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German Secret Service Helped Save Karzai in 2001

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A tip-off from Germany's foreign intelligence service, the BND, enabled American forces to rescue Hamid Karzai from a Taliban ambush in November 2001, according to previously secret records. The BND had monitored a phone call between two Taliban commanders plotting to capture and kill the future Afghan leader at a meeting with tribal elders.

The mission that brought Hamid Karzai to Afghanistan in autumn 2001 was extremely dangerous. The West had pinned its hopes on him. He had left his place of exile in the Pakistani city of Quetta and was on his way to the province of Oruzgan to meet tribal elders who had previously supported the Taliban. The plan was for the clan chiefs to join Karzai and thereby speed up the regime's fall. The meeting was scheduled for Nov. 4, 2001.

But in the rugged mountains of central Afghanistan, Karzai wasn't about to be welcomed by would-be allies. Instead, heavily armed Taliban units were lying in wait for Karzai and his entourage. News agencies later reported that the force numbered some 700 Taliban fighters. The man who went on to become Afghan president managed a narrow escape.

Ten years on, secret documents have revealed that the German foreign intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) saved Karzai's life.

On Nov. 1, BND records show, the BND's monitoring service had heard a telephone conversation between two commanders of Taliban chief Mullah Omar. One of them passed on

Mullah Omar's directive relating to Karzai. The Taliban had apparently found out when Karzai would arrive in Oruzgan. They knew his precise itinerary.

One of the Taliban commanders said the "friend of the Americans" should be treated "like Abdul Haq," and that that was an order from Mullah Omar. Abdul Haq, a Pashtun and an important ally of the United States government, had traveled to Oruzgan a few days before to negotiate with the tribal leaders. The Taliban captured him on Oct. 26. The US Air Force had rushed to his aid and bombed Taliban positions but couldn't prevent them from publicly executing him.

Rescued from the Taliban

When the BND's analysts at the agency's headquarters in Pullach near Munich realized the importance of the conversation they had overheard, they immediately informed the US Army. The US had assigned special forces members as security advisors to Karzai, but they weren't aware of the danger lurking in the mountains.

The warning came just in time. The Taliban had just opened fire on Karzai's fighters when US combat helicopters appeared, rescued Karzai and flew him to Karachi. The next day, the US Defense Secretary at the time, Donald Rumsfeld, told reporters about the dramatic rescue, without mentioning the German contribution.

Karzai himself made up a story to hide the help he had received from the West. He said he had been rescued not by the Americans but by a friendly villager who had told him about the planned ambush that day. After that he and his closest aides had fled through the mountains on foot in a three-day march, with no supplies other than some bread and green tea.