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Afghan Officials Say They Captured Taliban Spokesman

By Farouq Jan Mangal and Rod Nordland

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Afghan and coalition forces may have captured a prominent spokesman for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, three Afghan officials said Monday.

An Afghan government official in Saw Hawza District said Mr. Mujahid was among suspects detained during joint military operations in the remote district in Paktika Province. A second government official in Paktika confirmed the account. Both spoke anonymously because they were not authorized to release the information.

Mr. Mujahid is one of two official Taliban spokesmen, responsible for the group's publicity in eastern and northern Afghanistan, but he has emerged as the insurgency's most active voice.

Afghan and ISAF officials have maintained that Mr. Mujahid is not an individual, but rather a persona used by a number of Taliban insurgents adopting the same name and telephone number and operating from just across the border in Pakistan.

On Sunday, he was responsible for e-mailing copies of a secret Afghan and coalition security plan for protecting the upcoming loya jirga, a grand gathering of Afghans convened by President Hamid Karzai. While officials denied that the security plan, which was also posted on the Taliban Web site, was genuine, if it was a fake, it was a very elaborate one. Many details in it,

such as private phone numbers of intelligence officers, made it appear legitimate.

”We strenuously deny that,” said Lutfullah Mashal, the spokesman for the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence agency. “It’s not our plan, or if it is our plan, it’s the previous loya jirga plan,” he said, speaking to journalists Monday. “The plan Zabiullah Mujahid sent to you — he sent it to me also in my e-mail — if it was the genuine plan, then the Taliban would not have made it public, they would have used it.”

Gen. Aziz, the commander of Afghan Local Police in Paktika Province, said informants led authorities to the suspect, who confessed to being Mr. Mujahid, but maintained he was one of several insurgents to use that alias. General Aziz uses only one name, a common practice in Afghanistan.

A spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force said they were aware of the reports but had no confirmation of the arrest. They also were unsure if there were any coalition operations in that area.

The Taliban have been active in Saw Hawza District and two weeks ago killed the district governor.

Another government official stressed that the arrest was still unconfirmed. “One of those detained may have been the spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, but we are not sure yet,” said Mohlis Afghan, a spokesman for the governor of Paktika Province, which is in eastern Afghanistan along the Pakistan border.

Taliban insurgents attacked the last loya jirga, narrowly missing President Karzai with a rocket attack, and prompting him to dismiss his interior and intelligence ministers.

Mr. Mujahid spoke often to Afghan journalists by telephone, although never in person, and many of them maintain that his voice has not changed at least in the past year, suggesting he is a single individual, as he — or his persona has insisted is the case.

General Aziz said the person authorities captured confessed to being “the Paktika Province Zabiullah Mujahid,” and that he told his interrogators that he was one of several persons using that name who fed reports to a central figure who then disseminated them. He said each province had a Zabiullah Mujahid figure, General Aziz added.

Mr. Mashal dismissed Mr. Mujahid’s purported press coup as proof that the Taliban were unable to mount an attack on this year’s loya jirga. “So now they’re relying on a kind of psy-ops instead,” he said. Mr. Mashal said he was unaware of reports that Mr. Mujahid had been captured.

Whether a persona or real person, Mr. Mujahid was regarded even by his enemies as an effective communicator, reacting quickly to events and using a variety of new media to get the Taliban’s message out.

Mr. Mujahid could not be reached for comment Monday.

Farouq Jan Mangal reported from Khost, Afghanistan, and Rod Nordland from Kabul. Sangar Rahimi and Sharifullah Sahak contributed reporting from Kabul.