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European Languages

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Times online

Insurgent infiltrators terrorise Kabul's ruling class

12/13/2009

TALIBAN insurgents who have infiltrated Kabul are nailing “night letters” to the doors of policemen, soldiers and government workers, warning them to leave their jobs or face punishment.

The militants are being welcomed in the Afghan capital’s poorer areas among inhabitants who are disaffected with corruption, and who supply them with food, cash and weapons.

Safe houses and bomb-making workshops have begun to appear in run-down districts close to the city centre as the militants increase their presence and plot attacks on prominent local targets.

“They know who we are, where we live and what we do,” said Dr Ehsan Anwari, who used to work as an Afghan army medic and now runs a clinic in Company district, where Highway One, the main road from Kandahar to the south, enters the capital. “Whenever we hear shooting we think that the Taliban are taking over the district by force. We are afraid.”

Described by one police officer as a den of vice, Company district is a warren of tightly packed, single- storey houses and mud-caked, narrow streets. Last month, the Taliban tried to blow up the house of Anwari’s brother, a police officer, by pouring petrol through his front gate. The policeman grabbed his gun and opened fire. His attackers fled but he found mortar rounds, explosives and ammunition by the gate.

“We reported it but the police are too afraid to come into these streets at night because of the Taliban here,” Anwari said.

Earlier this year, the Taliban assassinated two army colonels as they walked through Company district to work. The killings forced many government officials to leave the area in fear of their lives.

Local inhabitants said last week that they supported the Taliban because the police had failed to crack down on criminal gangs smuggling drugs, running prostitution rackets and kidnapping businessmen.

Last month in Wardak, a Taliban-controlled province just south of Kabul, the insurgents captured four men accused of kidnapping the son of a wealthy Kabul tea merchant.

The kidnappers had told their victim to pretend he was one of their nephews if they met anyone en route to the gang's safe house in a remote area. But Taliban footsoldiers at a checkpoint noticed his expensive shoes, jeans and leather jacket.

Days later, four bodies were swinging from a tree in Maidan Shah, the provincial capital. A note pinned to one of them read: "The same fate awaits others who choose to kidnap for a living."

The Taliban had caught the kidnappers, tortured them and executed them in public. The tea merchant later donated \$200,000 to the Taliban as a gift for his son's release.

The story spread like wildfire through the districts around Highway One.

"It proves the Taliban have no problem with ordinary Afghans. They have a problem with those Afghans who work in high government positions who run crime in this city," said Karimullah, 40, who owns a shop selling flour, oil and rice.

"Of course I help them. They never pressure us to support them. They come around once a month and ask for help. We give them charity. People here prefer the Taliban to the government and the kidnappers. They are the ones who will bring security."

As he spoke, two men from Kabul municipality pulled up in Toyota Land Cruisers. Karimullah watched them with contempt as they entered the shops and started to take money from the owners.

"You see," he shouted, jabbing his fingers at them. "They take our money and they don't give us a receipt. It's not tax, it's for their own pockets."

The mounting collaboration between Kabul's disaffected residents and the Taliban mirrors the hardline Islamic regime's rise to power in the mid-1990s, when warlordism, corruption, violence and crime gripped the country during the civil war.

The Taliban used the public's disgust to garner support, swelling its ranks until its troops seized the capital in 1996.