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Sign of War Gains Proves False

By Matthew Rosenberg, Adam Entous

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The revelation that an impostor passed himself off as a Taliban leader in Afghan peace talks called into question coalition reports of progress in the war, and illustrated how little the allies know of the insurgency's top leaders and the difficulty that lack of knowledge presents for U.S. strategy.

The man, who claimed to be one of the highest-ranking members of the Taliban, held at least two meetings with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other officials in recent months, officials said.

Senior coalition officers—U.S. Gen. David Petraeus, chief of coalition forces, foremost among them—had sought to portray the nascent peace talks as a sign that the one-two punch of American forces clearing territory and Special Operations forces targeting insurgent field commanders was wearing down the Taliban and pushing them to the negotiating table.

Those claims are now in question. Many Western officials have concluded that the peace process is making little progress and the Taliban are ready to fight on.

The talks were disclosed in October by Gen. Petraeus, who said the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was providing "safe passage" for senior Taliban leaders to take part in preliminary talks with the Afghan government.

Some Obama administration and defense officials were unhappy when Gen. Petraeus revealed NATO's role facilitating the talks because they thought it raised expectations.

CIA Director Leon Panetta said recently that reconciliation was worth exploring but that the agency saw nothing to indicate a serious effort was being made by the Taliban.

Another track of the peace process, the so-called reintegration effort that aims to lure low-level Taliban fighters off the battlefield with promises of amnesty, cash and jobs, are also moving slowly—in part because it is drawing impostors seeking to profit by pretending to be pacified insurgents.

A senior NATO officer said the revelation about the talks wouldn't change the counterinsurgency strategy, which seeks to bolster the Afghan government and marginalize insurgents through military campaigns and development projects. But the apparent setback to the goal of driving the Taliban into peace talks will weigh on a scheduled war review by the Obama administration in December.

Commanders expect to have a clearer indication of which way the war is going in the spring, when the fighting season resumes, the senior NATO officer said. "This is going to take a long time," the officer said. "I don't think we're looking for quick fixes."

In the NATO talks, Afghan and coalition officials met multiple times with a man claiming to be Mullah Akthar Muhammad Mansour, one of the chief deputies to the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, before figuring out he was an impostor.

The man was flown multiple times to Kabul from Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, by British intelligence and given "a lot" of money to keep coming back, officials said. Officials didn't say how much he was paid.

A senior Afghan official said the figure who provided the most promise of progress in the talks was the man impersonating Mr. Mansour. The man's willingness to talk and relatively mild demands—for example, he didn't insist on the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan before opening peace talks—had raised hopes that the peace process was making progress after two years of often futile attempts at negotiating with the Taliban. It isn't clear whether other real or fake Taliban leaders were involved.

NATO's Afghanistan task force declined to comment on the talks or the ruse on Tuesday.

An official said the U.S. didn't provide the impostor with any money, but declined to say who provided the funds. U.S. officials believe the impostor's motivation was money, an official said.

Some officials said Gen. Petraeus's disclosure of the talks in October was intended to showcase U.S. support for Mr. Karzai's call for reconciliation with the Taliban. The officials said Gen. Petraeus also hoped it would help drive a wedge between Taliban leaders and rank-and-file insurgents who might be more reluctant to fight and die if they thought their leaders were talking peace.

U.S. intelligence officials have maintained the peace talks were exploratory. Western officials said they were mainly aimed at identifying who could be trusted conduits to Taliban leaders and to determine who represented whom. Western officials in Kabul on Tuesday said allied intelligence agencies have had little success in penetrating Mullah Omar's inner circle, and lacked evidence the insurgents were ready to negotiate.

A Western diplomat familiar with intelligence reports on the insurgency said the lack of knowledge had sometimes reduced officials to engaging in "mere guesswork" when it came to figuring out whether the Taliban were ready to compromise.

The Taliban organization, which denied taking part in the talks from the outset, quickly began gloating as word spread of the ruse. "The Americans and their allies are very stupid and anyone could fool them," said Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi in an interview.

There are conflicting accounts of how Afghan and coalition officials figured out they were dealing with an impostor. The senior Afghan official said Tuesday that he and his colleagues and Western officials have known for at least two weeks.

The official said it is now believed the man is Pakistani, and may be a shopkeeper from the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, where the Taliban's leadership is believed to be based. The Pakistani government wasn't represented in the talks.

In the reintegration effort, NATO reintegration chief, British Army Maj. Gen. Philip Jones, described in a recent interview going to Herat province earlier this year to see Afghans who claimed to be Taliban and had turned themselves into the government hoping to get jobs. He said he found fewer than 80 people wanted to turn themselves in.

"We had a look at these 76 people and I don't think probably any of them knew how to handle a rifle," he said. "Probably all of them at best were able-bodied but unemployed and some of them were kind of on the fringes of able-bodied."