighting their enemies."

Taleban commanders reached by telephone told a different story. Haji Mullah Ibrahim, who said that he was in central Helmand, insisted that Mullah Mansoor was his defence minister. He said that the tensions were nothing more than everyday friction between commander and deputy.

A spokesman for British Forces in Helmand refused to comment directly on the rift, insisting that their attention was focused on the population, the Government and the Afghan security forces — not on the Taleban