

## **The Night Belongs to the Taleban**

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In Wardak, just 40 kilometres from Kabul, the Taleban are operating openly, terrorising residents and paralysing the government.

It is at night that the letters are posted on walls, that doors are banged open, that television sets are broken, that those deemed faithless are beaten, or worse. When the sun sets, the Taleban begin their patrols, openly displaying their weapons, unchallenged by police or other government authorities.

Wardak, where once people never thought to fasten their gate latches in the evening, is now a province of fear.

"I saw them one night, tacking a 'night letter' to the wall of our mosque," said Matiullah, 28, of Sayed Abad district, in southern Wardak province. "I saw their guns, and I was afraid to even speak to them."

The next morning, said Matiullah, he went to read the night letter - normally a note or poster the Taleban pin to trees, mosques or schools warning locals not cooperate with the authorities, international forces or overseas aid groups.

"It was written that those who work with the government or foreign NGOs will face a harsh death," he said. "And it called for people to start jihad against the Americans and the government, and to help the Taleban."

Matiullah paused to consider his words, then continued, "I have never seen the situation as bad as it is now."

A guard in one the district's schools, who did not want to be named, echoed Matiullah's experience.

"The Taleban have come to the school three times in the past 20 days," he told IWPR. "Always they come at night. They do not hurt us, but they tell us not to come out of our guard room, while they paste the night letters."

The letters are much the same content as those in the mosque, he continued, "They do not say 'We will burn the school' or anything, just do jihad against the Americans."

Wardak province had a rash of school burnings in 2005, but in the past two years, the phenomenon has slowed.

In Chak district, the Taleban have been more aggressive, warning residents not to watch television in their homes. Those with telltale satellite dishes on their roofs can expect trouble.

One young man, who was afraid to give his name, told of his family's experience, "We had a dish antenna

on our house for a long time. The Taleban kept pasting night letters on our gate, saying that we should not watch TV, but we did not care. One night they came to our house, broke our television and our antenna, and beat us. They slapped me and kicked me.”

This was not an isolated incident, according to provincial authorities.

Mohammad Ibrahim Sadeq, the district governor of Chak, confirmed that several people had reported similar incidents. While not condoning the Taleban’s actions, he was not ready to excuse the “offenders”.

“These young people are also wrong,” he said. “They watch channels and programmes that are not appropriate for our culture and our religion. They should work instead of watching bad things on television, or they should watch educational programmes.”

Mullahs are also joining the battle, said the governor. During Friday prayers they incite their listeners to join the jihad against the government and the foreigners, he explained.

“We have arrested some mullahs who were preaching like this and handed them over to the central government,” said Sadeq.

Chak seems to be the district of Wardak most affected by the newly aggressive Taleban. Some observers, including the district governor, trace the beginning of the problems to the release of Mullah Yassar, one of five Taleban leaders who were exchanged for Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo in March.

Yassar is a native of Chak. While no one is ready to say that he has returned to his original homeland, many affirm that the insurgents were encouraged by his release, and began to accelerate their campaign.

“It is true that the situation deteriorated after Yassar was let go,” said Sadeq. “It is bad now, and it is going to get a lot worse.”

One of the major reasons for the district governor’s concern has been the lack of response from the central authorities.

“I have been asking the provincial government for months to send us more police, to make more checkpoints,” he complained. “But I have not received any answer.”

The police and army seem unable to address the problem, giving the Taleban free rein. Things have deteriorated to such a point that the Taleban are now carrying out armed attacks in broad daylight.

According to eyewitnesses, in late June the Taleban attacked a car with two German diplomats, who were on their way to Kabul after visiting a hospital in Chak.

“We were two people in an armed car following the German diplomats,” said Lal Gul, the hospital’s chief of

security. "We saw Taleban up ahead, armed with RPGs and machine guns. They ordered us to stop, and we opened fire. Then they shot back at us, and our car was burned. We got out and retreated, shooting at the Taleban the whole way. We got to where the Germans were waiting for us, then we all escaped back to Chak."

Lal Gul said that they had called the district police for help, but no one came.

Noor ul Haq, the head of the anti-crime unit of the Chak police, said he had not been informed of the Germans' plight until after it was over.

"We patrolled the hospital grounds that night, and escorted them back to Kabul the next day," he insisted.

Almas Khan, commander of Chak's auxiliary police, confirmed that the security situation was becoming critical.

"Things are very bad," he said. "We are not sure who is behind all of this. The Germans were attacked, we have had rockets fired on government buildings, there are mines on the roads - these are very bad people."

According to Almas, the situation was markedly worse during the night, when the police were restricted to a four-kilometre radius of the district centre. When asked why the police did not patrol the entire area, Almas just laughed.

"We leave it to God," he said.

Local residents have suffered from the absence of police patrols, which leave them at the mercy of the Taleban. Mohammad Omer, a 48-year-old farmer in Chak, told IWPR he was stopped by the Taleban when he went out at night to water his land.

"They asked me what I was doing, and I said I was a farmer," he told IWPR. "Then they said I should not carry a flashlight. They told me to make sure that I had a big light with me that was always on - otherwise, they said, they would think I was police and they would shoot me."

Sayed Wali, 28, a resident of Sayed Abad district, is fed up with the government's weakness.

"The Taleban tell people 'don't work with the government, don't send girls to school', they attack oil tankers in broad daylight, and they fire on cars. We have complained about this to the district centre, but no one pays attention."

Gul Rahman 36, also of Saidabad, said he had quit his government job after receiving a series of warnings, and now makes a living driving a taxi.

“I was afraid of being killed,” he said. “The Taleban carry their courts in their pockets. If they decide you are guilty they just take out their knife and behead you.”

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