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The New York Times

Taliban Step Up Assassinations in Southern Afghanistan

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By Rod Nordland, Taimoor Shah -

KABUL — The Taliban have been stepping up a campaign of assassinations in recent months against officials and anyone associated with local government in an attempt to undermine counterinsurgency operations in the south.

Government assassinations are nothing new as a Taliban tactic, but now the Taliban are targeting officials who are much more low-level, who often do not have the sort of bodyguards or other protection that top leaders do. Some of the victims have only the slimmest connection to the authorities. The most egregious example came Wednesday in Helmand Province, where according to Afghan officials the insurgents executed a 7-year-old boy as a government informant.

As the coalition concentrates on trying to build up the Afghan government in the southern province of Kandahar, a big part of that strategy depends on recruiting capable Afghan government officials who can speed up delivery of aid and services to undercut support for the Taliban.

The insurgents have just as busily been trying to undermine that approach, by killing local officials and intimidating others into leaving their posts.

“They read the papers; they know what we are doing,” said a NATO official here, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with his government’s policy. “It’s very much

game on between the coalition and the Taliban.”

The assassinations have been effective in slowing the recruitment of government officials, he said. “Am I going to live through the workweek? No one should have to ask that question,” the official said.

Just since March, according to reports compiled by The New York Times, there have been at least 11 assassinations in Kandahar, mostly of low-level officials. These reports, which are not complete, do not include police officers or other officials killed in more indiscriminate attacks, like suicide bombings.

Among the victims have been Mohammed Hassan Wolsi, head of the agriculture and livestock cooperative in the province, shot April 2 by a man with a pistol while buying a loaf of bread at an outdoor stall; an 18-year-old Afghan woman named Hosay, shot to death in an auto-rickshaw as she rode home from her job at Democracy International, an aid group, in Kandahar; Hajji Abdul Hay, the brother of a prominent member of Parliament, shot in the bazaar in the city; a bodyguard named Hajji Mohammed who worked for the provincial council chairman, Ahmed Wali Karzai; and a district intelligence agent, identified only as Zia, killed on a visit to the city.

The youngest victim was a 7-year-old boy, identified only as the grandson of a farmer named Qodos Khan Alokozy, from the village of Heratiano in the Sangin District of Helmand Province. According to Daoud Ahmadi, a spokesman for the governor’s office in Helmand, Taliban insurgents came to his village and dragged the boy from his home at 10:30 in the morning, accusing him of acting as a government informant for telling authorities of their movements. They killed him by hanging him from a tree in the middle of the village, Mr. Ahmadi said. A spokesman for the Taliban, reached by telephone, denied that the incident took place.

Some of the victims have been more prominent, including the deputy mayor of Kandahar, Hajji Azizullah Yarmal, shot to death while he prayed in a mosque on April 19, and Abdul Majeed Babai, head of the information and culture department of Kandahar, killed in a motorcycle drive-by shooting.

Assassins narrowly missed in attempts to kill both Kandahar’s mayor, Ghulam Hayder Hamidi, and the Kandahar Province governor, Tooryalai Wesa, last year. Mayor Hamidi, in a recent interview during a ceremony to mark the reconstruction of a local mosque, shrugged off the risks. “When it’s time to die, no one can save me,” he said, pointing out that he travels with a modest security detail.

An exile who lived in the United States until he returned here three years ago, Mr. Hamidi said his daughter, who had come back to Afghanistan first, talked him into doing so as well. “She said you have to come here, that we cannot change the time of death and one day you will have to die and I will cry. It could just as well be from a car accident in the United States.”

The mayor acknowledged, though, that the assassination campaign has made it harder to hire government workers — a task already complicated by the low salaries offered by the Afghan government, compared to what international organizations and even the military pay to qualified workers. American officials said they planned to address that by helping to provide secure housing and security assistance, something low-level Afghan employees cannot afford themselves.

The NATO official said authorities have compiled statistics on an increase in assassination-style killings in Kandahar, but a request for that information was turned down by the American Embassy on the grounds that it is classified.

A spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force, the NATO force in Afghanistan, cautioned, however, that it was not clear whether all of the recent spate of killings can be attributed to the Taliban. “Due to lack of accurate information, it is difficult to determine if a killing is an assassination, an act of revenge or criminal activity,” Maj. Steven Cole said.

Often just the threat of assassination has been enough to drive people from their jobs. A Kandahar communications expert who worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross said he left his job after receiving a series of death threats. He asked not to be named because he feared for his life.

The expert planned to take a new job with the American-financed Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative, as the director of a program in one of the rural districts around Kandahar. Then, on April 15 two car bombings hit the program and other American-supported aid organizations, killing three Afghans and wounding dozens of Afghans and foreigners.

“My family pushed me to give it up,” he said. “I know so many people who are afraid to take jobs with the government or the aid community now. It’s a very effective and very efficient campaign; the armed opposition are using this tool because it works.”