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What's behind the wave of assassinations in Afghanistan

By Tom A. Peter

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Jan Mohammed Khan, a powerful ally of President Hamid Karzai, is the latest casualty in a string of assassinations that undermine NATO's claims that the situation is improving.

Kabul - Sunday should have been a good day for Afghanistan. In the afternoon, Bamiyan province became the first to transition to the authority of Afghan security forces.

But a few hours after sundown, two suicide bombers stormed the Kabul home of Jan Mohammed Khan, one of President Hamid Karzai's senior aids, killing him and a member of parliament who was visiting. The attack comes less than a week after a gunman shot the president's half brother Ahmad Wali Karzai, the principal power-broker in Kandahar, at his home.

As the warm-weather fighting season reaches its peak, the Taliban appear to be carrying out a successful campaign to assassinate high-level officials, particularly those in Karzai's inner circle. The assassination campaign is destabilizing the personal patronage networks that run Afghanistan and undermining NATO's claims that the situation here is improving.

"The Taliban wants to put pressure on the government through these assassinations and push the government to accept their demands," says Mangal Sherzad, a professor of law at Nangarhar University in Jalalabad. "The enemy has lost the ability to fight government forces directly, so the second best option for them is to kill important people."

The Taliban took responsibility for the murder of Mr. Khan, the former governor of Uruzgan province, and a major power-broker in Afghanistan. Khan's family runs a large private militia. Hashim Watanwal, a member of parliament from Uruzgan, was also killed in the attack.

During an interview with the Monitor last Thursday, Mr. Watanwal expressed serious doubts about the future of his country.

“Overall, the security situation is getting worse in Afghanistan. It is out of control of the foreigners and the Afghan government,” he said during a phone conversation. “Since the foreign forces started talking about withdraw, it’s gotten a lot worse.”

Since March, insurgents have also assassinated Gen. Abdul Rahman Sayedkhili, police chief of Kunduz province, Gen. Mohammad Daud Daud, police chief for Northern Afghanistan, and Gen. Khan Mohammad Mujahid, police chief for Kandahar Province.

Though it’s unclear if the Taliban are responsible for all of these killings, especially Ahmad Wali’s, the Islamist organization says political assassinations are a major part of their campaign this spring and summer.

“These kinds of operations will continue and many more people will be targeted,” says Zabiullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman. “Each year our operations have a special focus, and this year the focus of our ‘Badar’ operations are to assassinate people who say they are popular, but the people actually do not like them.”

Throughout Afghanistan the killings are causing much frustration. Afghans have long blamed Pakistan for providing a haven for those who conduct attacks inside their country. The complaint was given even more traction after US Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May.

There is mounting pressure for the Afghan government to find a way to stop militants from entering the country or address the problem another way.

“Unfortunately the Afghan government was not able to secure its nation and its borders and I think it’s better for Karzai to resign and make way for a president who can tackle this problem,” says Gul Pacha Majeedi, a member of parliament from Paktya province.