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A more vicious, sinister breed of Taliban moves into Kandahar

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — The face of the war in southern Afghanistan is becoming more sinister as a fanatical wing of the Taliban, with strong links to al-Qaida, has moved into the region.

The Haqqani network is operating in Kandahar alongside more traditional - some would say moderate - elements of the Taliban, say U.S., Afghan and Canadian officials.

The group of hardcore, highly-trained terrorist cells claimed responsibility for last year's attempted assassination of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the deadly attack on Kabul's Serena Hotel.

The organization is headed by the elderly Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former favourite of the CIA during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, but since the fall of the Taliban he has been considered a rogue commander who has turned his sights on U.S. and NATO forces.

His son Sirajuddin Haqqani, with a \$200,000 US bounty on his head, controlled most of the Taliban combat elements in corrugated mountain passes of eastern Afghanistan along the Pakistani border.

But his influence crept south throughout much of last year, say Afghan civilian groups that have contact with militants.

"We have been told they are here and al-Qaida is with them," said the director of Kandahar's Peace and Reconciliation Office, Haji Aga Lalai, in an interview with The Canadian Press.

Lalai, whose office tries to convince Taliban fighters to turn themselves in exchange for land, houses and money, is on the cellphone with militants almost on a daily basis.

American officials, speaking on background, echoed the concern and described the Haqqanis as one of the biggest threats facing NATO and U.S. forces.

The Canadian military refused comment for this story.

But documents obtained under access to information laws show as early as last spring, the army realized something new was afoot and a possibly more dangerous foe had stepped onto the battlefield.

The first indication came in an attack March 2, 2008, in which Trooper Michael Yuki Hayakaze was killed in what appeared to be a well co-ordinated attack.

"Canadian Battle Group elements conducting a patrol in support of the ongoing Relief in Place, near Mushan in Panjwahi district were engaged by (blank) IED strikes, one of which resulted in a Canadian fatality," said a document prepared just days after the attack by Afghanistan Intelligence Response Team.

The documents, obtained by federal New Democrats and The Canadian Press, speculate that the attacks were carried out by someone new and point to a "possible transition" in insurgent tactics.

The analysis proved to be prophetic.

Within weeks Canadian troops were fighting intense, up close, pitched battles with Taliban fighters, who had until last spring preferred to bleed NATO forces with remotely detonated - or trip-wired - roadside bombs.

The fighting quality of the new militants also shocked soldiers.

Canadians were used to battling a tough, but ragtag band of undisciplined Taliban, who routinely emptied their AK-47 magazines in one burst of ill-aimed fire.

All of a sudden they were up against seasoned fighters who knew most of the ambush

tricks and didn't flinch in a firefight.

Insurgents have since returned to roadside bombings, killing 11 Canadian soldiers since December, keeping the pressure up in an unusually intense winter campaign, a time when militants usually rest and regroup.

Sean Maloney, a professor of history at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ont., said the change is an indicator that the Haqqanis, al-Qaida and other hardliners have taken a greater hand training fighters under the shelter of the ungoverned tribal regions of Pakistan.

They've stepped in to southern Afghanistan because NATO had killed off some many senior and mid-level Taliban commanders, creating a leadership vacuum, he said.

"They're having to bring other pianists, if you will, to their concert because their violinists have been wiped out," Maloney said in an interview.

"I think we're going to see more and more of this and I think it is specifically because of the affects of the previous year-and-a-half of operations."

A spokesman for the Taliban conceded that the Haqqani group had moved into Kandahar as well as nearby Helmand province to provide training, support - particularly in bomb-making - and to carry out attacks.

But Zabiullah Mujahid denied they had in any way subordinated themselves to the terrorist group.

"We are all fighting for Islam," he said in a telephone interview from an undisclosed location.

Maloney said the Haqqanis represent a more incidious threat because they are steeped in hardline Islamic movement; they have few ties to the local population and will "likely fight an unconstrained war" with NATO forces.

Signs of that have already emerged with the horrific attack on 15 young school girls, who had acid sprayed in their faces outside the Mirwais Mena Girl's School in Kandahar last November.

There has been a co-ordinated, relentless campaign to silence moderate voices with the assassination of local religious leaders, the latest of which happened Friday when Mullah Barrah, a member of the provincial shura, was gunned down on his way to mosque in the border town of Spin Boldak.

In each of the incidents, no one has claimed responsibility.

Lalai said he has not heard of the Haqqanis being directly involvement in specific attacks, but has his own indicator of their presence.

Fear.

In the last three months of 2008, the number Taliban who decided to take up his offers of written amnesty slowed to a trickle.

Only 11 militants have decided to lay down their arms, compared with 28 during the same period last year.

"They're scared if they get caught participating in the reconciliation program that they'll be killed," he said.