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The Taliban are Back in Southeast Afghanistan

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Le Monde

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KANDAHAR | Humanitarian organizations are questioning their presence after the murder of an International Red Cross delegate. The police, without any resources, are helpless. Everyone awaits the "new Afghanistan" of George Bush.

American bombing of Iraq and the cold-blooded murder of Robert Mungia, an expatriate representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, have troubled the international humanitarian aid community.

Several NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations) have already reduced or completely retired their foreign personnel in Kandahar. While the threat in this region, cradle of the Taliban movement, already existed for some time and tracts declaring "jihad" (holy war) against foreigners have been widely distributed in Kandahar, the fact that the Red Cross-one of the rare uncontested humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan- should have been touched, underlines, for everyone's attention, that no one is safe. The ICRC, in effect, has practically never left the territory in all the 23 years of war. "We shall review our security from a new perspective," affirms John Oerum, UN Security Chief for the south-east region of Afghanistan. The UN has not reduced its foreign personnel, but missions outside Kandahar are suspended for the moment pending a reevaluation of the situation.

Doctors without Borders, Oxfam, Action against Hunger, to take but a few examples, have sent their expatriate personnel to Herat or Kabul, with no return date announced. ICRC operations in all Afghanistan are still suspended. The foreigners present keep a low profile and are rarely visible in streets or restaurants.

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The resurgence of Taliban groups reorganized in neighboring Pakistan, coupled with the launching of the Iraq war, ideal pretext for Islamicist extremists, creates a fear of increased incidents involving foreigners. According to a witness to the ICRC delegate murder, Abdul Salam Jan, the armed men who pumped 20 Kalashnikov bullets into Ricardo Mungia declared themselves to be Taliban. They even called to witness the name of a known Taliban commander, the Mullah Dadullah. The order to kill "the foreigner" would have been given by satellite phone. It was accompanied by a warning to the Afghans not to collaborate with "kefirs" ("infidels"). Abdul Salam is a military man. He was driving in a government car when he was challenged by the killers. Finally liberated after four hours of agony, he was given a firm warning: "You work with the kefirs. You are the slaves of Karzaï the Afghan president, and Karzaï is the slave of the United States. Today, because you are an Afghan, we give you a warning only, but the next time, we'll kill you."

Search Operations

A religious functionary close to President Hamid Karzaï, the Mullah Jailani, was assassinated Thursday April 3 close to his village of De Rawud (100 km north of Kandahar), by a small group of unknown armed men who successfully fled. The assassins also killed the nephew of this 60-year-old religious dignitary, who welcomed Mr. Karzaï on his return from exile at the end of 2001 and who played an important role at the time in the struggle against the Taliban.

"The objective is not to abandon the south" of the country, John Oerum continues to assert. "If we were to do that, the killers would have won, and we don't want them to win," he says. Following this murder, and with the assistance of American soldiers "to coordinate the aerial support," the authorities launched two Taliban search missions, first north of Kandahar in the mountainous region Shawali Kot, then in the south, not far from Spin Boldak. These culminated in the arrest of about fifty people. Kandahar Chief of Police, General Mohammad Akram, admits that it is a difficult job. "When we send our troops to the mountains, the Taliban disappear, and when we leave, they come back," he explains.

In response to the worries of the NGOs, the General asserts that he is studying three measure designed to improve security. "We foresee, on the one hand, deployment of 50 soldiers in each district alongside the police, and, on the other hand, a multiplication of control points on the roads," he says for the first two measures. These measures seem all the more limited in that the General, who has already lost half his force through an inability to pay them, willingly admits that he has no resources, that is to say, no vehicles, no communication apparatus, no money.

The third measure to go into effect in recent days was the end of official clemency for the Taliban. "We have warned them to be quiet and that we have our eyes on them," affirms General Akram ; "but, after three months of

observation, we've seen that some remain active and we've arrested about fifty who distributed pamphlets, served as liaisons with the Chiefs in Pakistan, and laid mines."

For General Akram, the positive element is the inhabitants' collaboration with the police. "Thursday, thanks to the people's collaboration, we discovered six rockets about to be fired. However," he insists, "the government must furnish work for the population." Almost eighteen months after the fall of the Taliban, everyone is still waiting for the new Afghanistan "promised" by President Bush.

Translation: TruthOut French language correspondent Leslie Thatcher

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