

Informer Killings Show Growing Taliban Control

Author: [IWPR trainees](#)

Islamic insurgents hold court and execute alleged informers as they extend their hold over parts of the southern province of Helmand.

The past two weeks have seen an unprecedented rash of killings in Helmand as the Taliban claim to be settling scores with informers who have helped foreign troops based in the province. Afghan government sources say that those executed were innocent civilians, but the insurgents insist they held trials according to the laws of Sharia or Islamic law.

In all, eight people have been killed in three separate districts of Helmand province within the last 15 days. Four were hanged and the rest beheaded.

Taliban commanders maintain that those “executed” had betrayed them by tipping off the whereabouts of insurgents to the International Security and Assistance Force, the foreign troops charged with establishing peace and security in Helmand.

Several prominent Taliban commanders have been killed in air strikes in the past two weeks, apparently after information about their location was passed to ISAF troops.

“We are beheading and hanging those who have given information about our operations to ISAF and the government,” said a Taliban commander in Sangin district, where three of the hangings took place. The commander did not give his name.

Attaullah, the Afghan army’s chief of staff in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah disputes the Taliban’s version of events.

“The people [the Taliban] hanged were ordinary labourers. They were not working for the government, and they were not spies for ISAF,” he said. “Some were from Zabul province, others from Herat and Nangahar. They were just passing through.”

According to Attaullah, three men were taken off a commuter bus in Gereshk and beheaded simply because they were clean-shaven. During its five-year reign in Afghanistan, the Taliban administration forced men to wear beards and women to remain completely covered. They also banned music, film, television, and most other forms of entertainment.

The Taliban insist that the killings were justified under their own rules of conduct.

“We have our own court and our own judge,” said the commander in Sangin. “The accused were tried, sentence was pronounced, and we simply carried out the punishment.”

The executions have got local residents worried. Under the Taliban’s interpretation of Sharia, anyone who cooperates with the central government or with the foreign troops counts as a traitor and an infidel. This definition may include teachers, doctors and Afghans working for international aid agencies.

“Those who were arrested had documents on them, and they admitted they were working for the government,” said the Taleban commander. “We have never killed civilians.”

Helmand province has been the scene of fierce clashes between the Taleban and government troops backed by ISAF. The violence escalated last summer, when the United States-led coalition handed over command to ISAF, a NATO mission which, in Helmand, is dominated by British troops.

In early February, Taleban fighters took control of Musa Qala, a district where the insurgents and ISAF had reached a tenuous ceasefire agreement in October. The Taleban have also seized at least one more district, Washir, in the province’s northwest corner.

Local residents, the government and the Taleban all agree that the insurgents have a much greater hold on the province than has been previously acknowledged.

Sangin, a key district that lies between the capital and the hydroelectric power station near the Kajaki dam, is largely under Taleban control.

Since mid-January, Lashkar Gah has been almost entirely without electricity. While the province’s power department insists that the problem is merely technical, government officials admit privately that the Taleban have cut the power lines going through Sangin.

IWPR understands that local government officials have kept the news quiet for fear it would alarm the community and make the Afghan administration look weak.

Residents say the Taleban are openly patrolling the streets of Sangin, carrying weapons and riding around in vehicles.

So far, though, the insurgents have not attempted to implement the kind of comprehensive social controls that they enforced when they were Afghanistan’s government.

“The Taleban control Sangin,” said local man Mohammad Ibrahim, 45. “But they are not coercing people like they did before. When there is a wedding party, people play music and dance. The Taleban aren’t trying to stop these things. But they are present in the city with cars and guns.”

The fact that the Taleban hanged one of the alleged “spies” near Sangin town centre suggests that they fear neither the government nor the international troops.

“It is clear to everyone that we control Sangin,” said the Taleban commander. “There are some government people here, too, but they just sit there. NATO and the [Afghan] army are far away, in the desert.”

Attaullah, the army chief in Lashkar Gah, acknowledged that the situation in Sangin was cause for concern.

“The Taleban have the centre of the city,” he said. “But they are not based there. They come in like guerrillas, and when we come after them, they escape.”

One resident, who did not want to give his name, was more pessimistic.

“There are no NATO troops either in the town or in the area around it,” he said. “There is no army. There is only the Taleban. They hold the town.”

IWPR has recently begun a journalism training programme in Helmand province. This story is a compilation of reports by IWPR trainees.

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