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Missile threat to British troops

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IRAN is supplying the Taliban in Afghanistan with surface-to-air missiles capable of destroying a helicopter, according to American intelligence sources.

They believe the Taliban wants to use the SA-14 Gremlins missiles to launch a "spectacular" attack against coalition forces in Helmand, where insurgents claim to be gaining the upper hand.

Although British and American helicopters operating in southern Afghanistan are equipped with defensive systems to deflect an attempted strike, the SA-14 can evade such counter-measures.

It was a shoulder-held SA-14 supplied by Iran that was used by Iraqi insurgents to shoot down a Lynx helicopter over Basra in May 2006.

Five British service personnel died in that attack, including Wing Commander John Coxen and Flight Lieutenant Sarah-Jayne Mulvihill, the first British servicewoman killed in action since the second world war.

Although the Iranians are not natural supporters of the Taliban, they have been willing to assist them in the past in order to prevent Britain and the United States gaining influence in the region.

Special forces have previously intercepted arms shipments from Iran that would have helped the Taliban intensify a roadside bombing campaign that has killed 40 British troops over the past 18 months, including three last week.

However, coalition forces only became aware of the presence of SA14s two weeks ago when parts from two of them were discovered during an American operation in western Afghanistan.

"The weapons are out there and we thought it was only a matter of time before they got one or two into the south," said a defence source. "A Taliban spectacular against British or American troops would reinforce an increasing view among ordinary Afghans that the Taliban are gaining the upper hand."

In the past eight months, small arms and rocket-propelled grenade attacks on British helicopters in Helmand have increased. Last night the Ministry of Defence said it was not aware of any threat from SA14 missiles.

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