

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Bloodshed to escalate with coming U.S. surge, Taliban says

Fighters planning to ramp up violent summer campaign

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Taliban fighters say they are planning a bloody summer campaign of buried bombs and staged ambushes in rural areas and a rash of multiple co-ordinated suicide bombings and assassinations in urban Kandahar.

Designed to spread terror across the most densely populated areas of this province, the militants' ramped-up battle plan is a response to the impending surge of U.S. troops and retrenching of other forces here.

After two weeks of interviews with Taliban, close observers and Afghan government officials from some of the province's most troubled districts, a picture emerges of what to expect from what may be the most intense fighting season in years - and places nervous civilians squarely in the crosshairs.

"We have new plans, new tactics," a Taliban logistics director based in the volatile Panjwai district says. He recently returned from high-level meetings with militant commanders in Quetta, Pakistan, and spoke about plans on condition his name remains unpublished.

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"The new strategy of fighting is very important for us," he said. "It will be very dangerous for the government and for foreign troops."

Central to the summer strategy is a two-pronged terror campaign currently being mapped out by Taliban planners in a mountain refuge in northern Maywand district. The area links Afghanistan's Helmand and Kandahar provinces and is poised to become a focal point of the war when U.S. troops deploy there.

Their plan will be carried out by young fighters who, in recent weeks, have been trickling into the notorious rural areas west of Kandahar city, armed with new machine guns and sustained by villagers' donations of dry bread and watery yogurt.

When their commanders give the green light, these young militants, mainly between 18 and 30 years old, will instigate clashes on two fronts: the first will be across rural areas west of the city - the traditional summer battlefields for militants clashing with coalition troops. The second will be in urban Kandahar city, home to key provincial government offices and a hub for Canadian troops.

Out-powered in rural areas by military weaponry, fighters there will carry machine guns and attempt to sharpen the results of their ambushes, but they will rely more on land mines and improvised explosive devices, sources say.

Inside the city, insurgents plan to stage more frequent multi-bomber suicide attacks and targeted assassinations. Government officials and civilians who appear to be in favour of the current government will be hunted with new intensity.

"If a man or woman is working with the government, or they are supporters of the government or of the foreigners, we want to kill them," said one Taliban organizer speaking through a Pashto translator. "We want to put the pressure on Kandahar city. And we want to dissolve the government."

The militants' renewed focus on disrupting peace in Kandahar city comes at a time when Canadian troops are also setting their sights on the city. Under the command of Brigadier-General Jonathan Vance, Canada has for weeks been preparing to draw back from some of the remote outposts soldiers have been spread across - making room for the U.S. troop surge - and focus instead on securing urban Kandahar and the area immediately outside of it where the majority of the province's population resides.

This regrouping, which will take shape as U.S. troops make their way into the theatre over the course of the coming months, represents a transformation in Canada's approach aimed to allow troops to make headway on the nation building projects.

How locals respond to troops remains to be seen. In the city, confidence in both government and coalition forces has waned, and military officials acknowledge research confirms the forces' sunken popularity.

Their approval ratings have not been helped by a spike in large-scale violence over the course of the past month. Militants successfully carried out deadly bombings at the governor's mansion and the provincial council offices.

Assassinations have become a daily occurrence, so much so that victims of the gruesome killings only make the news now if they are well-known figures.

In rural pockets, confidence in government and foreign military has also dropped. In some districts with a sparse military presence, landowners who were anti-Taliban last year say they've grown weary of ineffective government, corruption and poor security.

All of that has made many long-time landowners wonder whether, if the Taliban cannot be beat, it's safer to simply join their cause.

"Last year, people were trying to convince the Taliban not to fight. Now people feel it is their obligation ... to start fighting," said one middle-aged farmer from Maywand district, where militants say they maintain two fortified, armed positions. "People see the government as weak. They're not defending the common people. The government can't bring security," he said.

Mullah Masood, Maywand's district leader, said allegiances to militants will not change until foreign stakeholders invest properly in Afghanistan.

"My suggestion is for the foreigner to find work for the common people, the people who are poor," he said.

"Find food for the children. Otherwise, this joining of the people with the Taliban will continue."

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