

August 4, 2003

Taliban Are Killing Clerics Who Dispute Holy War Call

By CARLOTTA GALL

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, Aug. 3 — The assassination, witnesses said, was trademark Taliban: two men on a motorbike, the passenger opening fire with a Kalashnikov rifle, the driver making a quick getaway.

But the choice of victim signaled a new turn for the Taliban, the fundamentalist Islamic movement that was ousted from power and has been running a campaign of attacks against foreign and Afghan government troops in southern Afghanistan for months. This time, the assassinated person was Maulavi Abdul Manan, known as Maulavi Jenab, a member of the local district religious council, shot as he left his mosque last week. He was the second senior Muslim cleric killed by Taliban assassins here in the last 40 days.

In addition, the head of Kandahar's Ulema-u-Shura, or Clerics' Council, Maulavi Abdul Fayaz, narrowly escaped death when a bomb exploded in his mosque as he was leading evening prayers on June 30. Twenty-seven people were wounded, 14 seriously, council members said.

Since then two other clerics, also members of their district religious councils, have been shot to death. One, Maulavi Ahmadullah, was killed two weeks ago in his district of Dand, not far from Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. On Wednesday evening, another, Maulavi Jenab, was killed in his district of Panjwai, southwest of Kandahar.

The killings come amid increased Taliban activity in southern Afghanistan. Local officials reported capturing 20 Taliban suspects in the last few days in two operations in Kandahar Province, one against a band of Taliban who killed two government soldiers last week. The authorities also caught a Taliban member trying to plant a mine meant to kill the governor of Oruzgan Province, north of Kandahar.

Maulavi Muhammad Haq Khattib, deputy head of the Kandahar Clerics' Council, said the clerics had undoubtedly been attacked by the Taliban. "According to the villagers and local elders, they had no enemies," he said in an interview in his office in Kandahar. "It was because of their support for the government."

The 15-member Kandahar Ulema-u-Shura and its branches in the districts have been vocal supporters of President Hamid Karzai and have welcomed the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Appointed by the governor of Kandahar, the council members are clearly allied with the government, but they are also keepers of the city's most hallowed shrines and are among the most senior tribal and religious figures.

By challenging the Taliban movement at the core of its legitimacy — its claim as a religious authority — the Ulema-u-Shura has drawn direct reprisals against its members. "The Taliban are saying they are religious people, but they are using force to get their aims and are using the cover of Islam," Maulavi Khattib said. "But we say this is not Islam. Islam does not support the use of force, and we are telling people not to fight."

Seven months ago, the council issued a religious edict denouncing the Taliban's call for a jihad, or holy war, against the American-led forces in Afghanistan. Unlike the Soviets, whose intervention here in the 1980's was intended to occupy the country and so justified a jihad, the American-led force had come to expel terrorists and bring peace, and had United Nations support, Maulavi Khattib said.

He gave other reasons that a jihad could not be called. He said that the government had been elected, and that a religious council had no right to call a jihad against a government chosen by the people.

The Ulema-u-Shura edict, signed by dozens of clerics, says of the Taliban: "They are saying that foreign troops have captured our country and they are calling to start a jihad against them. Just by using the name of jihad, they are killing as many people as they want."

"Respected Muslim brothers, you know the situation: you are witnesses that the president of our country is a Muslim, and his vice presidents and all members of the cabinet and government authorities are Muslims," the edict reads. "No one has said you should stop going to the mosque or stop praying, so for what reason is this a place of fighting?"

The Taliban have denounced the Clerics' Council, leaving threatening leaflets in mosques and bazaars, Maulavi Khattib said. "They wrote that people who work with the government would be harshly punished, and religious people would be doubly punished," he said. But none of the clerics who were attacked had received specific threats, he said.

It is not clear who commands the most influence with the people of southern Afghanistan. There is no doubt that Maulavi Khattib, whose family has guarded the Mui Mubarak, the Shrine of the Hair of the Prophet, and his deputy, Maulavi Wali Muhammad — whose family for 200 years has been the keeper of Kandahar's most famous shrine, Karqa Mubarak, the Shrine of the Prophet's Cloak — are well respected. They have support from the district councils and plan to open more offices in southern Afghanistan.

But they admitted in an interview that the Taliban have continuing influence in the districts. "In the rural areas, their propaganda is strong and the people are scared of them," Maulavi Khattib said. "Even if they saw something of the murders, they would say nothing."

