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Taliban Slay Six Village Elders Over Aid Money

By Alissa J. Rubin, Sharif Sharifullah

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In many of the farm hamlets of eastern Afghanistan, the elders have become used to late-night knocks at the door and masked Taliban men with guns demanding money, but this year was different.

When the men came, the elders refused to pay. The Taliban response in the impoverished Dwa Manda district of Khost Province was swift and brutal. They kidnapped 15 elders from villages that refused to turn over money they had received from the government for small development projects. A day later, the bodies of six elders were found, shot to death, said the Khost provincial police chief, Gen. Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai, on Tuesday.

“These elders were the heads of their village councils, and the enemy had killed six of those elders for no clear reason,” said a statement from the Interior Ministry.

“These wild killers did not show mercy to the tribal elders; they shot them and then escaped,” the statement said.

Tribal elders have been killed by the Taliban across the south and east of the country; in recent months, elders in Kandahar Province have been especially hard hit. At least 13 have been shot since February.

In the mid-1990s the killings were common practice in Khost as well when the Taliban were seeking to take over Afghanistan, said Arsala Jamal, the former governor of Khost, who is now the acting minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs. By killing just a few elders,

the Taliban were able to terrify the others and thus found it easier to gain dominance, he said.

The elders who were attacked earlier this week were from villages that had received grants worth just a few thousand dollars from Afghanistan's National Solidarity program, which is one of the government's most successful efforts to spur grass-roots development projects. The Taliban, hearing of the awards, demanded the money, said General Ishaqzai.

"The last time, the Taliban did the same thing in this place and they took all the money, which was given to the village elders," General Ishaqzai said. "This time the elders did not want to give the Taliban the money. That is why they took them from their houses and killed them."

The area where the attack occurred lies along the main road between Gardez, the capital of Paktia Province, and Khost, the capital of Khost Province. It has been free of Taliban activity for only brief periods since the 2001 American-led invasion that ousted the Taliban.

The Dwa Manda district lies along one of the main routes for smuggling insurgents, guns and money from Pakistan. Just over the Khost border in Pakistan lies Miram Shah, the headquarters of Afghan insurgents led by the Haqqani family.

On Tuesday, the Afghan Defense Ministry announced that 15 foreigners were among the 44 people who were killed in the crash of a private Pamir Airways plane on May 17. Three of the foreigners were Americans, said Maj. Gen. Ahmad Zia Yaftali, director of the army hospital. However, a spokeswoman for the American Embassy said she knew of only one American citizen who had died in the crash.

"Wayne Stancil was aboard the Pamir flight when it crashed," said Caitlin Hayden, a spokeswoman for the embassy. "Mr. Stancil was employed by Swiz Hewadwal JV, a joint venture. The embassy is in contact with his family, and we are not aware of any other U.S. citizens aboard the aircraft."

Sharif Sharifullah contributed reporting from Kabul, and an Afghan employee of The New York Times from Khost Province.