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The Guardian

## Pakistan Taliban chief Hakimullah Mehsud is alive, says spy agency

By Declan Walsh in Islamabad  
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### Setback for CIA after Pakistan intelligence official admits drone attack failed to kill the Pakistan Taliban commander

The Taliban leader in Pakistan, Hakimullah Mehsud, survived an American drone strike in January and is alive and well, a senior official with Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence agency told the Guardian today.

Mehsud was reported to have died in a CIA drone strike in South Waziristan in January but, although Pakistan's interior minister claimed he had been killed, the death was never confirmed by either US or Pakistani intelligence.

Today the senior intelligence official said he had seen video footage of the missile attack on Mehsud but other intelligence had since confirmed the insurgent leader survived. He declined to elaborate further.

"He is alive," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He had some wounds but he is basically OK."

Mehsud's apparent survival will be a blow to the CIA, which intensified efforts to kill the flamboyant young Taliban leader early this year after he appeared in a video alongside an al-Qaida operative who killed seven American spies at a base in southern Afghanistan in late December.

The failed attack on Mehsud came at the start of an unprecedented onslaught by CIA-controlled unmanned aircraft in the tribal belt. The CIA has carried out 38 attacks so far this year, the official said, compared with 49 in the whole of 2009.

"The US government is under pressure because it is unable to achieve much in Afghanistan. This is one way of hitting their al-Qaida enemies, as they define them," the official said.

Drone strikes are deeply unpopular in Pakistan because of civilian casualties. The New America Foundation recently reported that between January 2009 and March 2010 the drones killed 690 alleged insurgents and 181 innocent villagers. CIA figures put the civilian tally for the same period at 20.

The Pakistani official estimated the civilian toll was "between the two figures" but insisted that targeting had improved. "For the Americans, this is an effective way of doing things from a distance with little collateral damage. I give full credit to the CIA for this."

The Washington Post reported this week that the CIA has started using more compact drones and smaller missiles in an effort to reduce civilian casualties.

The intelligence official denied reports that the Taliban deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, had been captured in Karachi last January "by accident".

US intelligence pinpointed Baradar in a housing estate in a well-to-do part of Karachi, he said, but the raid to capture him was entirely Pakistani. "There was no American around," he said.

Baradar was being jointly interrogated by CIA and ISI agents and had yielded useful information, he said. For example, he claimed to have last met the Taliban leader in Afghanistan, Mullah Muhammad Omar, two years ago.

He also rejected claims that Pakistan had captured Baradar to scupper nascent Afghan peace talks, saying that Baradar had disdained President Hamid Karzai as "not even a real Pashtun".

In March, Kai Eide, the UN's former special representative to Afghanistan said he believed Pakistan wanted to prevent talks between the UN, the Afghan government and the Taliban, to retain control of the process.

The senior official said the ISI would be "very, very willing" to play a role in negotiations with the Taliban, but only if called upon by both the Afghan and US governments. For now, he said, Pakistan's spies are "sitting on the sidelines, watching".

"There are a number of different efforts and nobody knows what anyone else is doing. It's a very fragmented effort." He added that "if it's meant to confuse the Taliban, it's

working".

One stumbling block, he said, was the clashing policies of Britain and the US. "The British are more amenable to negotiations and talking," he said. "The Americans are attempting to create conditions where the Taliban will be forced to come to the table. In my opinion they will never achieve that."

A western diplomat in Islamabad said British officials were more inclined to talks than their US counterparts, but said policy had not been fixed in either country because "otherwise things would be happening".

The ISI official denied his agency retains close ties with Jalaluddin Haqqani, an al-Qaida-linked warlord whom America blames for recent mayhem in Afghanistan, including a suicide attack on the Indian embassy.

He admitted the agency had once been close to Haqqani but insisted that recent US allegations came from people who "lived in the past". He regretted that Pakistan had broken its links with the warlord because "otherwise, resolution of the problems in Afghanistan today would be so much easier for all of us".

The ISI was heavily criticised in a recent United Nations report into the death of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. The official described the report as a "sub-standard work with a clear agenda".

He said: "In the report, statements are made and inferences drawn on condition of anonymity and hearsay. Who in God's name does that?"

### Charmed life

Hakimullah Mehsud's apparent survival represents a second miraculous escape in the career of a youthful, ruthless militant leader.

The Pakistani government previously reported that the flamboyant tribesman, thought to be about 30 years old, was killed during a leadership struggle last August.

Despite his remarkable good fortune, however, Hakimullah's days as a Taliban leader may be numbered. According to a senior ISI official, his Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan organisation has been weakened by a sweeping army assault on its South Waziristan stronghold.

Mehsud's leadership has been challenged by other figures, too, including his rival Wali-ur-Rehman. "He may not be in the leadership position," the intelligence official said. "His rise was accidental. He was mister nobody, people found it difficult to accept him."

Mehsud rose to militant fame on the back of his ambition and showy cruelty. He sprang

to prominence in 2007 with the humiliating kidnapping of over 200 Pakistani soldiers in South Waziristan.

A year later, he led dozens of ambushes on Nato supply convoys as they passed through the Khyber Pass; in one instance he invited reporters to film him at the wheel of a looted American Humvee.

Hakimullah became Taliban leader in August after a CIA drone killed the Tehrik-i-Taliban founder, Baitullah Mehsud. He also became known for cruelty. In Orakzai tribal agency, which was under his sway, Taliban fighters preyed on minority Sikhs and carried out bloody sectarian attacks on Shias.

Whatever Mehsud's fate, the Taliban remain a potent force. Yesterday, a suicide bomber rammed his car into a checkpoint on the outskirts of Peshawar, killing five policemen. In North Waziristan, a clash at a checkpoint left four militants dead and injured one soldier.