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The Telegraph

## Taliban paid £100 a month to stop fighting

By Sean Rayment,

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The “reintegration” programme, which has the full support of Nato, is intended to keep them from attacking troops from the International Stabilisation and Assistance Force (ISAF).

Those who have attacked and killed British forces are also effectively given an amnesty, which means they will never be put on trial.

The amnesty extends to all Taliban fighters, including those who have taken part in atrocities, such as murdering children, beheadings and hanging women.

The agreement is part of a policy signed by the British Government in which insurgents are being allowed to “walk off the battlefield” and enter a “reintegration” scheme.

Taliban joining the programme are not interrogated but instead are asked to complete a questionnaire explaining their reasons for joining the insurgency.

The strategy has been designed to encourage rank and file Taliban to stop fighting and instead return to their communities with “dignity and honour”.

More than 2,700 insurgents have been reintegrated into mainstream Afghan society since October 2010, with 800 now described as “showing interest in leaving the Taliban”.

Of those, about 90 are from Helmand, where nearly 400 British troops have been killed and more than 5,000 injured.

The reintegration policy has already produced some startling results. In northern Afghanistan, about 900 former Taliban have left the insurgency and violence has decreased by 30 per cent.

But it is not without risk. Maj Gen David Hook, the director of the Joint Force Integration Cell in Kabul, admitted in an interview with The Sunday Telegraph that the programme would be difficult for many British families to accept but insisted that reintegration was vital if peace was to be achieved.

The British general, who previously served as a commander in southern Afghanistan, said he saw some horrendous examples of Taliban brutality, which he said he would have “personally found difficult to forgive”.

The general confirmed that even if the insurgent who murdered five members of the Grenadier Guards battle group at a check point in Nad e’Ali in November 2009 entered the scheme, he would not be prosecuted. “This is an Afghan process which the international community signed up to,” said Maj Gen Hook.

“My role is to support the Afghans in that process. This idea of forgiveness has been agreed by the international donors and the UK has given £6.5 million and helped design the programme to deliver peace at the local level.

“We accepted large numbers of IRA back into our own society because we wanted peace in Northern Ireland and I don’t see it any different in Afghanistan.”

Taliban who want to leave the insurgency enter a three-month training programme of “de-indoctrination” where they are taught the values of good citizenship and must vow to sever all links with

al-Qaeda, take no further part in violence and uphold the laws of Afghanistan.

Islamic scholars also provide lessons explaining that the true path of Islam is non-violent. During this period volunteers are paid a stipend of about £100 a month.

“We’ve had more than 2,700 Taliban come across and only five have returned to the insurgency,” said Maj Gen Hook.

He said many of those who joined the Taliban had simply had enough of fighting and wanted to return to their families. “General John Allen [the American commander of the ISAF] talks about three natural ways of leaving the Taliban – killed, captured or reintegrated,” he said.

“The prospect of death is a great motivating force. The insurgents are feeling the pinch after a very effective summer of fighting by Nato. The insurgents know that if they continue fighting they will be killed.”

The money — there is a total of £98 million — is handed out by the Afghans who run the scheme, which is under the supervision of Maj Gen Hook.

Those who complete the process are offered a period of vocational training and efforts are made to establish whether they will be welcomed back by their communities.

Maj Gen Hook said: “It’s not a case of, ‘Come in and we’ll give you £100 a month.’ Some of these negotiations take weeks while people try to resolve the grievances that are keeping them in the insurgency. Once their grievance has been addressed it’s another powerful reason why they won’t become recidivistic.”

He said it was important to distinguish between draining the Taliban of its numbers and surrendering to them. “This programme is about an individual coming back and seeking forgiveness from his community and the community willing to accept them back,” he said.

“It is not surrender. That forgiveness provides a strong bond between the individual and the community, which is perhaps better than some of the previous attempts [to get men to leave the Taliban] where people have been paid to stop fighting but return to the fight once the money has gone.”

The idea is based on a concept of “afwra”, part of the code that governs behaviour among Pashtuns, the ethnic group from which the Taliban tends to be drawn.

“Afwra is about forgiveness, so both sides have to forgive for it to work and when that forgiveness is given by both sides they lock into each other, which makes it less likely to break down,” he said.

Contact is made with the Taliban by Afghan “outreach” teams venturing into rural areas and trying to establish the reasons why young men are joining the insurgency.

Research had shown that many join the insurgency because of a grievance that is not addressed by central government. Some Afghan men turn to the Taliban for help.

In Helmand, for example, the governor of the province believes that the insurgency could be reduced by 25 per cent if disputes over land rights could be resolved. Maj Gen Hook said: “If you address the grievance then those young men don’t want to fight because there is no reason to fight.”

Despite the relative success of the programme, he admitted that the number of Taliban leaving the insurgency had not been as high as expected.

“There was an expectation that the programme was going to be more successful than it has been and that it is one of the challenges we face,” he said.

“It was designed by people whose experience was Iraq, which from a tribal aspect was far simpler and there was a degree of optimism at the start of the programme but the tribal dynamics

in Afghanistan are such that the programme was never going to be the silver bullet that perhaps people thought.

“I see it as a slow process which will eventually reach a tipping point.”

However, critics of the scheme have warned that too few of those defecting are actual insurgents, and that it is failing to undermine the rebels in their southern heartlands.

Hanif Atmar, a former interior minister, said last week: “Of around 30,000 insurgents, only eight per cent have reconciled so far — and 99 per cent of them are not from the south.

“Frankly speaking, it does not work. The eight per cent that are reconciled, most of them are not genuine insurgents, particularly not from the regions that matter.”