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## Helicopter rumors refuse to die

By Ahmad Kawoosh  
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MAZAR-E-SHARIF - Persistent accounts of Western forces in Afghanistan using their helicopters to ferry Taliban fighters, strongly denied by the military, is feeding mistrust of the forces that are supposed to be bringing order to the country.

One such tale came from a soldier from the 209th Shahin Corps of the Afghan National Army, fighting against the growing insurgency in Kunduz province in northern Afghanistan. Over several months, he had taken part in several pitched battles against the armed opposition.

"Just when the police and army managed to surround the Taliban in a village of Qala-e-Zaal district, we saw helicopters land with support teams," he said. "They managed to rescue their friends from our encirclement, and even to inflict defeat on the Afghan National Army."

This story, in one form or another, is being repeated throughout northern Afghanistan. Dozens of people claim to have seen Taliban fighters disembark from foreign helicopters in several provinces. The local talk is of the insurgency being consciously moved north, with international troops ferrying fighters in from the volatile south, to create mayhem in a new location.

Helicopters are almost exclusively the domains of foreign forces in Afghanistan; the international military controls the air space and has a virtual monopoly on aircraft. So when Afghans see choppers, they think foreign military.

"Our fight against the Taliban is nonsense," said the soldier from Shahin Corps. "Our foreigner 'friends' are friendlier to the opposition."

For months or even years, rumors have been circulating in Afghanistan that the Taliban are being financed or even directly supported militarily by the foreign forces.

In part it stems from an inability to believe that major foreign armies cannot defeat a ragtag

bunch of insurgents; in addition, Afghanistan has been a center of foreign intrigue for so long that belief in plots comes naturally to many war-weary Afghans.

The international troops hotly deny that they are supporting the insurgents.

"This entire business with the helicopters is just a rumor," said Brigadier General Juergen Setzer, recently appointed commander for the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, in the north. "It has no basis in reality, according to our investigations."

The general added that ISAF-North had overall control of the air space in the northern region.

But the persistent rumors that foreign helicopters have been sighted assisting the Taliban in northern Afghanistan were given an unexpected boost in mid-October by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who told the media that his administration was investigating similar reports that "unknown" helicopters were ferrying the insurgents from Helmand province in the south to Baghlan, Kunduz and Samangan provinces in the north.

Captain Tim Dark, of Britain's Task Force Helmand, was vehement in his reaction.

"The thought that British soldiers could be aiding and abetting the enemy is just rubbish," he said. "We have had 85 casualties so far this year."

Engineer Mohammad Omar, governor of Kunduz, refused to comment on the issue, but Enayatullah Enayat, governor of Samangan, also denied that the helicopters were moving the opposition around in Samangan.

"I am in contact with both national and foreign forces in Samangan," he said. "I have not seen any suspicious helicopters bringing in the Taliban."

The north has recently witnessed a spike in insurgent activity, particularly in Kunduz and Baghlan. Provinces that were relatively calm even six months ago are experiencing armed attacks, suicide bombings and even outright Taliban control over several districts.

In a district of Baghlan province, Baghlan-e-Markazi, residents witnessed a battle last month in which they insisted that two foreign helicopters had delivered the Taliban fighters who then attacked their district center.

"I saw the helicopters with my own eyes," said Sayed Rafiq from Baghlan-e-Markazi. "They landed near the foothills and offloaded dozens of Taliban with turbans, and wrapped in *patus* [a blanket-type shawl]."

According to numerous media reports, the Taliban attacked the district center, and the district police chief along with the head of counter-narcotics and a number of soldiers were killed.

Commander Amir Gul, district governor of Baghlan-e-Markazi, insisted that the Taliban fighters had been delivered by helicopter.

"I do not know to which country the helicopters belonged," he told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "But these are the same helicopters that are taking the Taliban from Helmand to Kandahar and from there to the north, especially to Baghlan."

According to Amir Gul, the district department of the National Security Directorate had identified the choppers, but it refused to comment.

Baghlan police chief, Mohammad Kabir Andarabi, said that his department had reported to the central government that foreign helicopters were transporting the Taliban into Baghlan.

The Baghlan provincial governor, Mohammad Akbar Barikzai, told a news conference on October 21 that his intelligence and security services had discovered that unidentified helicopters were landing at night in some parts of the province.

"We are investigating," he said.

Rumors have reached the point where US ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, felt compelled to address them last week at a ceremony honoring the more than 5,500 Afghan police and soldiers who have died during the present war.

The reports were "outrageous and baseless", said Eikenberry, as reported by McClatchey newspapers. "We would never aid the terrorists that attacked us on September 11, that are killing our soldiers, your soldiers and innocent Afghan civilians every day."

Afghan political analysts have woven elaborate theories as to why the foreign forces would be helping the Taliban.

According to Rahim Rahimi, a professor at Balkh University, America and the United Kingdom are trying to keep all of Afghanistan insecure, so that people feel the need for the foreign forces.

"They will try and destabilize the north any way they can," Rahimi said. "It is a good excuse to expand their presence in the area, to get a grip on the gas and oil in Central Asia."

Fighting Islamic extremists was one way to insert themselves into the area without provoking a fierce reaction from Russia and the Central Asian governments, he added.

Numerous websites have devoted blogs, columns and "investigative reports" to the helicopter rumors; literally everyone has heard the whispers, and many, if not most, believe them. It provides an added reason to suspect and fear the foreign forces, as well as an explanation for the rapid spread of the insurgency throughout the country.

In the end, it may not really matter whether the rumors are ever substantiated. The firm belief that Afghans have in them can determine attitudes and behavior, further fueling mistrust of the Westerners in their midst.