Encountering the Taliban

A TIME correspondent tracks down unrepentant, hardcore forces who vow to keep fighting in their crusade against America

By MICHAEL WARE/KANDAHAR

GENERAL TOMMY FRANKS, COMMANDER OF the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, calls the recent assault on Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants in the Shah-i-Kot Valley an "unqualified and absolute success." But he concedes that pockets of resistance remain and promises to go after them unceasingly. The British last week pledged to help, committing 1,700 troops to the effort. Who are these holdouts, and what are their aims? To find out, TIME embarked on a search for surviving Taliban fighters who refuse to yield. It required weeks of negotiation with Taliban commanders, who finally proffered an invitation to meet with two of them. "They will talk," said an Afghan contact, "but not in Afghanistan."

The journey begins in Kandahar on a rainy weekday morning. After a long drive, we reach a Pakistani checkpoint. The 4x4 is discarded for motorbikes, on which we travel along back paths across the border. Once we get inside Pakistan, a car picks up the travelers and cuts through the slow traffic of the border bazaar. It proceeds along a back road to the outskirts of town. "There are many Talibs here," says a guide. "Everyone knows, but everyone protects them."

The car stops at a green iron gate at an anonymous compound. A man called Mullah Palawan steps outside and beckons his guests inside. "You are welcome," he says. In a long, high-ceilinged room where half a dozen men rest on cushions, he is joined by another man, who agrees to be identified only by his titles, Hajji Mullah Sahib, meaning, roughly, Honorable Mr. Cleric Sir.

These men are Taliban. Part of an unrepentant hard core, they are hunted in their own country and supposedly barred from Pakistan and denied access by the hundreds of troops who guard the border. Yet here they sit, sipping sweet green tea, untroubled, gregarious and masters of their domain. Mullah Palawan, who commanded an armored corps in Herat before his flight to Pakistan, has spent the morning browsing through the bazaar. Hajji Mullah Sahib, once a Taliban ideologue, passed the time chatting at home. Both seem to go about their daily business without a care in this bustling gateway to Afghanistan.

Mullah Palawan is a large, jovial man. He tries to keep his face stern but breaks out in cheeky smiles when he thinks no one is looking. Hajji Mullah Sahib is a drawn, rakish figure. Conversation stops when he enters the room. In the past, his religious scholarship lent authority to the Taliban. He and others like him from the regime's theological vanguard preached the righteousness of Mullah Omar's government, and thousands listened. They still do in the Pakistani madrasah, or religious school, where he teaches.

Hajji Mullah Sahib does not so much converse as lecture. Afghanistan's woes, past and present, he argues, are the fault of malign interference by the Soviets and the Americans. Operation Enduring Freedom, he says, is a pretense for manipulating Afghan affairs. In a blink he dismisses the argument that the U.S.-led coalition aims only to eradicate al-Qaeda. "If the Arabs were terrorists, why didn't America just catch them?" he asks, instead of launching all-out war?

The men in this room, and others who are regrouping in Afghanistan and Pakistan, boast that

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they are preparing to pounce on the U.S. invaders, and that they have allies. “Our neighbors are also terrified of the United States, and they want to make trouble for America,” warns Hajji Mullah Sahib. “Now they are sending us money, guns and men.” On this score, he’s right. Iran has been sending supplies and munitions to disgruntled Afghan commanders who are not being paid by the new government. In Kandahar, the Taliban’s spiritual center, a government commander says disaffected elements of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency have been covertly assisting al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives with logistics, escape and safe havens.

The anti-American forces, by various accounts, are also finding support from a coalition of disparate groups within Afghanistan. These include the Iranian-backed Hezb-i-Islami movement, which before the Taliban came to power was one of the most dangerous factions among the Afghan mujahedin, and Ittehad-i-Islami, which has a few thousand underfunded troops in southern Afghanistan. These groups once opposed the Taliban, but the old disputes have been sidelined in the face of a common enemy: America and its Afghan allies. Astad Abdul Halim, Ittehad-i-Islami’s Kandahar commander, blasts the province’s U.S.-backed governor, Gul Agha Sherzai. “If Sherzai continues the bad acts he is doing now,” he says, “there will be a time very soon when we will attack.”

The recent Shah-i-Kot offensive, far from deterring the opposition, has emboldened it. Applauded in the West as a victory for the international coalition, the operation has been celebrated by Kandahar Talibs as an American failure. “How many bodies are there?” asks a former Talib, mocking U.S. claims of a major victory and citing eyewitness accounts of only a few Taliban and al-Qaeda corpses. “With all their power, the Americans could not capture our fighters,” he says.

If anyone doubts the ardor of grass-roots support for the anti-American militancy in southern Afghanistan, Kandahar’s cemetery for al-Qaeda fighters bears unequivocal testimony. Hundreds of mourners have descended on the graveyard from as far away as Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul and Uruzgan province. What began as daily homages have grown into all-night vigils. Men, women and children sleep by the graves. Devotees recite the Koran throughout the night. The ill and blind flock to the site seeking miracle cures, which many claim to receive. Men mumble, repeating scripture until they fall into a trance, swaying and convulsing, talking in tongues. “Do not speak English here,” says a Talib accompanying a TIME correspondent. “They will kill you the instant they know you are a foreigner. These people are so angry.”

In its propaganda from the underground, the Taliban has subtly shifted tack, redrafting its cause from a religious to a nationalist one. Hajji Mullah Sahib makes sure he hits the buttons. “Those working against America now are not Taliban,” he insists. “They are Afghan.” Kandahar’s bazaars reverberate with claims that former Taliban Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, who is thought to be in hiding, has issued a secret call to arms. True or not, the tale is meeting with approval in many quarters. “For the moment, we need food and more weapons, but we are willing to fight,” says a former Talib. “When America goes, we will take back Kandahar in three days.”

Questions
1. What does this article reveal about the status of the Taliban in April?
2. What allies are lending support to the Taliban? What are their shared goals?