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Telegraph

Wikileaks Afghanistan: Taliban 'hunting down informants'

By Robert Winnett

07/30/2010

The Taliban has issued a warning to Afghans whose names might appear on the leaked Afghanistan war logs as informers for the Nato-led coalition.

Washington - In an interview with Channel 4 News, Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, said they were studying and investigating the report, adding "If they are US spies, then we know how to punish them."

The warning came as the US military's top officer, Admiral Mike Mullen said that Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, may already have blood on his hands following the leak of 92,000 classified documents relating to the war in Afghanistan by his website.

"Mr Assange can say whatever he likes about the greater good he thinks he and his source are doing, but the truth is they might already have on their hands the blood of some young soldier or that of an Afghan family," he said.

The US government has called in the FBI to help hunt those responsible for leaking tens of thousands of secret documents about the Afghanistan war.

Robert Gates, the US Defense Secretary, warned that sources identified in the documents now risked being "targeted for retribution" by insurgents in Afghanistan.

He pledged a "thorough, aggressive investigation" to identify the leakers and said that steps were being taken to restrict access to classified documents in future.

Bradley Manning, a 22-year old intelligence analyst, is the prime suspect in the leak inquiry. He is currently already in custody in Kuwait after being arrested for allegedly leaking other information earlier this year.

However, he was previously caught boasting that he had leaked tens of thousands of documents on the Afghan war to the Wikileaks website. The Pentagon suspects that Manning may have accomplices within the military.

Earlier this week, Wikileaks published 90,000 documents – mostly reports detailing operations by American and other allied forces in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009. The website is threatening to publish thousands more documents.

In his first comments on the massive leak, Mr Gates said that "the battlefield consequences of the release of these documents are potentially severe and dangerous for our troops, our allies and Afghan partners, and may well damage our relationships and reputation in that key part of the world." "Intelligence sources and methods, as well as military tactics, techniques and procedures will become known to our adversaries," he added.

The defense secretary promised "a thorough, aggressive investigation to determine how this leak occurred, to identify the person or persons responsible, and to assess the content of the information compromised."

Mr Gates promised to take steps to protect the lives of US service members as well as Afghans possibly exposed by the leaks.

The massive leak jeopardised the trust vital to gathering intelligence in the "field", said Mr Gates, a former CIA director.

"We have considerable repair work to do," he said.