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AP News

Ex-Pakistan spy found dead in tribal region

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A former Pakistani intelligence officer sympathetic to al-Qaida and the Taliban was found shot dead Friday in a northwestern tribal region several weeks after he was abducted by a previously unknown militant group, officials and witnesses said.

Khalid Khawaja disappeared in late March with another ex-intelligence official called Sultan Amir Tarar and a filmmaker. There was no word on the fate of the two others. Tarar also had deep militant links, having helped establish the Taliban movement in Afghanistan in the 1990s, when Pakistani security agencies were supporting the group.

Khawaja's killing points to the complexity of the situation in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, which host a deadly mix of militant groups from all over Pakistan and the world that are under intense pressure from U.S. missiles strikes and Pakistan army offensives.

Khawaja's body was found with gunshot wounds to the head and chest in the Karam Kot area of North Waziristan, which is under effective militant control.

Several hours after the body was dumped, it remained lying on the road, according to an Associated Press reporter who visited the scene.

A printed note attached to the body accused Khawaja of spying for the CIA and Pakistan's main spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI. It also accused him of being involved in an attack in 2007 on militants holed up in a mosque in Islamabad by Pakistani security forces.

The three men were first reported abducted in late March. Soon after, a previously unknown militant group calling itself the Asian Tigers claimed to be holding the men in a video delivered to local media.

Javed Ibrahim Paracha, a former lawmaker known to be close to militants, said he was called four days ago by a man who claimed to be from the group holding the three men. The man identified himself as Ali Raza and said the group was willing to negotiate the release of the three men in exchange for 120 militants imprisoned in Punjab, Pakistan's heartland. Raza asked Paracha to help in the negotiations. He declined.

The ISI has past links with Islamist militants and Khawaja often appeared on television speaking in defense of suspected extremists. He has claimed to be close to Osama bin Laden in the early days of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet Union and in a recent interview with The Associated Press praised him repeatedly.

Recently, he has spoken up in defense of five young American terror suspects on trial in Pakistan. He also filed a petition in a Pakistani court to stop any attempt by Islamabad to extradite recently arrested Afghan Taliban leaders, including the movement's No. 2 Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

It was unclear why Khawaja and Tarar, also known as Col. Imam, made the trip to the tribal regions, which are highly dangerous for outsiders. Extremists there are very wary of potential spies because of the key role of human intelligence in directing the missile attacks.

Taliban expert Rahimullah Yousafzai said recently Imam and Khawaja may not have understood that younger militant groups in the northwest would not necessarily appreciate their militant sympathies.

"Times have changed and a new generation of militants has emerged that is suspicious of anyone linked to the Pakistan Army or the ISI," he wrote in a column for The News daily. "Col. Imam and Khawaja must have felt that the militants posed no threat to them due to their past associations with jihadi and Taliban groups."