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Warlord's death a boost for Taliban

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THE assassination of a key ally of Australian forces in Afghanistan will embolden the Taliban and leave a power vacuum that it would seek to exploit, analysts say.

Jan Mohammed Khan, a powerful tribal leader and former governor of Oruzgan province, where most Australian troops are based, was shot dead after two gunmen wearing suicide vests stormed his house on the western outskirts of Kabul on Sunday night. Killed along with Mr Khan was one of the province's three MPs whom Mr Khan had used as his proxy in the country's parliament.

The latest in a series of targeted killings has left Afghan President Hamid Karzai increasingly isolated and has undermined coalition claims of security gains against the Taliban.

The assassination of Mr Khan came hours before General David Petraeus ended his 13-month stint as US commander in Afghanistan and handed over to his successor, Lieutenant General John Allen.

The killing follows the slaying last week of Mr Karzai's half-brother and key southern powerbroker Ahmad Wali Karzai by his security chief in his Kandahar city home and comes as coalition forces have been talking up security gains in Afghanistan as NATO and the US begin to withdraw troops from the battlefield.

Mr Khan, known as "JMK" by friends and foes, was a key source of intelligence for Australian forces in Oruzgan, having frequently passed information to them about the movements of insurgents.

The Taliban, in claiming responsibility for the attack, said Mr Khan was killed for supporting international forces, referring to the assistance on night raids he and his warlord nephew, Matiullah Khan, gave Australian and US special forces.

The director of Afghanistan's Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Kabul, Haroun Mir, said the killing of Mr Khan would strengthen insurgents fighting Australian forces in Oruzgan and further discourage others from assisting foreign forces there.

"Of course it will make the Taliban stronger in Oruzgan," Mr Mir said. "It sends a powerful signal to anyone who is against the Taliban: you are not safe anywhere, even in Kabul."

Thomas Ruttig, of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, said Mr Khan's death would "create a large gap in the power structure of Oruzgan" that the Taliban could try to exploit but he doubted this was the motive for killing him.

"While we don't know yet why this happened, it could be read as more of an attempt to weaken Karzai than anything to do with Oruzgan, which the Taliban seem to treat as a place for R&R," Mr Ruttig said.

Australian military officials in Oruzgan failed to return calls yesterday but the loss of Mr Khan is likely to assist them in their attempts to support the province's official leaders, including the governor and police chief, both of whom Mr Khan had treated with hostility and was constantly trying to undermine.

Despite his standing and previous attempts on his life, Mr Khan took a low-key approach to security.