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Reuters

Analysis: Nine years on, the Taliban have a message for West

By Sayed Salahuddin

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When NATO leaders gather for a summit in Lisbon next week, where Afghanistan will top the agenda, they can expect a message waiting for them from the Taliban.

That message may well be a violent demonstration of their staying power, even though Washington and U.S. and NATO commanders have been talking up recent successes in Afghanistan before the summit and a strategy review by President Barack Obama next month.

This comes as many European NATO members begin to look at how long they can keep justifying their commitments to an increasingly unpopular war, and as Obama remains committed to beginning a gradual drawdown of U.S. troops from July 2011 before the 2014 goal set by Kabul to take total security responsibility.

The Taliban have proved in the past they are well aware of the world beyond the deserts and fields of Afghanistan's south and its inaccessible mountains and valleys in the east and north, timing attacks to coincide with major events.

Four suicide bombers attacked the main U.N. compound in western Herat city last month, an assault the Islamist group said was in response to the U.N. Security Council renewing the mandate for NATO forces in Afghanistan 10 days earlier.

"From one side, the Taliban would like to show that the United States could not defeat them militarily in the past nine years and from other side want to introduce themselves as an acceptable political force, too," said Ghulam Jelani Zwak, director of the Afghan Analytical and Advisory Center.

On Saturday, as many as 14 Taliban fighters staged a bold assault on an airport and NATO base in Jalalabad in the east. At least 10 insurgents were killed, witnesses and police said.

The day before that, a suicide car bomber attacked a NATO convoy on Kabul's outskirts, wounding two soldiers, the first attack in the city in three months.

These extend a recent pattern of daring attacks by Taliban-led insurgents, including a massed raid by up to 80 fighters on a NATO outpost in southeastern Paktika province at the start of November, a different tactic to the usual Taliban hit-and-run raids.

At least 15 insurgents were killed in a pitched battle after a similar attack on a patrol in southern Helmand on Thursday.

At the same time, the insurgents' political rhetoric has become more moderate and more frequent, just as Washington and NATO have been talking up their gains. Analysts say the Taliban are trying to position themselves as a legitimate political alternative.

MORALE BOOST

Zwak traces the Taliban response back to Obama's announcement last December that a "surge" of 30,000 extra troops -- meant to push insurgents to the negotiating table -- would be followed by the drawdown from July 2011.

"This announcement created the morale among the opponents that America is facing defeat and will leave Afghanistan, and if Americans leave, then the Taliban should present themselves as an alternative to the current government," he told Reuters.

Violence is at its worst across Afghanistan since the Taliban were overthrown by U.S.-backed Afghan forces on November 13, 2001, with military and civilian casualties at record levels and support for the war sagging in Washington and European capitals.

Recent weeks have seen a wider acceptance of the need for a negotiated settlement to the conflict, with reports emerging of contacts between the Afghan government and senior Taliban leaders to explore the possibility of talks.

"The Taliban show considerable prowess in the arts of propaganda," said Matt Waldman, an analyst at Harvard University who has been in contact with the Taliban and was a security adviser for the British and European parliaments.

"Their most important statements seek to mobilize Afghan support for the Taliban, and increasingly, to undermine Western support for the war and counter concerns about the movement," Waldman said.

Among the most important of recent political messages was one attributed to the Afghan Taliban's reclusive, one-eyed leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, in September.

It assures Afghans of good governance, a Taliban government run by a consultative body based on "talent and honesty" and spoke of unity and the rights of tribes and women.

During their austere five years in power, the Taliban denied women the right to work outside the home and made them wear the all-enveloping burqa, drawing wide international criticism.

Omar's message even spoke of the need to address pollution and to combat the trade in illegal drugs. Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world's opium used to produce heroin, an illicit trade that helps fund the insurgency.

The Taliban also criticize President Hamid Karzai for what they say is the endemic corruption in his government. The West argues that corruption inhibits the growth of state institutions and aids the insurgency.

The Taliban's last message was addressed to the U.S. Congress last weekend, when Obama was in India, after Obama's Democrats suffered major reversals in U.S. mid-term elections.

"Will you be able to obtain your long-term goals in the region only through the war in Afghanistan?" it asked.