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Taliban claim new missiles downing aircraft

By Habiborrahman Ibrahim

9/12/2011

The Taliban say new missile consignments are allowing them to down increasing numbers of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aircraft. However, military officials and defense experts cast down on the claim, saying some helicopters have made forced landings after suffering technical problems, and any direct hits probably came from existing weapons.

An estimated 20 helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft belonging to both NATO and Afghan forces have either crashed or been forced to make emergency landings in the past six months.

In the deadliest incident of its kind since international forces entered Afghanistan 10 years ago, a Chinook helicopter carrying 30 US soldiers and eight Afghan colleagues crashed in Wardak province on August 6. NATO officials said the aircraft was probably hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, or RPG.

It was only one of several incidents involving helicopters within a matter of days. Helicopters reportedly came down in the southern Paktia province on August 8, in Khost on August 6 and in Kandahar on August 5. On July 25, a Chinook was brought down in the eastern Kunar region. NATO reports indicated that the aircraft were able to land and no one was killed in these incidents.

Taliban spokesman Zabihollah Mojahed told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting that the insurgents were hitting more aircraft because they had got hold of new surface-to-air missiles.

Without specifying the make or model, he indicated that they were portable, shoulder-launched

weapons, and were being gradually rolled out to insurgent forces around Afghanistan. So far, they had been delivered to units in about half the country's provinces.

"This is a very successful weapon, and the mujahideen in all provinces will soon be receiving it," he said.

Mojahed would not say what the country of origin of the new weapons was; he merely laughed and said the United States was making new enemies every day. "We can obtain anything we want, with the help of God," he said.

The Taliban spokesman said the international forces in Afghanistan "rely on their air power, but this will be defeated soon".

A spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force, Brigadier-General Carsten Jacobsen, said three of the force's helicopters had been shot down by the Taliban, while other crashes and emergency landings were caused by technical problems.

In the case of the helicopter crash that killed 38 people in Wardak, Jacobsen said, "It is not clear whether the Taliban have obtained a new weapon, or used old weapons." He said an investigation was still ongoing, but all the indications were that a new weapon was not used in this case.

As well as NATO, the Afghan armed forces have their own fleet of helicopters. Defense Ministry spokesman General Zaher Azimi acknowledged that some had come down, but blamed this on technical breakdowns.

"Such things happen during military operations," he said, "but they don't mean the opposition has acquired new weapons or become stronger."

General Abdul Wahab Wardak, commander-in-chief of the Afghan Air Force, said the insurgents' claim to have sophisticated new weapons was just talk.

"The Taliban use this kind of propaganda to boost the morale of their fighters," he said.

After 30 years of conflict, weapons like Soviet-made machine guns were in plentiful supply, he said, and it was most likely these that were bringing down aircraft as part of bolder, more aggressive tactics employed by the Taliban in anticipation of the withdrawal of foreign troops, scheduled for 2014.

"Afghanistan is a mountainous country and NATO pilots aren't familiar with the topography," the general said. "They also make the mistake of flying at low altitude, so they can be targeted even with ordinary anti-aircraft weapons."

These general was referring to weapons like the antiquated but powerful Soviet-manufactured DShk heavy machine gun, RPG launchers and other arms capable - with a good aim - of hitting a low-flying helicopter, and still widely available.

From 1986, the US government supplied hundreds of Stinger missiles to Afghan mujahideen to allow them to strike at Soviet military helicopters, specifically the low-flying gunships that could pin them down.

After Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Americans bought back as many of the missile systems as they could. Experts say that even if the shoulder-launched missiles the Taliban claim to have do exist, it is unlikely they are Stingers from the 1980s.

Not everyone dismisses the Taliban's claims of hitting more aircraft.

Nurolhaq Olumi, a politician from Kandahar and one-time general in the Afghan military, believes NATO is losing more helicopters to hostile fire than it is letting on.

"NATO generals are not telling the truth when they say their helicopters are carrying out emergency landings because of technical problems," he said. "The opposition forces really are hitting their aircraft as they fly at low altitudes."

Olumi said that if the Taliban had not yet got hold of new anti-aircraft systems, it was more than likely they would do so, and this would prolong the conflict. He said they would source such weapons in Iran or Pakistan - both countries that he believes "want NATO to fail in Afghanistan".