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Pentagon Jams Web, Radio Links of Taliban

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WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration is starting a broad effort in Pakistan and Afghanistan to prevent the Taliban from using radio stations and Web sites to intimidate civilians and plan attacks, according to senior U.S. officials.

As part of the classified effort, American military and intelligence personnel are working to jam the unlicensed radio stations in Pakistan's lawless regions on the Afghanistan border that Taliban fighters use to broadcast threats and decrees.

U.S. personnel are also trying to block the Pakistani chat rooms and Web sites that are part of the country's burgeoning extremist underground. The Web sites frequently contain videos of attacks and inflammatory religious material that attempts to justify acts of violence.

The push takes the administration deeper into "psychological operations," which attempt to influence how people see the U.S., its allies and its enemies. Officials involved with the new program argue that psychological operations are a necessary part of reversing the deterioration of stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Taliban and other armed groups have carried out a wave of attacks in the two countries. U.S. officials believe the Taliban enjoy an advantage by being able to freely communicate threats and decrees.

In Pakistan, Taliban leaders use unlicensed FM stations to recite the names of local Pakistani government officials, police officers and other figures who have been marked for death by the group. Hundreds of people named in the broadcasts have later been killed, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials.

"The Taliban aren't just winning the information war -- we're not even putting up that much of a fight," said a senior U.S. official in Afghanistan. "We need to make it harder for them to keep telling the population that they're in control and can strike at any time."

The new efforts were described by an array of U.S. officials, several with firsthand knowledge of the technologies and tactics used to block the radio stations and Web sites. The Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Central Intelligence Agency declined to comment.

Psychological operations have long been a part of war, famously in World War II when "Tokyo Rose" broadcast English-language propaganda to Allied troops. More recently, some militaries have used high-tech methods. During the December-January war in Gaza, Israeli forces sent cellphone text messages to alert Palestinian civilians to impending strikes and encourage them to turn against the militant group Hamas.

The Obama administration's recently released strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan calls for sending 4,000 U.S. military trainers to Afghanistan and sharply expanding economic aid to Pakistan. The U.S. may also provide radio-jamming equipment to the Pakistani government, according to officials familiar with the plans.

The new push reflects the influence of Gen. David Petraeus, who runs the military's Central Command and has long

been a major proponent of using psychological operations to reduce popular support for armed Islamist groups.

Another supporter, Richard Holbrooke, the administration's special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, publicly alluded to the new program late last month. He told reporters there were 150 illegal FM radio stations in Pakistan's Swat Valley, which allowed militants to go "around every night broadcasting the names of people they're going to behead or they've beheaded."

Mr. Holbrooke likened the Taliban radio stations to Rwanda's Radio Mille Collines, a virulently sectarian broadcaster widely believed to have helped fuel the Rwandan genocide. The U.S. considered jamming the station in the 1990s, but ultimately chose not to.

"Nothing has been done so far" about impeding the Taliban communications, Mr. Holbrooke said. "We have identified the information issue ... as a major, major gap to be filled."

Psychological operations can be controversial. In Iraq, the Pentagon at one point ran a program that paid Iraqi journalists to run articles and opinion pieces supportive of U.S. war aims and the Iraqi central government. Critics called it government-funded propaganda, while the Bush administration defended the effort.

Henry A. Crumpton, a former State Department counterterrorism chief who led the CIA's Afghanistan campaign in 2001 and 2002, warned against relying too heavily on high-tech solutions such as disrupting militant radio broadcasts. "Those can be very effective, but they're -- underscore -- short-term tactics," he said.

Still, many military officials believe that stabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan requires gradually diminishing the Taliban's public standing while simultaneously building popular support for more moderate local political and religious institutions allied with the U.S.

"It's not an issue of trying to persuade your average Pakistani farmer to love the U.S.," a U.S. official said. "The idea, frankly, is to muddy the water a bit."

As part of this push, the U.S. has started U.S.-funded radio stations in many rural parts of Afghanistan. In one example, Army Special Forces teams in eastern Paktia, a restive Afghan province that abuts the Pakistani frontier, put on air a radio station late last year called "the Voice of Chamkani," referring to the village where the U.S. base is located, and distributed hundreds of radio receivers.

According to an account in the current issue of "Special Warfare Magazine," an Army publication on special operations, the U.S.-run radio station has worked to build support for the Afghan national government by highlighting local development projects that were approved by Kabul.

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